Eunuchs: Angels or Devils in Disguise?

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Abstract—The contradictory role of eunuchs in ancient China has remained a long-term debate in history. Often viewed as either holy or profane, eunuchs occupied a unique space in society that defied easy categorization. This study challenges the prevailing negative perception of eunuchs in ancient dynastical China by re-examining historical records and highlighting their positive contributions to society. The historical portrayal of eunuchs as wicked and cunning individuals has been heavily influenced by Chinese literati who sought to defame their rivals in order to gain political influence. Eunuchs, who played crucial roles in the imperial court, have had a significant impact on China's development both positively and negatively. By focusing on notable eunuchs such as Zheng He, Cai Lun, and Sima Qian, this paper demonstrates that their contributions to Chinese culture, technological advancement, and historical documentation significantly outweigh the harm caused by a few power-hungry individuals. Ultimately, the paper calls for a more nuanced understanding of eunuchs' roles in ancient Chinese society and their impact on the country's development.

1. Introduction

"Chinese bureaucrat-scholars, who were constantly locked into an adversary position against the eunuchs, had a tendency to portray their archrivals as rapacious, wicked, sly, and duplicitous [1][2]. They attributed all the dynastic evils to the despised and hateful eunuchs when in fact the person responsible for the ills of the society was the very despot whom Chinese literati gleefully served" [3]. This quote by Henry Tsai highlights the long-standing debate over the role of eunuchs in ancient China [4]. Chinese literati and eunuchs vied for power in the imperial court, with scholars defaming eunuchs to gain influence. As recorders of history, scholars shaped public perception of eunuchs, portraying them negatively as cunning and evil. This biased portrayal has endured, shaping our current understanding of eunuchs in Chinese historiography.

The custom of employing eunuchs to serve the imperial family in ancient dynastical China was established gradually by a few prominent emperors, until nearly every emperor had multiple eunuchs serving in various roles, particularly in the harem and the imperial court. However, many eunuchs were known for their corruption, cruelty, and misuse of power. For example, Wei Zhongxian [5], a chief eunuch during the late Ming dynasty, was known as one of the most powerful eunuchs in ancient Chinese history. Wei Zhongxian's notoriety stems not only from his persecution of the Donglin party, but also from his unprecedented usurpation of authority traditionally reserved for the emperor himself, according to historical Chinese scholars [6]. Liu Jin, another eunuch during the Ming dynasty, was also known for his arrogance and corrupt practices, and was accused of accepting bribes and using his position to enrich himself and his family [7]. Additionally, some eunuchs used their positions to engage in nepotism and favoritism, appointing their relatives and cronies to important positions regardless of merit.

Generally, the negative portrayal of eunuchs as corrupt figures in literature can be traced back to various historical contexts. It is important to note that historical literature often reflects the biases, stereotypes, and societal perceptions prevalent during the time it was written. Eunuchs, being a distinct social group, were often marginalized and subjected to prejudice, which influenced how they were depicted in literary works [8]. While evaluating specific claims, it is also essential to consider the historical context and the motivations behind these portrayals. Indeed, while some eunuchs were known for their lust for power and negative influence, such as those who contributed to the downfall of entire dynasties, it would be unfair to generalize that all eunuchs were parasites who eroded the foundations of dynasties. Rather, the contributions made by eunuchs to China's development were multifaceted and complex. Eunuchs played important roles in shaping China's history, culture, and technology (see Section 3).

This paper aims to challenge the prevailing negative perception of eunuchs in ancient China by re-examining historical records and highlighting their positive contributions to society. By focusing on analyzing notable eunuchs, it will demonstrate that a more nuanced understanding of eunuchs' roles in ancient Chinese society is needed to fully appreciate their impact on the country's
development. Ultimately, this paper will argue that eunuchs were neither angels nor devils in disguise but rather complex individuals whose legacies deserve a more nuanced understanding.

2. From Slaves to Political Heavyweights

Eunuchs initially emerged in the ancient pre-imperial Chinese states, where they were employed as servants in the inner courts of the palace [9]. Their primary responsibility was attending to the needs of the women of the royal household, particularly those within the royal harem. Given their castrated status, eunuchs were not considered fully male, which rendered them suitable candidates for ensuring the chastity and safeguarding the lineage of the ruling families. Eunuchs gained more prominence during the Spring and Autumn Period (771-476 BC) and the Warring States Period (475-221 BC). In these periods, it was not uncommon for captured enemies to be castrated and forced into service as eunuchs in the conquering states' palaces. This practice further established the role of eunuchs in royal courts across ancient China.

As the centuries passed, the roles of eunuchs within the palace evolved, encompassing a wide range of tasks such as serving as butlers, bodyguards, and cooks. Additionally, they began to take on more administrative and even military responsibilities, which further enhanced their influence in the court. Despite the trust and confidence placed in them by the rulers, eunuchs often faced disdain from the noble classes due to their castration [2]. This discrimination may have spurred many eunuchs to exploit their privileged position for financial gain and to seek political influence within the imperial court. The progression of eunuchs' roles in ancient China represents a significant shift, as they transitioned from mere servants to influential figures within the palace. Unsatisfied with their status as simple slaves, eunuchs increasingly sought to exert power and authority, leading to their growing prominence in the political sphere over time. During this era, eunuchs began to exhibit initial signs of political sway within the confines of the imperial court.

The utilization of eunuchs was an important feature in Chinese history and Chinese culture (Fig. 1). The phenomenon had lasted for nearly 4,000 years, from as early as 2,000 B.C.E. to 1924 C.E. [10], when the Qing dynasty fell, which is also the end of imperial China. Historical primary sources that documented the practice of eunuchs often portrayed them in a negative light. The origins of Chinese eunuchs can be traced back to the Xia dynasty (2205-1766 BCE), although it was during the Shang dynasty when the first written records of castration involving boys and adults emerged. Initially, eunuchs were primarily foreign wartime captives rather than native Chinese individuals. As the eunuchs' status within the imperial palace increased, particularly with the fall of the Zhou dynasty and the rise of the Qin dynasty, many impoverished Chinese families began to view castration as a means of social mobility and a way to escape poverty. Consequently, they willingly subjected their sons to the procedure in the hope of advancing their family's prospects and securing a better future.

During the Western Han dynasty, the government became more centralized than ever under Emperor Xuan of Han's reign. With the separation of the inner and outer imperial courts, eunuchs began rising to various crucial government positions in the inner court. This development was characterized by the emperor's aggressive measures to centralize authority, balance power between political factions, and establish a Confucian-based bureaucracy. When Emperor Guang Wu of Han restored the Han dynasty and the House of Liu after Wang Mang's usurpation, he heavily relied on eunuchs to govern the newly restored Han dynasty. The practice of employing eunuchs as a rival power group to the bureaucracy gradually evolved during the Eastern Han (25-220 CE) to bolster imperial authority. During the Eastern Han dynasty, dowager empresses often promoted their relatives to powerful positions, as emperors were typically still children or adolescents when they ascended the throne. As emperors matured, they recognized this power imbalance and subsequently promoted court eunuchs to powerful positions, inadvertently sowing the seeds for the dynasty’s downfall. The massacre of two thousand eunuchs in 189 CE marked the end of eunuch influence on the Han court and sparked a massive civil war, ultimately leading to the Three Kingdoms Period and the collapse of the Han dynasty.

In the following centuries, some dynasties continued to grapple with issues related to eunuchs, given the rising power of the eunuchs. The economically prosperous and
culturally magnificent Tang dynasty (618-906 CE) was one such example. During this time, eunuchs were appointed as commanders of the royal palace guards, supervisors of the imperial army, and participants in governmental decision-making processes. High-ranking government officials often had to curry favor with chief eunuchs' favorites to maintain their power and positions. Towards the end of the dynasty, Tang eunuchs essentially became kingmakers, as they selected seven of the last eight emperors to ascend the throne. Despite the downsides of eunuchs choosing the successors, this practice allowed for stability amidst numerous civilian rebellions. This era, known as Huanguan Shijia or "eunuch dynasties," saw eunuchs controlling the imperial government and court decision-making abilities. As Robert B. Crawford observed, "the Sung Dynasty, although it was the greatest period of inner-outer court unity, further strengthened the ultimate basis for eunuch influence by its theoretical and institutional changes which contributed greatly to the creation of a new and absolute despotism considerably different from that of Han and post-Han times. Ming completed the process." Thus, the influence of eunuchs persisted throughout various Chinese dynasties, shaping the political landscape and the course of history.

While eunuchs played a notable role in ancient China’s history, their presence and influence were not limited to this region alone. Various societies and cultures throughout history also employed eunuchs in diverse capacities, including ancient Egypt, Persia, Rome, the Byzantine Empire, Islamic Caliphates, Korea, and India [11][12][13]. In these societies, eunuchs often served as court officials, administrators, and attendants, with some even commanding armies or holding significant political power.

3. Notable Eunuchs and Their Contributions to History

3.1 Cai Lun: Papermaking Technology Inventor

Cai Lun, widely accepted as the inventor of paper and the papermaking process, began his service as a court eunuch in 75 C.E. and achieved several promotions during the reign of Emperor He of Han. In 105 C.E., he presented the process for paper manufacturing to the emperor, earning an aristocratic title and substantial wealth [14]. Notably, Cai Lun’s position as an eunuch (court officer) granted him access to the imperial bureaucracy, which allowed him to propose and implement his ideas more effectively. He was appointed as the imperial supervisor of the Palace Pigeon Nests and oversaw the production of various goods, including paper. His groundbreaking invention revolutionized the process of literature and artwork production, empowering scholars to unleash their creative potential and catalyzing a remarkable upsurge in the prominence of Chinese literature and art throughout subsequent dynasties, most notably during the Tang and Song dynasties. Prior to paper’s advent during the Han dynasty, bamboo served as the primary medium for recording literature and history, but its weight and size rendered it an exceedingly inconvenient option. Similarly, silk and ink were feasible but prohibitively expensive due to silk’s relative scarcity. His ingenuity brought about the discovery of paper’s raw materials, including the inner bark of mulberry trees, bamboo, remnants of hemp, rags of cloth, and fishing nets. He mixed these materials with water and pounded them using a wooden tool, pouring the mixture onto a flat piece of coarsely woven cloth to let the water drain through, leaving behind a thin, matted sheet of fibers on the cloth. His papermaking process was presented to the emperor and received generous rewards, and the new medium came into widespread use. Civilians commonly refer to paper as "the paper of Marquis Cai." Cai Lun’s innovation of paper production was an instrumental contribution to the progress of human civilization and history.

Following its invention, paper making workshops proliferated throughout China, with the province of Guizhou attaining prominence for its exceptional facilities. By the third century, paper had become the preferred writing medium in China and had already disseminated to neighboring countries such as the Korean Peninsula, Vietnam, and Japan. The advent of lightweight and easy-to-store paper enabled China to propagate its culture through the widespread dissemination of literature. The replacement of earlier writing materials, such as bamboo and silk, which were gradually abandoned due to their impracticality, expedited the development and dissemination of Chinese culture.

The significance of paper’s utility transcended borders, with some Chinese paper makers taken captive by Arabs following the Tang army’s defeat in the Battle of Talus River in 751. The Arabs swiftly learned to produce paper and, in turn, replaced papyrus with the new medium as the preferred writing material in the Middle East and North Africa. Through trade, Arabian paper soon disseminated to Europe, leading to the first European paper production in Spain in 1150, which gradually supplanted parchments and hides in writing. The introduction of paper also facilitated the spread of scholasticism in Europe. Furthermore, the discovery of Chinese printing press technology further bolstered the widespread use of paper, facilitating technological and academic advancements in societies worldwide [15].

3.2 Sima Qian: Grand Historian of the Han Dynasty

Sima Qian, a distinguished eunuch of the Han dynasty, is renowned as the world’s inaugural official historian [16]. Appointed as a court scribe under the auspices of Emperor Wu of Han, Sima Qian was the progeny of Sima Tan, a fellow court historian. During this epoch, historians were typically tasked with immortalizing and aggrandizing the emperor’s reign and dynasty, frequently incorporating elements of myth and fable. In contrast, Sima Tan adopted a factual approach to documenting the past, inspiring Sima Qian to emulate this methodology. Prior to his demise, Sima Tan had commenced work on a fragment of the Records of the Grand Historian. Intent on fulfilling his father’s valedictory wish to "continue their ancestors" by
compiling the narratives of the past, Sima Qian assumed responsibility for the project. He embarked on an expedition to numerous historical sites across China, including the birthplace of Confucius in Qufu, located in the state of Lu. In defense of his comrade Li Ling, a general accused of treason, Sima Qian's actions were perceived as insolent by Emperor Wu, who consequently presented Sima Qian with a choice between execution and castration. With the records yet to be completed, Sima Qian opted for castration. As Joshua J. Mark elucidates, "he [Sima Qian] embraced humiliation, dishonor, castration, and a three-year imprisonment to conclude the work, recognizing its paramount significance" [17].

Figure 2. Song Dynasty copy of the “Shiji” transcribed in 1171 AD.

However, when Sima Qian spoke out against the controversial actions of a powerful general, he was sentenced to castration as a form of punishment. For Sima Qian, castration was a severe and humiliating penalty, as it effectively removed him from the ranks of the elite and denied him the possibility of having offspring. However, despite this punishment, Sima Qian's dedication to history and his commitment to preserving historical records remained strong. Esteemed as the foremost compilation of an authentic historical record, the Records of the Grand Historian, also known by its Chinese name “Shiji” (see a copy in Fig.2), were compiled through Sima Qian's meticulous process of interviewing elder generations to obtain first-hand accounts, engaging with local inhabitants at historical sites, and utilizing sources that have since been lost. Scholar Raymond Dawson underscores the intricacy of the records' structure, which aimed to encompass the entire chronicle of the Chinese world from its inception to 100 BCE, the period during which it was authored. This monumental work profoundly influenced subsequent generations, furnishing them with invaluable insights into the past. For instance, the Records of the Grand Historian elucidate the actions of Qin Shi Huang, the inaugural emperor of China, who instigated the burning of texts in 213 BCE and the internment of scholars in 212 BCE. According to Sima Qian, Qin Shi Huang endeavored to fortify the prominence of Legalism while simultaneously diminishing the influence of Confucianism, apprehensive that his legitimacy might be compromised by the extant Confucian and Daoist texts and scholars. Sima Qian's narrative of the discourse between Chancellor Li Si and Qin Shi Huang unveils the rationale underpinning the book burnings and the ensuing massacres during the Qin dynasty.

3.3 Zheng He: Fleet Admiral, Mariner, and Diplomat of Ming Dynasty

Recognized as one of the most prominent commanders in Chinese history, Zheng He, a Ming eunuch, was initially a Muslim man called Ma from Yunnan. Following his capture during the Ming invasion of Yunnan, he was castrated and served as a palace eunuch, eventually developing a close bond with Zhu Di, the son of the Ming dynasty founder, Zhu Yuanzhang. Zhu Di granted Ma the name "Zheng He" and brought him to his domain of Beiping (present-day Beijing) after being titled Prince of Yan. Zheng He gained Zhu Di's confidence as they fought against the Mongols, and when Zhu Di staged a coup against his nephew, Emperor Jianwen, in 1399, Zheng He backed him.

During the rule of the Yongle Emperor, the Ming court undertook several maritime missions, most notably the seven voyages headed by Zheng He. These expeditions traversed the “Western Ocean,” encompassing Southeast Asia, the Indian Ocean, and areas of the "Eastern Ocean," such as the modern-day Philippines, Borneo, and Indonesia. In contrast to missions under the Hongwu Emperor, these voyages sought to validate the Yongle Emperor's authority, displaying the Ming court's might and integrating surrounding regions into the empire. Consisting of envoys, soldiers, and specialized personnel, these missions likely included more than 20,000 military members armed. This formidable show of force enabled the expansion of Ming and the accumulation of treasures for the imperial court. Zheng He successfully claimed regions like Sri Lanka, Su-gan-la, and Sumatra, capturing and returning numerous rulers to the capital, thus showcasing the Ming army's prowess and compelling submission.

Zheng He's early Islamic faith and potential Mongol-Arab heritage, as implied by his father's and grandfather's "Hajji" last name, could have influenced his understanding of Islam and the Arabic language. Furthermore, Zhu Di believed that his nephew, Jianwen Di, was concealing himself in Southeast Asia, preparing a military resurgence. These voyages were advantageous to the Ming court, as they impressed allies, secured peace, and acquired riches. In modern times, the People's Republic of China has leveraged Zheng He's legacy to enhance relations and solidify ties with Southeast Asian countries, portraying him as an emblem of peace and unity.

4. Summary

In the annals of Chinese history, eunuchs have often been negatively portrayed in literature and narratives. However, it is important to recognize that not all eunuchs were corrupt; in fact, many made significant contributions to the Chinese nation and aided in the advancement of human civilization. Initially, eunuchs emerged as a form of punishment for criminals and prisoners of war. Over time, they evolved into serving roles within the imperial
court and inner palaces, ultimately becoming influential government officials engaged in various affairs and campaigns. Their lack of family ties and diminished sexual desires were seen as desirable qualities for roles involving close proximity to the ruling elite, such as attendants to the emperor or managers of the harem.

Moreover, examining the notable eunuchs and their contributions provides valuable insights into the diverse reasons for castration, including both serving specific roles in the imperial court and as a form of punishment. The unique position of eunuchs in the court allowed them to propose and implement creative ideas (e.g., Cai Lun and Zheng He), while the experience of punishment could sometimes serve as a motivator for exceptional achievements (e.g., Sima Qian). By emphasizing their accomplishments and contributions to society, as well as historical background, we can foster a more balanced understanding of the role of eunuchs in Chinese history.

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References