

# I



## Introduction

### THE SCHOLAR AND THE EUNUCH

In the late sixteenth century when Protestants and Catholics were opposing one another across the length and breadth of Europe, two baby boys, Yang Lian and Wei Zhongxian (also known as Li Jinzhong), entered the world in the mountain-girded Hubei of central China and in the arid Hebei near the Beijing area, respectively. They were destined to play significant roles in the political arena of the Ming dynasty. Like many others of their time, both tried desperately to work through narrow and tortuous paths that led to position and wealth. Yang chose the civil service examination system that tested how well a scholar could write bagu or eight-legged essays, became a literati-official, exerted a great influence on the people, and before his death in 1625, rose to the rank of senior vice censor in chief. Wei, on the other hand, by choosing castration and because of a streak of cunning in his nature, worked his way to be the powerful managing grand eunuch in the Ceremonial Directorate of the Ming court. By traditional accounts, Yang had done good deeds for the country, retained his sterling qualities by upholding Confucian ideals and convictions. In vivid contrast, Wei was a wily, unprincipled scoundrel, who having no means for education, took a shortcut to position and power. As a palace eunuch, he cheated and fawned on his superiors in order to swindle them and win advantages. Whether or not such accounts, mostly written by Confucian scholars in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, are reliable, both Yang and Wei, in winning riches and power, had to endure unbearable hardships and make enormous sacrifices. For Yang to pass the extremely difficult examinations, he dedicated away his young life in working on bagu composition and mastering the myriad of words and mechanic syntax of the classic language. In such an endeavor, Yang had to restrict his learning, suppress freedom of thought, and stifle his creativity. For Wei, needless to say, he lost forever his "manhood" and had to live an abnormal life as a deficient man, worrying about wetting his bed every night.

Born in 1571 in Hubei's Yingshan county, Yang began to learn Confucian classics when he was very young. Through perseverance and industry, he passed both a county test and a prefectural test and became one of a dozen people from his area to hold a *Xiucai* (flowery talent) or a bachelor degree, which not only brought him respectability, but entitled him to receive a meager stipend from the government. Even though he continued to struggle, his villagers no longer despised him and no one dared to trample his family under. Also, by earning his first degree, Yang no longer was required to kneel to a magistrate. More important, even if he ran out of luck or failed all else in life, he could at least tutor village youngsters for a living. But he also realized that he was only a novice in the realm of the scholars and that he was far from being a learned person. Consequently, he persevered and studied day and night for yet another competitive examination, which was held only once every three years in his provincial capital city of Wuchang.

A chief examiner and a number of vice examiners, all appointed by the emperor, presided over his provincial examination. Good fortune once again smiled on him for he passed the second examination and was bestowed a *Juren* (recommended person) or licentiate degree. Of the few dozen licentiates who took the examination with him, many failed several times in previous attempts; some had gray hair, and a few indeed led miserable lives before passing the examination. By becoming a licentiate, however, Yang, like most other fellow degree holders, now enjoyed fame and also frequently received pigs, porcelain, housewares, and possibly land and a house from his neighbors, admirers, and people who needed political clout. But he was never allowed to forget even for a moment that the duty of a scholar was to become a government official. So he could not relax as he had one more very difficult stair to climb to earn an official position; that is, to pass the final metropolitan examination.

There is no record as to how many times Yang Lian had to take the metropolitan examination to earn the highly prized *Jinshi* (advanced scholar) degree or a doctorate. Directly supervised by the Ministry of Rites, the metropolitan examination was held once every three years in Beijing and each time awarded between 200 to 300 doctorates among the thousands of qualified licentiates from all over the country. In preparing for the examination, many candidates injured their health, ranging from bleeding ulcers, insomnia, indigestion, tuberculosis, to depression, nervous breakdown, and other mental illnesses. Several hanged themselves in the examination cells. But Yang Lian survived, for in 1607 he passed the metropolitan examination and completed this most tortuous journey to officialdom. Following another palace test, plus a brief interview with the Emperor Wanli (1573–1620), Yang Lian, now thirty-six years of age, was officially given a doctor degree and a government post.

Yang Lian began his career as a magistrate of Changshu county in the coastal Jiangsu province. He reportedly listened to the voice of the people, avoided bringing shame to himself or getting involved in bribery scandals, and steadily rose through the ranks. He was duly promoted to be a supervising secretary in Beijing, in charge of scrutinizing revenue and military affairs. In the Confucian lexicon, fealty, courage, and uprightness were the qualities that a virtuous official should possess. Yang seemed to personify all of such virtues and was therefore made a censor near the end of Wanli reign.<sup>1</sup> However, Yang Lian was not among those flowers born to blush unseen and waste their sweetness on the desert air. Within the bounds of Ming political collegiality, Yang clashed vigorously with powerful ministers, infuriated prestigious grand scholars, and condemned sleazy eunuchs. Then came the eventful year of 1620. China had three different emperors on the throne within only two months and, because of frequent changes of leadership, the functioning of the government was seriously disrupted, and Yang Lian was involved in the thick of political manipulations.

Emperor Wanli died on August 18, 1620, and the Emperor Taichang, the fourteenth Ming sovereign, ascended to the throne, already a dying man. After taking several "red pills," Taichang died on September 26, 1620. Soon a pall was cast over Beijing as factional strife in the Ming court intensified while three major scandals shattered even the confidence of the cabinet. Amid the general confusion, Yang Lian, who was also known for his rash judgment, and Wang An, the dead emperor's favorite eunuch, kidnapped the sixteen-year-old crown prince from his foster mother's quarters and had him installed as Emperor Tianqi on October 1, 1620. But the enthronement of the fifteenth Ming emperor also catapulted the eunuch Wei Zhongxian from obscurity into the limelight of power. Finally, in the summer of 1624, Yang confronted the powerful Wei and brought about an acrimonious standoff that flared the politics of Ming court between the literati-bureaucrats and the palace eunuchs.

If Yang's scholarly and political journey was one of mental anguish and emotionally drained experience, Wei's rise to power was physically vexatious and psychologically tumultuous. Wei started as the son of a decent but poor man on February 27, 1568, in Hebei's Suning county, an area that served as one of the major regions that supplied eunuchs. Constantly struggling just for mere subsistence, Wei grew up illiterate and a habitual gambler. Wei was briefly married to a peasant girl who gave him a daughter. But when treated brutally by the hooligans who relentlessly badgered Wei to pay off his gambling debts, Wei decided to make a radical change in his life by voluntarily having himself emasculated. Such a decision, as peculiar as it seemed to any rational modern man, was not a matter of inconsequence in Chinese history.

This is because Wei, as our story unfolds, was to help accelerate the downfall of the Ming dynasty.

Various methods of castration were used in China. According to the French writer Richard Millant, Japanese scholar Jitsuzo Kuwabara, and the British researcher Garter C. Stent, a volunteer like Wei, would first have to seek a specialist for the risky operation. Accompanied by a guarantor, who witnessed the operation and also was responsible for the volunteer's payment and recovery, Wei met his surgeon in a small hut. Before the specialist performed the operation, he ritually asked the young volunteer if he would regret it or not. If the answer was negative and firm, the specialist would immediately flash his blade and, in a few minutes, the castration was completed. In addition to excruciating pain, many would-be eunuchs died of excessive bleeding, urine blockage, or other complications.<sup>2</sup> Wei survived; however, it took him several months to heal from the surgery.

Emotionally scarred and physically deformed, Wei was later thoroughly examined by the palace head eunuch who made sure that Wei's "treasure parts" had been permanently severed from his body. He was about twenty-one years old, and through a relative of his mother, Wei entered the palace service. He was now a novice, surrounded daily and closely watched by hundreds of fellow eunuchs, who had chosen the same tortuous method to gain employment in the emperor's harem. In the ensuing months and years, Wei was to discover that he had joined a group of peculiar people who were neither men nor women. With his natural male forces abated, the fundamental process of biological change occurred in his body cells, evidenced in changed functions and in appearance. There was an apparent loss of height and beard, his nose became broader and his ear lobes thicker. Decreasing hormone levels caused loss of elasticity: his skin wrinkled, his joints stiffened, and his muscle strength gradually weakened. His nails had a dull yellow appearance, the halfmoons disappeared, and the nails developed ridges. He quickly underwent a change of voice. He now sounded a bit more shrieking and evidently more feminine than masculine. His body weight increased, mainly because of reduced physical activity in an environment where food was plentiful. Although not readily visible to him, perhaps the most important changes occurred in the lungs and the cardiovascular systems. These led to a decrease in his body's ability to gather oxygen from the air and a decreased ability to pump adequate blood with its essential components to all parts of the body. He soon became soft and fat.<sup>3</sup>

According to a famed Chinese physician, Chen Cunren (1909–1990), who treated eunuchs in his Shanghai clinic in the 1930s and early 1940s, physical and physiological changes after castration were much easier to detect than psychological changes. However, based on available literature and historical records, including the eunuch Liu Ruoyu's memoir, a castrated man

like Wei Zhongxian tended to have a chip on his shoulder, that is to say, he was extremely sensitive about his “deficiency” and the fact that he rose to power by way of a “shortcut.” He was often paranoid, petty, and took trivial matters very seriously. He also became peevish, vindictive, and capable of quick and ruthless decisions; but gentle and loyal to his friends and generous to his relatives. Accordingly, he needed to align with powerful eunuchs and collaborate with influential palace women. Above all, he always stood by his autocrat employer like a faithful dog and would come to the defense of his emperor even when the emperor flouted with the wishes of the people by acts of tyranny.<sup>4</sup> Stories about the eunuchs’ intimacy with both the palace women attendants and the imperial family are abundant, and the following chapters will provide a few typical examples.

For the next thirty-odd years, Wei Zhongxian worked in the imperial stable, palace construction, and various inner court storehouses. In the taxonomy of Ming eunuchism, Wei was neither fish nor fowl; he held no office. He was reported to enjoy profane forms of entertainment and love dog meat, flowers, fancy clothes, and flattery. During this long time of service Wei also acquired a cursory knowledge of the written Chinese language. Then, by a stroke of luck, he was assigned to cook for Emperor Wanli’s grandson, who was later to become Emperor Tianqi (1620–1627). Wei served the young prince diligently, not only creating a strong bond with the future emperor, but also establishing a close relationship with the prince’s wet nurse, Mistress Ke, to whom Tianqi was deeply attached. Ke was a very attractive woman and Tianqi, then a teenager, felt something more than just childlike devotion to a former wet nurse. In fact, it was on the recommendation of Ke that Wei was appointed in 1622 to be a managing grand eunuch in the most powerful Ceremonial Directorate, which handled the flow of imperial documents. The official Ming history says that, together with Mistress Ke, Wei exerted an unhealthy and improper influence over the young emperor, introducing the emperor to a life of profligacy while consolidating his power bases. Wei even received the emperor’s approval to train a eunuch army within the palace and had the chief grand eunuch Wang An, Wei’s former patron, demoted and then murdered. By the end of 1623, now fifty-five years old, Wei was also made the director of a secret police establishment, known as the Eastern Depot.<sup>5</sup> It was said that Wei effectively utilized this position to harass or remove persons he deemed undesirable and begin a reign of terror.

While the young emperor indulged in archery contests, water works, carpentry, opera, and led a life of idleness and debauchery, Wei was said to have caused the death of an imperial concubine, dismissed numerous honest officials, stolen precious jewelry from imperial treasury, and acquired riches and highest honors for himself and his relatives. It was against this background that the Censor Yang Lian decided to risk his life by impeaching Wei

and remonstrating with the emperor. Yang listed twenty-four heinous crimes allegedly committed by Wei. Even though some 100 other officials also denounced Wei, Emperor Tianqi stood by his eunuch confidant. Consequently, Wei had Yang and a dozen high ranking officials thrown into jail and later flogged to death or executed. During this show of power, more than 700 literati-bureaucrats were also purged.<sup>6</sup> The year was 1625, when Charles I took the throne of England, but less than a decade later, the last Ming emperor Chongzhen, Tianqi's brother, flew even more brazenly in the face of his people than did Charles I. But before Chongzhen committed suicide in 1644, on the approach of rebels, he saw to it that Wei and his cronies were eliminated.

Wei's patron and protector, Emperor Tianqi, unexpectedly died on September 30, 1627, at the age of twenty-three. After nearly three months of tense waiting, an imperial rescript came to remove Wei from Beijing and ordered him confined in Fengyang, a special Ming penitentiary for convicted imperial clansmen and high ranking eunuchs not far from Nanjing. Wei left Beijing with a guard of 800 eunuchs, 1,000 horses, and 40 wagonloads of jewelry. About halfway between Beijing and Fengyang, Wei took his own life, and his guards were also arrested. Worse still, in early 1628 Wei's corpse was sadistically dismembered and displayed in Wei's native village as a warning to the public. Wei's closest ally, the Mistress Ke was beaten to death, six of his coconspirators suffered immediate execution, nineteen officials who were associated with Wei, were marked for execution in the winter of 1628, thirty-five of Wei's relatives were banished to the frontier and nearly 200 other people received various degrees of punishment.<sup>7</sup> The counterpurge of 1628 was indeed as bloody and malicious as that of the purge that took place three years early, but the Ming dynasty was about to run its course.

#### NEW THEMATIC APPROACHES

The turmoil of the 1620s in general and the tragic deaths of the scholar Yang Lian and the eunuch Wei Zhongxian have generated enormous interest among Chinese historians. With their emphasis on the importance of Confucian ethics and propriety, they tend to downplay, if not grossly neglect, the shortcomings of China's traditional social and political organizations. According to this line of interpretation, the problems of the 1620s were caused primarily by the shortcomings of individuals, such as Wei Zhongxian and the Mistress Ke, instead of the ritualistic and absolutist imperial system. By their so-called praise and blame standard, this is a black and white case, a struggle between the eunuch who had a malevolent touch on imperial system and the scholar who adhered to strict Confucian morals. So far as these historians are concerned, the event bodes well. However, by cutting loose from

traditional Chinese moorings and carefully studying the rise and fall of hundreds of Ming personages, one can easily find that no individuals or groups, except the emperors, could maintain an unchallenged and durable hold on power for more than a decade. This is because the Ming institutional framework, which lasted for 276 years, was so well established that even the handful of eunuchs that had occasionally risen to powerful positions found themselves constantly subject to institutional restraints and traditional restrictions. In the final analysis, both the literati-officials and the eunuchs were really the pawns of the colossal Ming institutions and absolutism.

Chinese historians who condemn the evil influence of the Ming eunuchs often cite such notorious eunuchs as Wang Zhen in the 1440s, Wang Zhi in the 1470s, Liu Jin in the early 1500s, and Wei Zhongxian in the 1620s. But had the eunuchs' rise to power in the Ming dynasty resulted in "one profit but hundreds of damages," as proclaimed by the chroniclers of the *Ming shi*, the standard history of the Ming? It is true that at times of intense power struggle, as in the case of 1625 when eunuchs had the upper hand, hundreds of their rival literati-bureaucrats were tortured, disgraced, forced to leave positions or even put to death. However, of the estimated 1 million eunuchs employed by the Ming emperors throughout the dynasty, only a small number actually rose to power and influence. And among the powerful castrati were many laudable generals and admirals, skillful diplomats and explorers, talented architects and hydraulic engineers, noteworthy financiers and exemplary administrators.

Although a few secret police chiefs and eunuch political bosses at one time or another enjoyed riches and power and basked in adulation, the lives of ordinary eunuchs, who were servants and slaves of the emperor, his consorts, and relatives, were restricted, routine, and boring. They worked year in and year out in the imperial quarters, in the frontiers, and in the princely establishments all over the Ming empire. But, although their hard labor and long subservience provided the emperor and his relatives—their number estimated at 20,000 in 1550 and over 80,000 at the end of the Ming—with luxury, beauty and safety, and political intelligence, the eunuchs also represented a threat to the scholar-officials' cherished role as the instrument of imperial government. After the office of premiership was abolished in the 1390s, Ming state affairs were divided among six ministries or boards; namely, Personnel, Revenues, War, Punishment, Rites, and Public Works. Each ministry had a minister but the ministries were really under the direct control of the emperor, who frequently used his trusted eunuchs to run the state.

The grim irony in Chinese historiography is that the Chinese intelligentsia somehow felt that they were charged with a mission to build an ideal society and, if the system derailed, they were responsible for mending it to

meet the criteria as prescribed by legendary sage-kings in ancient times. Unfortunately, cruel political realities often defeated such idealism. Failing to implement their utopian ideology, many intellectuals felt powerless, impotent, and ultimately disappeared from the historical scene. Others utilized their writings to continue to promote the politics of the sage-kings. Constantly locked into an adversary position against the eunuchs, these highbrow bureaucrat-scholars had a tendency to portray their arch rivals as rapacious, wicked, and unscrupulous. They attributed all the evils to the despised and hateful eunuchs when in fact the cause of the ills of the society was the very imperial institution that Chinese intelligentsia gleefully served. The two groups collided, interacted, and conflicted throughout the Ming period and for nearly 250 years vied with one another for control of the imperial apparatus. Corresponding to such idealism and rivalry was the timidity and lack of revolutionary tradition of the Chinese intelligentsia. Consequently, Chinese historians rarely openly and persistently criticized the autocratic political system and the tyranny spawned from it. Instead, they singled out the eunuchs as the scapegoats and refused to treat this lowbrow group as a social and political complex.

The clichés that too often were recorded—the weak and lazy emperors, the sly and cynical eunuchs—should now be viewed as unsympathetic reverberations from idealistic and timid traditions of Chinese intelligentsia. Should twentieth century historians continue to condemn eunuchs as palace termites, blame them for corruption in imperial court, and accuse them of being usurpers and terrorists; or should we treat them as needed hewers of wood and drawers of water, themselves the victims of a tyrannical system? It is high time that eunuchs be allowed to speak for themselves and be seen as the subjects rather than the objects of Ming history. It is important that eunuchs be studied in the context of the emperor's immediate environment, his court, and the bureaucracy that the emperor headed and which received its power from him. Our investigation has already yielded evidence that there were many loyal talents among eunuchs and that their contributions to the Ming society were indeed very significant.

In the past century a few Western scholars have deviated from orthodox Chinese ideological abettors and tried to give eunuchs a more balanced treatment. For example, Paul Pelliot and Wolfgang Franke, while sharing the view that the eunuch system was a disturbing and irrational element in China's imperial past, also saw it as a necessary cement that held imperial institutions together and made China's polygamous society work. Other scholars, who were attracted to this subject matter, utilized modern methodological tools for examining political and social behavior of the eunuch group. In 1908, Richard Millant of France wrote *Les Eunuques: A Travers Les Ages*, detailing the castration techniques and processes by which young boys



were brutalized and forced to trade their manhood for jobs in imperial courts. Robert B. Crawford in 1961 wrote an article, "Eunuch Power in the Ming Dynasty," in the Dutch journal *T'oung Pao*, briefly analyzing eunuch political activities in Ming period. Two years later, Japanese popular writer Taisuke Mitamura completed his best seller, *Chinese Eunuchs: The Structure of Intimate Politics*. More recently, a German scholar Ulrike Jugel wrote a laborious Ph.D. dissertation, studying the social-political role and the development of the eunuch group in the Later Han dynasty (25–220 A.D.). And in 1968, Ulrich Mammitzsch wrote a thesis defending the controversial eunuch Wei Zhongxian.<sup>8</sup>

It is evident that a more objective and in-depth study of Chinese eunuchs in general and the roles of Ming eunuchs in particular is needed for the topic to break free from the traditional framework in which it has been studied. The thematic stress of usurpation of power by the eunuchs and the conceptual framework of historical harm and damage done by the eunuchs should be balanced with an attempt to look at the eunuchs' social backgrounds and their ways of life. Horrid stories and high-handed power games need to be discussed in the context of Chinese despotic political traditions. And individuals and their behavior also should be reexamined in the light of institutional tyranny. The following chapters will present a comprehensive picture of the eunuchs as a central, constituent element of the imperial government equally as significant as the civil and military hierarchies. They will also demonstrate that the eunuchs were not just household servants meddling in affairs of state, but made up a third administrative hierarchy through which emperors could, and did, exercise their power in all areas of government.

Map A. Fifteenth Century China

