

Collin M. Barnes
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Senior Seminar
Ming Dynasty Outline

“You're Not a Eunuch, Are You?”
The Eunuch's Role in the Fall of the Ming Dynasty

1. Introduction

(a) Thesis: The Ming Dynasty was brought down by greedy and ill-educated eunuchs. By looking into the various roles and types of the eunuchs both within and outside of the government, what shifted during the dynasty that started its decline, why this is related to the eunuchs, as well as some contradictory viewpoints, one can see that the eunuchs of this time period single-handedly ended the dynasty and issued in a new era of Chinese history.

i. Notes: in within gov't → talk about economy, military (that's where banished eunuchs go), In shift → 1587. In counter → *Peasant Rebellions*, military (lacked funds for travel, didn't know what was happening elsewhere in the world (Japan raided a lot (1: 195)), weakness (conquered by Manchu), stupidity (built Forbidden City, Wall of China, etc...), over-confident

2. Short history of Ming Dynasty

(a) Formation (lasted from 1368-1644)

i. Came after the Yüan Dynasty (1260-1368)

A. Monk Chu Yüan-chang (extremely brutal and smart) led rebellion. (1: 189-90)

- In 1368 he drove Mongols out of Peking
- Out of China proper by 1371
- out of Yünnan by 1382
 - explain Yünnan → Area of Western China (look at map)
- Mongols tried to overtake later, but failed

B. Shifted capitol to Nanking (near Chu's wealth/power)

- Moved again after campaigns in 1421 to Peking (1: 192)
 - Nanking was still subordinate capitol and had prominent place.

C. Wanted to rebuild China and make strong

- New roads, canals, defensive structures, est relations with neighbors (1: 190)

D. Wanted to focus on academics

- Scholars look into past and extract literature from previous dynasties
- 1403- sent eunuchs of high position on missions to Tibet, Java, Siam, and Bengal (in 1405 went to South Seas, India, and Persian Gulf) (1: 192)
 - *Extremely* profitable → spread culture and trade
 - Ended very suddenly b/c lack of money (1: 195)
 - Isolated China, and could only sail in domestic waters

E. Change in government structure

- Wanted to go back to Sung Dynasty gov't, not Yüan (charts on 8: 35 and 39)
- Eunuchs played a heavier role in Ming than any other before

- (b) Started to decline in mid-late 1500s
 - i. Corruption became too much (9: 212)
 - A. “The emperors' lack of interest in government affairs greatly encouraged corrupt ministers to indulge in open abuses” (9:212)
 - B. Old Chinese Proverb: “Heaven is high and the emperor is far away”
 - If you are not near the court, nobody cares what you are doing.
 - Write Chinese interpretation on 9:212!
 - C. Attacks
 - (c) Ended in 1644
 - i. Constant attacks led to the final downfall
 - ii. Li Tzu-ch'eng led the army to attack China (9:357)
 - A. Attacked China from 1641-44
 - 1641- conquered Lo-yang and killed Prince Fu
 - Attacked K'ai-feng
 - Had to withdraw because of attacks
 - Came back and broke dikes of Yellow River and drowned everyone
 - Controlled all of Honan by 1643
 - From Honan- attacked Shansi
 - Conquered Ta-t'ung, Chu-yung, and Hsüan-fu
 - Two days after getting Hsüan-fu, attacked capital (Peking)
 - Peking fell
 - Ch'ung-chen emperor tried to save it, but nobody cooperated
 - Climbed a small hill near palace and hung himself
 - End of Ming Dynasty
3. What is a eunuch?
- (a) Western views of eunuchs are not the same as Chinese
 - (b) Term we use for eunuchs in China is *huan-kuan* (gov't official), which does not automatically imply castration (26: 9)
 - i. *huan* was formerly used to denote wandering scholars seeking employment (26: 14)
 - ii. Chinese term for castrates is *yen-jen*
 - iii. Not all *yen-jen* were *huan-kuan*, and not all *huan-kuan* were *yen-jen*
 - iv. Almost all *huan-kuan* were *yen-jen* by Ming → can be considered the same
 - (c) Some were *tzu-kung* which means self-castration
 - i. Was offensive during Ming b/c “maintaining one's body in perfect condition and producing descendents” (26: 20) was “filial behavior”
 - A. punished during Ming if *tzu-kung*
 - (d) Psychological effects of castration- can change habits (26: 10)
 - i. Formerly used as punishment for non-Chinese (26: 15)
 - ii. *Kung-hsing- kung* means “sexual parts”, *hsing* means punishment (26: 15)
 - By Ming, rarely used as punishment (started to decline as punishment in Chou Dyn.)
4. Why eunuchs?
- (a) Trusted
 - i. By becoming a eunuch, all ties between them and family are broken (26: 12)
 - A. Change names to signify

- B. Celebrate day of castration as birthday (26: 19)
 - C. “Castrated servants were ideal for such elevated rulers because they had cut off all their ties that bound them to their families at home.” (26: 12)
- (b) Different in Ming than any other
- i. WAY more eunuchs than ever before
 - A. Eunuch offices in the inner palace climaxed during the Ming Dynasty (26: 14-5)
 - B. Maximum of 13,000 eunuchs at a time, minimum of 3,000
 - Total of around 1 million eunuchs during entire Ming (7:7)
 - During Ch'ing Dynasty, only 2,000 max (26: 15)
5. Eunuchs in the Government
- (a) Roles
- i. Ming Eunuch Organization (26: 29)
 - A. 12 Directorates (*chien*)- most important- worked directly w/ emperor and hired other eunuchs for higher positions, handled emperor's documents (26:35)
 - B. Under control of *ssu-li ch'ang-yin t'ai-chen* (Grand Guardian of the Seal of the Directorate of Ceremonies)- authorized work of agency w/ seal.
 - C. Under that was 4-6 eunuchs who were the *ssu-li ping-pi t'ai-chien* or Managing Grand Guardians of the Directorate of Ceremonies (26:35)
 - D. Only emperor himself could appoint eunuchs to these positions
 - Shows importance
 - E. Sub-Offices
 - 4 Offices (*ssu*)
 - 8 Bureaus (*chu*)- Nobody knows why organized like this
 - Responsible for material needs of the court (wardrobe first, then stables, etc...) (26: 31)
 - F. These offices required literacy, placing eunuchs in higher educational role than most of the population
 - Allowed them to know the inner-workings/plans of empire (26:33)
 - ii. Tax collectors, military, police, diplomatic envoys, emissaries to emperor,
 - A. Not in these positions all the time, just as needed
 - B. Many positions were typically unliked by general population
 - C. Mining tax collectors *k'uang-shui chien* used eunuchs- could bypass civilian bureaucracy (26:30)
 - Used eunuchs as loopholes → even more unliked
 - iii. Had *many* different roles as depicted in “Two Scrolls” (13:__)
 - A. Only people allowed near emperor on barge (high rank) (13:5) (plate 2)
 - B. Carrying fans/canopies to shade others (low rank) (13:23-5) (plates 11-12)
 - C. Eunuchs were involved in almost every aspect of government
 - Wide range helped to increase foothold on governmental affairs
- (b) Not always qualified for positions, but given them anyway.
- i. Yang Lian and Wei Zhongxian (aka Li Jinzhong) story (7:1)
 - A. Both wanted success and prominent titles
 - B. Yang took civil service exam (*extremely* difficult), worked hard as a scholar and became Senior Vice Censor in Chief

- C. Wei (eunuch name was Li) became a eunuch as a shortcut to power
 - Described as “a wily, unprincipled scoundrel, who having no means for education, took a shortcut to position and power” (7:1).
 - Attained position of Managing Grand Eunuch in the Ceremonial Directorate of the Ming Court (*extremely* high—appointed by emperor)
- D. One worked, the other didn't.
 - Yang was *way* more qualified, but Li was a eunuch
- ii. Some realized this, like Emperor Hongwu
 - A. “Not one or two of these people out of thousands are good. Those who are evil frequently number thousands. If they are employed as ears or eyes, then the ears and eyes are covered. If they are employed as the heart and bowels, then the heart and bowels will be sick. The way to control them is to make them fear the laws and not permit them to have merit. If they fear the laws then they will be attentive to their conduct. If they have merit, then they will be arrogant and lustful” (7:29) (Hongwu Veritable Record, 44, 8th moon of 2nd year, Hongwu reign).
 - System as too expansive to change/destroy
 - Too much power for unqualified people
 - iii. Considered dangerous to the emperor himself
 - A. Primary Source by Ou-yang Hsiu *On Eunuchs*:
 - B. “Even though there are loyal scholar-ministers in the court, the monarch will not trust them because, in his judgement, they are too remote and unfamiliar and are not so reliable as those who are around him every day from morning to night. As the monarch draws closer and closer to the persons surrounding him, his alienation from his scholar-ministers also becomes greater and greater. Meanwhile he becomes more and more isolated from the outside world. The more isolated he is, the more fearful he becomes; the more fearful he becomes, the greater will he be subject to the eunuchs' control. Eventually even his life is at the mercy of his nominal servants who decide whether he should live or die in accordance with their whims: danger has thus lurked behind every door or curtain in his imperial palace. The persons whom he thought he could trust have now become a source of danger to him.... It may cause the monarch to lose his kingdom. Even if the dynasty does manage to survive, the monarch himself may be killed.... The eunuch danger... cannot be easily eliminated even after the danger has been recognized.... How can future monarchs afford not to be alert to this danger?” (3:148-9)
 - Perfect example seen below:
- (c) Wei-Chung-Hsien
 - i. Who he was
 - A. Considered the “most notorious eunuch”
 - B. Epitome of corruption
 - C. Recorded by eunuch that worked with him in palace: Liu Jo-yü in *Cho-Chung-Chih*
 - ii. Born on February 27, 1568 in Su-ning (26:103)
 - A. Father was Wei Chih-Ming; mother was Liu-shih (family tree)
 - iii. Lifestyle and Becoming a eunuch

- A. Became eunuch after marrying (family name Feng. 26:107) and having a daughter
- B. Described as “a good-for-nothing, brawling boy who liked gambling, horse-back riding, and archery. He spent these youthful days in the company of a like-minded crowd of loafers but was forced to leave his native village and seek eunuch employment because he had suffered sizeable gambling losses and his creditors were pressing hard for payment” (26:107).
- Only became eunuch because irresponsibly handled money
 - One example of many eunuchs?
- C. Rise to power
- Began work in the stables under the *Yü-ma chien* Lui K'e-hsiang
 - Wanted something different, so went to work for mining tax collector.
 - Almost died b/c his reputation preceded him, but traveling Buddhist monk—Ch'iu Yüeh—saved him. (26:113)
 - Ch'iu gave him money and sent him to work in Peking at imperial storehouses
 - Became cook of emperor's grandson Wan-li
 - First time working inside imperial court → dangerous, but opportunistic
 - Formed very close relationship with the prince (26:115?)
 - B/c stole things from warehouse where he worked and gave them to the emperor (food, toys, gifts, etc...)
 - transferred to cook of Hsi-tsung → (who became emperor 1 October 1620 (26:119)
 - Emperor was only 16 when ascended Dragon Throne
 - Unfit for duty b/c lack of good education and age
 - Needed somebody to help him with governmental matters
 - Since already trusted by Hsi-tsung, he was promoted to *ssu-li ping-pi t'ai-chien* (handled the documents to and from the emperor) (26:125)
 - Trust shown (and how much he liked Wei) by example of horse
 - Wei liked riding horses and once rode side-by-side with the emperor (which is an inexcusable breach of etiquette).
 - Instead of punishing Wei, emperor shot the horse on the spot (26:135).
 - He could pretty much run the empire because he was in the emperor's confidence
 - “The emperor frequently asked for Wei's advice and seemed to heed it” (26: 137).
 - Also had access to important documents, so he potentially knew more than the emperor himself did.
 - Essentially, Wei ran the empire, not Hsi-tsung
 - Killed himself on 12 January 1628 (16 years before end of Dynasty)
 - Potentially found out? Unsure.
- D. Gained a vast amount of power in the latter part of his 30-ish years of servitude (26:112)

- “He is denounced in the sources as a scheming, cruel monster revelling in the glory of his power and using it ruthlessly against upright officials who might have saved the dynasty” (26:112)
- iv. Gave power to family members (family tree)
- A. Wei's nephew Wei Liang-Ch'ing from sister Wei had very prominent role
 - Substituted for emperor during sacrifice at emperor's ancestral temple in 1627.
 - B. 9 direct family members given position in *chin-i-wei* (Imperial Bodyguards—direct access to emperor at all times) (family tree)
 - Plus 4-5 grandchildren also given same positions
 - C. Used power to advance his own name
- v. Why this was important
- A. Extremely prominent eunuch in Ming Dynasty
 - Many sources talk about the infamy of Wei
 - B. Showed how being a eunuch could bring unqualified people into power
 - C. Changed the course of the Ming Dynasty by himself (failed not too long after he died)
 - D. More eunuchs that were like Wei in the empire
 - If enough, could do *significant* damage.
- (d) Military
- i. Some eunuchs were genuinely qualified
 - A. Rose to positions of Grand Defender of regions like Gansu (NW China, right by Mongolia) because of military victories (7:60).
 - B. Others were placed in charge of putting down rebellions near the borders, which were mostly successful.
 - C. As more eunuchs were put in charge of battalions, quality decreased.
 - “The increase in number corresponded to a decline in the quality of soldiery” (7:61).
 - ii. Led troops to battle (even if not completely qualified)
 - A. Wang Zhen advised emperor to ride to battle with them in 1449
 - Emperor captured → catastrophe (7:60)
 - B. Chêng Ho (eunuch): 1405- get fleet of junks at Soochow and sailed south
 - Ming historian Ku Ch'i-yüan (1565-1628) wrote: “Officers, soldiers of the flag army, braves, civilians, buyers, and clerks numbered 27,870 men. The total number of ships was sixty-three, of which the largest were 444 [Chinese] feet long, and 180 feet wide. The middle sized ships were 370 feet long and 150 feet wide” (1: 193-4)
 - Massive undertaking for person without military experience
 - C. 1465- 140,000 best soldiers pulled from ranks and put in 12 “capital regiments” (7:64)
 - Best soldiers put under command of court eunuchs with no experience.
 - “As more and more eunuchs were given military command, a feud slowly but inevitably developed between the castrati and the professional soldiers” (7:64).
 - Soldiers not promoted b/c of actions b/c eunuchs had positions of power.

(e) Economics

i. Eunuchs had direct impact on economics as tax collectors, to imperial advisors

A. Greed and corruption hurt economy during the Ming Dynasty

B. Managed Imperial Plantations

- Managed them immorally
 - Hired, “hoodlums and ruffians to do their bidding. Worse still, they forcibly took over people's land, extorted their money and other valuables, and debauched their wives and daughters” (7:166)
 - In 1504, “the eunuch manager in a Baoding plantation sent his troops to arrest more than 200 peasants who protested against the encroachment of the imperial estate upon their lands” (7:169).
 - If anybody complained, they would be sued on made-up charges.
- Could decide how much to grow—influenced costs
 - “With few exceptions, all those supply depots and installations were supervised by eunuchs” (10:13)
 - Between the years 1580-1588 (typically noted as the start of decline (10:xiii), rice prices went from 0.30 silver oz/shih to 1.55 silver oz/shih
 - Start of decline → eunuchs need more money
 - Near end of dynasty, prices skyrocketed
 - Husked Rice: 1632- 1.0 silver oz/shih, 1642- 5.0 silver oz/shih
 - After Ming fell and eunuchs weren't in charge of certain parts, prices fell
 - 1647- 4.0 silver oz/shih, 1649- 1.2 silver oz/shih, 1650- 1.0 silver oz/shih (Primary source,

C. Advisors had hand in economy/trade

- Silk Prices went up
 - Average over whole Ming was .60 silver oz/bolt
 - In 1644- 1.00 silver oz/bolt (almost twice as much)

(f) Consequences

i. “Eunuchs had increased their control of affairs of state to such an extent that many good officials refused to remain in office, others were prevented from defending their country properly and some even lost their lives, and thousands were mulcted of their property through outrageous taxation” (1: 199).

ii. Disunity and problems within the military and the government led to a weakened state.

A. Other countries saw this and entertained the idea of invasion.

6. Led to crisis in the court (outside of government)

(a) *Tzu-kung*- self-castrated eunuchs

i. led to surplus of eunuchs (26: 18)

ii. “All of our stupid commoners are dreaming of a rich and powerful life by castrating their own children and grandchildren. Sometimes there are hundreds of these castrated children in one village and the official bans issued one after the other do not seem to have any effect upon these people” (26: 21) → Brings into selling eunuchs too

iii. Became big problem → Cheng-te emperor (1506-21) 3500 *tzu-kung* wanted

- A. assistance from gov't b/c no place to go. Settled in outskirts of Peking, but more came to be eunuchs but were turned away. Tried to send them home, but didn't work (26: 22) → led to banditry
 - Other countries saw this disunity → provided opportunity

7. Shift from prosperity to decline

(a) Gradual

- i. No one specific event marked the turning point
- ii. Involved many different aspects of government and people
 - A. Military
 - B. Imperial Advisors
 - C. Tax Collectors
 - D. Ill-advised decisions

(b) Why shift related to eunuchs

- i. Eunuchs in positions of power in all of these areas
 - A. They ran the operations
- ii. Many accounts of them expanding lands/influence to gain money/power
- iii. So many in gov't it caused a lot of corruption

8. Counter-Arguments

(a) Peasant Rebellions

- i. Originated in northern Shensi (6:1) (Northwest China)
- ii. Other countries owned parts of China from favors to emperors
 - A. Peasants driven off land became angry (1: 199)
 - B. Not a lot of good farming land anyways (6:1) → when it is taken away, it hits harder
- iii. Nobody cared about peasant regions of China enough to do anything
 - A.

(b) Military Weakness

- i. Lacked funds to travel
 - A. Couldn't protect self from Japan and other attacks
- ii. Didn't know what was happening elsewhere in world b/c limited self to domestic waters
- iii. Not really weak
 - A. Had canons from Europe! (9:345)
- iv. Poor leaders
 - A. Conquered by Manchus after they already defeated them before
 - Leaders were EUNUCHS!

(c) Lack of education

- i. Built Forbidden City during this time
- ii. Map of world (primary source)

(d) Over-Confident

(e) Europeans=disunity

- i. Spanish money was used
- ii. American Indian corn was brought over

9. Conclusion