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Hidden Power: The Palace Eunuchs of Imperial China

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Introduction

Eunuchs, males who have been rendered sexually impotent by mutilation or removal of the external genitals, served as palace menials, harem watch-dogs, and spies for rulers in most of the ancient world kingdoms stretching from Rome, Greece, and North Africa, through the biblical lands, and on across the Man continent. Nor were castrati unknown in modern times. They were idolized in eighteenth-century opera houses of Europe, having been emasculated as children to preserve their male soprano voices. The practice of using eunuchs for Vatican choir, was banned only in 1878.

Castrated aides attended the Great Moghul emperors of India, and the maharajas of Indian princely states under British rule well into the twentieth century. Nowhere, however, were eunuchs of such great and long-continuing historical significance as in the palaces of Imperial China.

Down through the centuries of China's dynastic rule, officials repeatedly memorialized the Dragon Throne, pleading that eunuch interference in state affairs be curbed. However, almost none recommended that the ancient eunuch system be abolished. This is but one indication of how deeply ingrained in Chinese thinking was the custom that allowed only sexless males to serve the Imperial Presence, the ladies of his royal family, and his thousands of concubines, all amassed together in the "Great Within" behind forbidden palace doors.

It should be pointed out that Chinese dynastic histories were all written by mandarins, the educated elite who, as a class, despised the palace eunuchs.

Mandarins alone were eligible to hold office in the bureaucracy, the "Great Without." Men qualified for coveted bureaucratic positions by passing grueling official examinations that required years of arduous study. The examinations were based on the philosophy of Confucius, the Great Sage, whose teachings became the backbone of Chinese culture. Records indicate that Confucius himself, some 5M years before Christ, gave his stamp of disapproval to eunuch assumption of power, thereby tending authority for centuries of Confucianists to defame all palace eunuchs. Some researchers

suggest that the scholar-officials hated the eunuchs because, as personal attendants to the sovereign, the eunuchs always had his ear, and so were in a better position than even the most powerful minister to curry favor, exercise influence, and accumulate wealth. Thus, when considering old Chinese accounts of eunuch treachery, allowance must be made for prejudice or exaggeration. Nonetheless, the bulk of evidence weighs so heavily against the eunuchs that few can doubt the harm they did the nation.

The use of eunuchs in Chinese courts was based in very old tradition, and no society clung more tenaciously to long-established custom than the Chinese. Court chronicles reveal that Chinese kings as early as the eighth century BC., and no doubt long before that, kept castrated servitors. Confucianism exalted all that was ancient, and admonished monarchs of every dynasty to meticulously follow precedents set not only by saintly historical kings of old, but also by god-kings glorified in China's legendary past.

Since remotest times, and especially after the advent of Confucianism, Chinese males, including rulers, demanded strict moral purity in their womenfolk.

Hordes of sexually impotent men were needed to guard the chastity of imperial ladies languishing in the teeming women's quarters. The emperor kept the largest harem in the land not only to support his image as paramount personage of the realm, but also to ensure many heirs to the throne in a time of high infant mortality. If the emperor's queens failed to bear a living heir, sons of the highest ranking concubines could succeed to the throne. The presence of numerous ever-watchful eunuchs lurking in the recesses of the sprawling palace guaranteed that each child born therein was sired by the monarch. Non-eunuch males, even relatives of the ruler or of his consorts, were barred from the vicinity of the women's apartments on penalty of death.

Irrefutable royal paternity was essential to Chinese rulers, for the hoary cult of ancestor worship decreed that each emperor must perform the official sacrifices made to his deceased forebears as far back as the dynasty's near-deified founder. Each emperor, as Heaven's representative on earth, had to conduct the vital state religious rites necessary to maintain the harmonious balance between Heaven and the Chinese nation.

Eunuchs were also required to preserve the aura of sacredness and secrecy that surrounded the Imperial Presence. The Emperor of China was exalted as the recipient of the mystical Mandate of Heaven that sanctified his right to rule. Since it was believed that this Heaven-sent mandate could be rescinded if the emperor misgoverned or conducted himself unvirtuously, the personal life of the Son of Heaven was carefully shielded from ordinary mortals lest they observe any human failings. Only the "effeminate, cringing eunuchs," slavishly dependent upon the emperor for their very lives, were considered cowed enough to be silent witnesses to his private foibles and weaknesses.

During imperial audiences officials kept their eyes decorously lowered, for to look upon the royal countenance was strictly forbidden. When the emperor proceeded through the capital city carried in the royal sedan chair by eunuchs, bamboo curtains were erected across the side streets to shield him from the vulgar view. All audience seekers, including envoys from vassal states and courts, had to kowtow before the Chinese emperor by sinking to their knees and knocking their heads nine times on tile floor to demonstrate total obeisance.

Much speculation exists as to why most monarchs of China so trusted their eunuchs one emperor praised them as "creatures docile and loyal as gelded animals" when bodily mutilation was universally abhorred in orthodox Chinese culture. Loss of limb or castration rendered a man unfit to worship before the carved wooden spirit tablets to which the ancestral souls descended during memorial services. More deplorable still, a eunuch, since he was incapable of siring sons, had no one to perform the obligatory sacrificial rites for his own soul after death. Thus, one who suffered this most shameful of deformities was deemed outside the pale of Chinese society

The belief was prevalent that a castrato, since he would always be childless, would not covet political power and position to pass it to sons, according to the Chinese tradition. Similarly, he would have no need to accumulate riches by selling inside palace information or stealing tile treasure and tribute that flowed to the imperial coffers. Yet history repeatedly proved this faith in eunuch passivity and loyalty unfounded. Official records, perhaps unfairly, cite few instances where palace eunuchs displayed genuine fidelity or civic concern.

In Chinese thinking, all forces indeed, all things proceed naturally recurring cycles of yin and yang, reaching a peak (yin) and then inexorably receding to opposite depths (yin). (Maleness, strength, and virtue were under the influence of yang; while females, eunuchs, and evil were ruled by the forces of yin.) The yin-yang theory seemed to be borne out in the waxing and waning of eunuch power. What were some of the factors which led to the recurring, disastrous excesses of eunuch influence in the imperial courts?

Male infants sired by the emperor were reared in the profound seclusion of the palace, nourished by wet nurses till weaned. Thereafter, the young princes were placed almost exclusively in the hands of eunuchs who cherished the hope of remaining forever near the seat of power. Toward this end, many eunuchs went to exhaustive lengths to win and hold a future emperor's favor. Unscrupulous, power-hungry eunuchs could - and often did mold a young heir apparent's character to suit their own ambitions.

Many a prince became emperor while still a child. By the time he had reached his majority, his eunuchs had introduced him to enervating extremes of

promiscuity and other debilitating habits. Once corrupted morally and physically, the new sovereign was a weak-willed tool in the hands of his caretakers - easily convinced that enemies and traitors lurked everywhere in the Great Without. In this way, his faith in legitimate government advisors was destroyed. His only recourse was to depend on his eunuchs for information, counsel, and support.

Sometimes eunuchs played upon the fierce female rivalries, jealousies, and raw ambitions prevalent in the harem. There, several thousand ladies competed for the attention of the emperor - their only road to wealth and power for themselves, their clans, and their hoped - for princely sons. More than one eunuch joined forces with a scheming empress or concubine in dark plots to do away with the heir apparent and place her own son or favorite in line for succession. If the intrigue was successful, the conspiring eunuch was in a position to usurp enormous authority.

Often a young ruler found himself completely beholden to eunuchs who had usurped such power that they were able to put him on the throne over a rival candidate. In such cases, the eunuchs were almost impossible to dislodge from power, for they kept control in their own hands from one short reign to the next. In some instances, the emperor actually feared his eunuch "benefactors."

It must be acknowledged that certain Chinese emperors, had it not been for the backing of their eunuchs, would have been powerless in the face of organized factions of officials or mighty consort clans seeking control of the throne. Moreover, though many of the emperors were dominated by their eunuchs, many others throughout China's imperial past were forceful and self-determined, and led their nation to a greatness and level of culture more advanced than those of contemporary civilizations in the West.

All countries large and small suffer one defect in common, the surrounding of the ruler with unworthy personnel... Those who would control rulers first discover their secret fears and wishes.

Han Fei Tzu, revered Chinese Minister of state and man of letters who died 233 BC

The Need for Eunuchs, How They Were Castrated, and Their lifestyle

Throughout this book, little has been said about the way its which Chinese males were castrated for palace service. Almost nothing was written on the subject in Chinese histories. However, in the late 1800s a British official stationed in China, George Carter Stent, published a paper giving more

information on this subject than was ever before generally known in the Western world.[G. C. Stent, "Chinese Eunuchs," in *Journal of the Royal Society, North China Branch*, no. XI, 1887.] Although his study of palace eunuchs was made late in imperial rule, the eunuchs' clinic which he described is known to have existed in the preceding Ming Dynasty, and it is assumed that many of its methods were in use long before the Ming era.

In Stent's time there were only around 2,000 eunuchs employed in the Forbidden City, for the Manchu emperors had been determined to keep their numbers down. Another reason for the greatly reduced number of eunuchs may have been that during the previous fifty years, the Manchu Dynasty was ruled by a regent, Empress Dowager Tzu Hsi, for two successive little boy emperors, which would have considerably lessened the need for concubines.

Besides the eunuchs in the imperial palace, the numerous princely sons and married princesses of Manchu rulers were allowed to keep thirty eunuchs each in their private establishments. Imperial nephews and younger unmarried princes had to make do with twenty eunuchs, and grandsons with ten.

Sons born to lesser concubines could employ four to six eunuch servants. During Manchu times, the only other persons allowed to employ eunuchs were all the numerous descendants of the eight Manchu banner chieftains who had originally assisted in establishing the Ching Dynasty in the 1600s: they were allowed twenty eunuchs each. All these dignitaries were not only entitled to use eunuchs, but were compelled to do so, or lose their rank for failing to keep up the dignity of their Manchu station.

Every fifth year, each princely son was required to furnish the Manchu palace with eight young eunuchs who had been well trained, inspected for proper castration, and declared free of disease or uncleanness in person. The palace paid 250 taels to the princes for purchasing and training each eunuch.

Since this system did not nearly supply the numbers of eunuchs required by the palace, grown men could voluntarily have themselves castrated, but to be accepted for service at the palace, they had to find someone to vouch for their character, and they invariably ended up with menial jobs that did not necessitate entrance into the imperial ladies' apartments. Large numbers of young boys, purchased from their families, were castrated and drafted into the palace where they were especially favored by harem ladies as pets and companions.

All eunuchs were thought of as "pure," but those under ten years of age were termed "thoroughly pure." These were prized by palace ladies and given as much freedom and familiarity as if they were girls, and allowed to perform bedroom and bathroom duties of the most intimate nature. Boy eunuchs were supposedly free of any licentiousness, even in thought. As they grew older they were replaced by younger eunuchs and given duties outside the ladies' quarters.

Just outside the Forbidden City gate, but within the Imperial City, was a run-down budding where several "knifers", - who were recognized by the government as qualified to perform castrations, though they received no government salary, plied their trade. Theirs was a hereditary, family profession.

They collected six taels for each surgery and nursing the eunuch through the initial stage of recovery.

When the surgery was about to take place, the candidate was placed on a low bed in a semi-reclining position, and asked once more if he would ever regret being castrated. If the answer was no, one man clasped him about the waist while two others separated his legs and held them firmly down to prevent any movement. Tight bandages were wound around the thighs and lower abdomen, the patient was given a bowl of nerve-stunning" herbal tea, and his private parts were desensitized with baths of hot pepper water. Both penis and testicles were then swiftly cut off with a small curved knife as closely as possible to the body. A metal plug was immediately inserted into the urethra, and the entire wound covered with water-soaked paper and carefully bandaged. Immediately thereafter, the eunuch was made to walk about the room for two or three hours supported on each side by the "knifers" before he was allowed to lie down. He was not allowed to drink any liquid for three days, during which time he suffered great agony from thirst and extreme pain, and was unable to urinate. At the end of three days, the bandages were removed, the inserted plug pulled out, and hopefully the sufferer was able to obtain relief with a copious flow of urine, at which time he was congratulated and considered out of danger. If the surgery rendered the eunuch unable to urinate, the passages having grown closed, he was doomed to an agonizing death.

It is claimed that eunuchs rarely died from the crude surgery, only about two cases in a hundred proving fatal. This is not difficult to believe, for if the fatality rate had been high, it is unlikely that thousands of males would have chosen this means to try to improve their economic status.

When thoroughly recovered, usually in two or three months, and after perhaps a year of training in princely establishments, they were transferred to the imperial palace where they were again closely examined by old, experienced eunuchs to ascertain that they had been rendered completely sexless.

The severed parts, euphemistically called the pao, meaning the "precious," were preserved in a hermetically sealed vessel, and were highly valued by the eunuch. They were always placed on a high shelf to symbolize that the owner should rise to high rank. The eunuch also treasured his "precious" because, to be promoted to a higher grade, he was obliged to first display his emasculated parts and be reexamined by the chief eunuch. If his

"Precious" should be lost or stolen, at promotion time he had to buy one from the eunuch clinic, or he could borrow or rent one from another eunuch. It was also vital that the eunuch's organs be placed in his coffin at his death in the hope of hoodwinking the gods of the underworld into believing that he was a complete man: otherwise he was doomed to appear in the next world as a she-mule.

Besides the hundreds and sometimes thousands of eunuchs employed in household and harem duties, a few were "ordained" to become one of the eighteen Lamaist priests which the palace maintained expressly to attend to the spiritual welfare of the female inmates. Though often as not the chosen eunuchs could neither read nor write and knew nothing about the craft of priesthood they earned a double salary. Needless to say, vacancies among the eunuch lamas were filled without delay.

Another some 300 eunuchs were employed as actors and singers in the ever popular palace theatricals. Eunuch performers lived outside the palace in the Imperial City on small salaries, but were accustomed to receive gratuities from their imperial audiences for especially pleasing performances,

Eunuchs who ran away from the palace were invariably caught by special police and returned to the Forbidden City. First-time offenders were imprisoned for two months, given twenty blows of the bamboo or whip, and sent back to duty. Those who deserted a second time were put in a cangue for two months - a large wooden frame that clamped around the neck, preventing lying down or feeding oneself. Third time defectors were banished to Manchuria for two-and-a-half years, as were eunuchs who were caught in thievery. If the stolen goods were valued by the emperor, however, the offender was beheaded at a special grounds about ten miles from Peking. Neglect of duty or laziness were punished by whippings. The chief eunuch summoned one eunuch from each of the forty-eight household departments to administer the whipping with bamboo rods. The culprit received 80 to 100 blows and was then sent to a doctor - also eunuch - to have the wounds dressed. After three days, the offender was again flogged, in a punishment called "raising the scabs."

Eunuch salaries in the late 1800s usually ranged from two to four taels a month. Twelve taels was the highest pay allowed to eunuchs of any rank. In addition, each eunuch received a quantity of rice each month. Groups of eunuchs banded together to organize messes, each donating food as needed. The cooking was done in the palace kitchens. The eunuchs lived in small huts, called "menials' houses," attached to the sides of main buildings where their employers resided and where the eunuchs could be readily summoned. Each of the myriad of courtyards in the Forbidden City had a colony of eunuchs.

Palace eunuchs were allowed to worship in the temples, to burn incense, practice fasting, and donate money and offerings, but they were prohibited from ascending the altar of the main deity, as were all cripples, deformed persons, those lacking an eye, limb, or any other body part, and menstruating females.

Eunuchs were easily recognizable by their high falsetto voices (for which they were derisively called "crows"), as well as their want of beards, their cringing, hang-dog demeanor, and often their bloated appearance -though in old age they invariably became thin and deeply wrinkled, making them look like old women. Low-ranking eunuchs wore a long grey robe under a shorter dark blue coat, and had to wear their official hats and boots when on duty. In olden times, high-ranking palace eunuchs wore ornate robes of brilliantly embroidered colors.

Eunuchs had such a peculiar walk that they could easily be recognized at great distances. They characteristically leaned slightly forward, their legs close together, taking short, mincing steps, with the toes turned outward. Whether this odd walk was a physical necessity, or was imposed upon eunuchs as a rule of conduct to denote the eunuch's station is not known.

For a long time after castration, many young eunuchs wet their beds and themselves. No notice of this was taken for a time, but a long continuance of the problem resulted in severe floggings, which were continued until the habit was broken or outgrown. Thus, the Chinese spoke of them behind their backs as "stinking eunuchs," and claimed they could smell one a mile and a half away. A common expression used for a normal person who offended the nose was, "He's smelly as a eunuch" The most common and vulgar name for a eunuch was "Old Earl" or "Old Rooster," insulting terms that were never used to the eunuch's face. Eunuchs were so extremely sensitive to any reference to their deficiency, it is said, that such items as a spoutless teapot or a tailless dog were never mentioned in their presence.

Most of the eunuchs' leisure time was spent In gambling among themselves, their greatest source of enjoyment. It is said they were especially affectionate toward women and children, and loved pets, many of them keeping a puppy on which they lavished great affection. As late as tile 1920s, one dismissed but fairly well-off eunuch was commonly seen ice-skating on Peking's outdoor rink, displaying miniature Chinese dogs that he sold to foreign ladies to make his living.