

“You're Not A Eunuch, Are You?”

The Eunuch's Role in the Fall of the Ming Dynasty

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2 November 2009

The Ming Dynasty was one of the most important and prestigious periods in Chinese history. During this time, rebellions were suppressed, warring neighbor countries were defeated, and China's wealth and influence spread further than it ever had before. While this particular period brought great prestige to China, it also ushered in much corruption, enough to actually cripple and end this great dynasty. The largest contributor to this corruption was, ironically, the most trusted group of people in the Imperial Court: the eunuchs. Due to their infertility, they were allowed into some of the most secure locations in the whole of the empire, and their “trustworthiness” was put to the test and oftentimes found lacking. The Ming Dynasty was brought down by greedy and ill-educated eunuchs. By examining the various roles and types of the eunuchs within the government (court officials, economists, and military leaders), the roles played by eunuchs that were not part of the government system, important figures involved in the Ming demise, militaristic and economic problems brought about by the eunuchs, as well as some contradictory viewpoints by historians that do not believe the eunuchs played a significant role, one can see that the eunuchs of this time period were the most important contributor to ending this dynasty and ushering in a new era of Chinese history. The corruption that these eunuchs displayed during the Ming Dynasty allowed the government and military to become weak, giving surrounding countries an opportunity to attack and conquer this great empire.

Throughout Ming history, there have been many instances where eunuchs were the reason for the overall decay and eventual downfall of many government structures and programs. However, it is important to define exactly what a eunuch is, since the Ming definition varies from the Western definition. In the Western world, the term used for eunuchs in the Ming Dynasty is *huan-kuan*, which does not directly relate to a castrated man¹. *Huan*, in the original

¹ Ulrich H-R Mammitzsch. *Wei Chung-hsien.: A Reappraisal of the Eunuch and the Factional Strife at the Late Ming Court* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Hawaii, 1968), 9.

Chinese, actually refers to wandering scholars that sought employment². Before the Ming Dynasty, the term *huan-kuan* was actually reserved for people who were merely government officials; it did not have any relation to castration whatsoever. The term for a castrated man in pre-Ming China was actually *yen-jen*, which did not imply any sort of government position at all, but rather showed the fact that they were simply castrated. However, by the time the Ming Dynasty began in 1368, practically all *huan-kuan* were *yen-jen*, although not all *yen-jen* were *huan-kuan*³. This shift in definitions came about because of the fact that so many *huan-kuan* were *yen-jen*, that it simply became the norm for these men in the inner court to be castrated. Many *yen-jen* that were not in the inner court, however, were actually *tzu-kung*, which refers to a man that castrated himself. This practice was despised in Ming China, and was considered an offensive and punishable ritual because men should pride themselves in “maintaining one's body in perfect condition and producing descendents”⁴. Self-castration was meant to be a punishment for non-Chinese prisoners, because it would strip them of their honor, and it also had many psychological effects that could change their behavior. This punishment was known as *Kung-hsing*. *Kung* refers to the Chinese word for “sexual parts,” and *hsing* means “punishment”⁵. During the Ming Dynasty, this practice was practically outlawed because it was so harsh, and was considered barbaric to many Chinese.

Before the importance of eunuchs can be addressed, one needs to understand the history of the Ming Dynasty itself including its origins, the peak of power, and its eventual fall. In 1368, a monk named Chu Yüan-chang led a rebellion against the ruling Mongols and succeeded in ending the Yüan Dynasty, which had ruled from 1260 to 1368. Chu Yüan-chang was an

2 Mammitzsch, 14.

3 Mammitzsch, 16.

4 Mammitzsch, 20.

5 Mammitzsch, 15.

exceptionally smart man, and equally brutal⁶. In order to gain information, he would brutally torture prisoners of war until they begged for death, which he usually gave them after a slow and painful process. By 1368, Yüan-chang succeeded in driving the Mongols out of Peking (the capital city), out of China proper by 1371, and finally out of Yünnan (a vast area composing of Western China) by 1382⁷. Bitter about their loss of an extremely vital and influential piece of land, the Mongols sought to reclaim it through various campaigns launched at China throughout the next several decades. However, all of these were promptly put down to the point where the Mongols had no other choice but to admit defeat.

Before the Ming Dynasty was issued in, eunuchs played an important, but subdued role in the government. Due to problems with eunuchs in previous dynasties, the eunuch role and title were actually removed from the courts completely. Chinese historian Shih-shan Henry Tsai wrote, “During the first hundred years of the Song dynasty [1127-1279], which governed then the largest nation on earth, China enjoyed the reign of a succession of emperors who were conscientious and able administrators, as well as the general absence of any notorious perfidy on the part of the eunuchs”⁸. However, in 1294, emperor Kublai Khan commanded a eunuch to oversee an expansion project on the Grand Canal near Beijing. After completing this project, the eunuch (Guo Shoujing) was given the title of Taijian (or Grand Eunuch) and was given control of China's water supplies⁹. After reintroducing eunuchs to China's inner court, a foothold was established and many more eunuchs were hired to fill both humble and prestigious government positions. This practice continued and increased exponentially up to and during the Ming Dynasty.

6 L. Carrington Goodrich. *A Short History Of The Chinese People*. (New York: Sturgis Press, 2008), 189-90.

7 Goodrich, 190.

8 Shih-Shan Henry Tsai. *The Eunuchs in the Ming Dynasty (Suny Series in Chinese Local Studies)*. (Albany, New York: State University Of New York Press, 1995), 12.

9 Tsai, 13.

While Yüan-chang and other emperors ruled China during the early Ming Dynasty, there were several flaws that they believed needed to be fixed. The first was that the inner-workings of the country had to run smoother than they had in the past, and this could only be achieved with properly maintained modes of transportation. With this in mind, many roads were either fixed or replaced entirely, and other roads were created to link important cities to one another to establish better communications. Also, while roads were an extremely important part of the transportation structure during this time, canals were of equal importance¹⁰, and many new waterways were dug to allow ships to sail from port to port and increase trade within the country itself. Along the same lines of transportation and trade, these emperors saw the importance of building relations with their neighboring countries, and sought to expand their culture across the land and sea.

In order to achieve this mass expansion of the Chinese culture, the emperors sent some of their most important eunuchs to represent China to the foreign nations not only nearby, but also to nations that were extremely difficult to reach during this period in history. In 1403, eunuchs were sent to Tibet, Java, Siam, and Bengal, which were moderately close and, given the proper equipment and supplies, could be reached fairly easily. However, by 1405, missions were expanded from these somewhat “local” nations to places like the South Seas, India, and even the Persian Gulf¹¹. These missions were *extremely* profitable, and not only did they succeed in spreading Chinese influence and academics the the wider world, but it also opened up trade routes that brought the emperors of the Ming Dynasty vast amounts of wealth. However, this did not last for long. While it took only a few years to implement these missions as an ordinary occurrence for Chinese eunuchs, it also took only a few years for the entire system to come to an

10 Goodrich, 190.

11 Goodrich, 192.

abrupt end. Due to lack of money from corruption and poor management (spearheaded by eunuch officials, which will be discussed later), the Chinese officials decided to limit ocean-faring vessels to domestic waters only¹². This served to isolate China, and opened it up for surprise attacks from neighboring countries because there were no longer communications that could ready the army in lieu of an invasion.

Another thing that happened during the Ming Dynasty was a drastic change in the overall government structure. During the Yüan Dynasty, the government was set up with the emperor on top, and then three branches directly below him that held equal power: the Secretariat, Censorate, and Chief Military Commission. Each of these branches had one subordinate branch that would then distribute the emperor's wishes and commands among the population¹³. However, during the Ming Dynasty, this system changed somewhat. The emperor was still at the top, but instead of all three branches having equal power, more power was given to the Censorate who could directly oversee the operations not only of the other two main powers, but also of all their subordinate branches without being evaluated themselves¹⁴. The emperor did this because the eunuchs that controlled the Censorate were trusted, and it would allow these trusted men the opportunity to involve themselves in every aspect of the government so they could then report all of their findings to the emperor. The duty of the Censorate both before the Ming Dynasty and during the dynasty was to be the “eyes and ears” of the empire, and to report their findings back to the emperor. Prior to 1368, they focused on the population outside of the Imperial Court and the government offices. However, after this switch in structure, they had the legal right and obligation to interfere in the affairs of anybody within the empire, save for the emperor himself. Because this group was so close to the emperor, the people that held sway in this position were

12 Goodrich, 195.

13 Charles Hucker. *The Ming Dynasty : Its origins and evolving institutions. (Michigan papers in Chinese studies)*. (Ann Arbor: Center For Chinese Studies, The University of Michigan, 1981), Pg 35.

14 Hucker, 39.

typically eunuchs, which will be expanded upon later. During the Ming Dynasty, more than ever before, eunuchs were placed in positions of great power, and typically had no one to answer to except the emperor. This gave them a vast amount of freedom and, with this freedom, an opportunity to expand their own personal power and wealth.

Eunuchs that went through the proper procedures and became eunuchs according to tradition could hold many important titles, and it was this opportunity that led to the end of the eventual decline of the Ming Dynasty. After looking at the types of eunuchs and parts of their influence in the history of the Ming Dynasty, one is inclined to ask, “Why eunuchs?” Many historians have wondered what exactly separated this class of castrated males from the rest of the educated and able-bodied Chinese population. By becoming a eunuch, it automatically implied that the person could be trusted because they were willing to sacrifice one of their most important rights as a man (the continuation of their line of heritage) in order to serve the government and the people. For the most part, if people knew that a man was a eunuch, they would tell them important and classified information with barely a second thought. One of the reasons they were so trusted was because when they chose to become a eunuch, they *purposely* and *officially* broke all of their ties with their former lives. They would no longer communicate or carry any ties to their families (which made it so they could not be blackmailed), and they would even change their names on the day they were castrated to signify a fresh start without any connections to their past¹⁵. In many cases, these eunuchs would even celebrate their day of castration as their birthday to show a complete removal of their former lifestyle¹⁶. Historian Ulrich Hans-Richard Mammitzsch stated that, “Castrated servants were ideal for such elevated rulers [like the emperor] because they had cut off all their ties that bound them to their families at

15 Mammitzsch, 12.

16 Mammitzsch, 19.

home”¹⁷. By removing all ties to any outside influence, this select group of men could completely devote their lives to serving the emperor without ever having to worry about parents, spouses, or children. They were ideal for service in high-ranking government positions, and their lack of family ties made it possible to trust these men with valuable information that could be revealed to no one else.

Another reason why eunuchs were so trusted and could work in the inner courts while other people were forced to stay outside was because the emperor did not have to worry about them getting sidetracked or swayed by the women of the court. Since these men had no means of reproduction—even if they wanted to—they could not reproduce or fornicate with the emperor's wives or the wives of other men that lived in the palace. By removing this obstacle, these men had little other choice than to be fully devoted to the emperor. Since these “distractions” could no longer prompt these men into action, the only thing that could deter these eunuchs from completely serving the emperor was money. The emperor saw to it that these men were paid well, but their greed was sensational and since women were no longer an issue, many eunuchs sought to prove their worth by gaining wealth.

The role of the eunuch in the Ming Dynasty was extremely different than any dynasty prior to this time, and was even different than the dynasties that followed it as far as eunuchs were concerned. Eunuch involvement in the imperial courts, inner palace, and government offices hit their climax during the Ming Dynasty, which is apparent when looking at specific eunuchs that were in office, as well as the overall eunuch population during this time. One major difference between the Ming Dynasty and any other Chinese dynasty was the fact that there were *many* more eunuchs during this time than ever before. It has been estimated that there were roughly 13,000 eunuchs in the employment of the empire at its peak, and no less than 3,000

17 Mammitzsch, 12.

eunuchs employed at any time¹⁸. According to Chinese government records, in 1598 alone, the court took in approximately 4,500 new eunuchs to attend to the needs of the inner court¹⁹. Altogether, there were roughly one *million* eunuchs employed by the empire over the 276 year reign of the Ming Dynasty²⁰. While it is obvious that this was a long period of time to accumulate these eunuchs, these numbers should be compared to other periods in Chinese history. For instance, the Ch'ing Dynasty—which came immediately after the Ming Dynasty and lasted until 1914—is comparable to other Chinese dynasties as far as eunuch population is concerned. However, while the Ming Dynasty had an average of 8,000 eunuchs in employment at any given time, the Ch'ing emperors had a *maximum* of 2,000 eunuchs under the imperial payroll throughout the dynasty²¹. This is an extremely vast difference between the two, and it shows just how much emphasis was placed on these sometimes irresponsible and ill-educated eunuchs between 1368 and 1644.

The main reason for a eunuch's existence was to serve in the government and to be at the beck-and-call of the emperor at any given time. Their roles in the government were exceptionally vast, and could range from stable boys to high-ranking officials that answered only to the emperor. By looking at the government roles of the eunuchs during the Ming Dynasty, their qualifications, one example of an extremely high-ranking eunuch, their roles in the military, and how they impacted the economy of China during this time, it is clear to see that they are the most important group to blame for the demise of this proud dynasty.

As stated before, the role of a eunuch during the Ming Dynasty could be *extremely* vast and ranged from roles of great humility to positions of practically unparalleled power. Eunuchs

18 Mary Anderson. *Hidden Power: The Palace Eunuchs of Imperial China*. (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1990), Pg 240.

19 Anderson, 240.

20 Tsai, 7.

21 Mammitzsch, 15.

had arranged their own hierarchy within the government, which gave certain eunuchs the rights and responsibilities to hire other eunuchs or to report directly to the emperor. At the top of the hierarchical scale were the 12 Directorates (or *chien*). These people were the most important, and worked with the emperor as advisors and handled his own personal documents. These eunuchs were also responsible for hiring other eunuchs to various positions within the government²², and it often led to the hiring of personal friends or family members of the *chien*. Although these eunuchs were supposed to have cut off ties from their families completely, many of them secretly kept close contact with them, and were able to hire family members even though they were supposed to have absolutely no affiliation to them whatsoever. Beneath this overarching group was the *ssu-li ch'ang-yin t'ai-chen* (which translates to the Grand Guardian of the Seal of the Directorate of Ceremonies). This group was in charge of authorizing any official document that was written during the Ming Dynasty, and gave these eunuchs a unique opportunity to carefully inspect documents that were sometimes hidden from the general public. If they did not approve of a certain document, the paper was disregarded and had to be changed until these eunuchs decided it was worthy of being published. If they deemed it worthy, they would stamp it, thus officially making the document legitimate. Underneath the *ssu-li ch'ang-yin t'ai-chen* was the *ssu-li ping-pi t'ai-chien*. This was a group of four to six eunuchs that were just underneath the *ssu-li ch'ang-yin t'ai-chen* in the Ming hierarchy. Their title is interpreted as the Managing Grand Guardians of the Directorate of Ceremonies²³, and they were instructed to guard both the documents that were passed by the *ssu-li ch'ang-yin t'ai-chen*, as well as the *ssu-li ch'ang-yin t'ai-chen* themselves. All of these positions were so important that the emperor was the only person allowed to appoint people to these positions, and oftentimes he appointed

22 Mammitzsch, 35.

23 Mammitzsch, 35.

advisors that had been with him before his rise to the throne, regardless of their overall trustworthiness or merit.

Beneath these primary eunuch positions were several sub-offices. These were appointed by the Directorates, and the only person that could overrule their decisions was the emperor. The main sub-offices were the eight Bureaus (*chi*) and the four Offices (*ssu*)²⁴. The reasons for the distinction between the roles is unclear, but it is known that these two branches were responsible for providing the people of the inner court with all of their material needs. The primary focus was taking care of their wardrobes, then after that they were required to care for the emperor's stables and other chores that needed to be accomplished²⁵. While these roles varied in importance, the emperor required that all of these men be literate enough to read documents if the occasion called for it. In order to achieve this, once a man officially became a eunuch, there was a special school set aside called the *nei-shu-tang* that served to educate him in the ways of government procedures, literacy, and other essential skills for government officials²⁶. This was especially required of the higher-ranking eunuchs, but the lower-level ones needed to be proficient as well. An unintentional side effect of this required learning was that it placed these men in the highest percent of educated people in the whole population of China. It also made it possible for these eunuchs to know all of the inner-workings of the palace, which made their positions even more important²⁷.

While it would seem that eunuchs always held very high positions in the government, this claim is not necessarily true. A royal procession from the Ming Dynasty is depicted on two scrolls—one when the emperor and his attendants, soldiers, and advisors are leaving Peking, and the other scroll shows them as they return. By looking at these scrolls, a lot of information about

24 Mammitzsch, 31.

25 Mammitzsch, 31.

26 Mammitzsch, 33.

27 Mammitzsch, 33.

the functions of a eunuch in the Ming society can be gathered. For instance, it is clear to see that there are varying levels in the eunuch hierarchy since some eunuchs are elaborately dressed²⁸, and others are in fairly simple attire (however, all eunuchs wore the same head attire, so they could be easily distinguished from other officials)²⁹. These scrolls show how eunuchs were involved in almost every aspect of government. In some parts of the scrolls, eunuchs are seen waving fans to cool down other members of the imperial court, or carrying thrones for the emperor or his advisors to sit on³⁰. However, in other parts—like the section of the scroll where the emperor is on his barge—eunuchs clearly hold an extremely high rank in the government. In this portion of the scroll, the emperor is seated in the middle of the barge, and the only people that are allowed near him are his personal eunuchs. Not even the soldiers that are entrusted to guard him are allowed nearby, but rather they are pushed to the edges of the barge while his eunuchs practically share the emperor's canopy³¹. By having so many eunuchs in such a wide range of governmental positions, this group's foothold in the dynasty was more than secure, and their influence and ideals could not be stopped.

As seen in the scrolls, eunuchs held many positions that were still government related, but they did not answer directly to the emperor like some of the other prominent offices. Some of these roles included tax collectors, military leaders, police, diplomatic envoys, emissaries to emperor, and other roles that could be considered prestigious, but not necessarily high ranking like the Directorates. One problem that arose from eunuchs being in these positions—other than the fact that it gave them the opportunity to act in corrupt ways without being caught or questioned—was the fact that, for the most part, these were roles that were not seen in a positive

28 Zhiliang Na. *Emperor's Procession: Two Scrolls of the Ming Dynasty*. (Taipei, National Palace Museum New York: , 1970), 5 → Plate 2.

29 Na, 25 → Plate 12.

30 Na, 55 → Plate 27.

31 Na, 5, 106 → Plate 2.

light by the Chinese population at large. The functions of these roles was typically to either take money from people, imprison them for breaking a law, or to take their sons and lead them into battle. In fact, there was a popular song during the early Ming Dynasty that put eunuchs on the same level as women, which is considered one of the lowest places one could be. The ode went:

Not heaven but women and eunuchs
Bring misfortunes to mankind.
Wives and those without balls
Bleat with similar voices.³²

Women were extremely disrespected during this time, and many citizens could see first-hand the corruption of the eunuchs because they were the ones that were being oppressed and taxed without restraint.

Another reason people did not like the eunuchs filling these occupational roles was because, due to the fact that they were eunuchs, they could skirt around rules that the majority of the population had to adhere. For example, the *k'uang-shui chien* (or mining tax collectors) used eunuchs to gather their money because they were not under the same legal obligations as the normal tax collectors. Since they were eunuchs, they could bypass the civilian bureaucracy and the *k'uang-shui chien* could impose any tax that they wanted³³. The eunuchs were used as loopholes around the Chinese laws, and it made them even more detested than before. Many people despised these occupations and, since eunuchs were largely responsible for filling these roles, the blame eventually fell on them.

It is clear that eunuchs held many positions within the government, but a question that one must ask is, were they qualified for these various responsibilities. The answer to that question, in a word, is “No.” More often than not, eunuchs that were employed by the government were there because they wanted a quick and simple way to gain a lot of power with

³² Tsai, 12.

³³ Mammitzsch, 30.

little to no effort—even if it meant losing a part of them that they would have preferred keeping. A perfect example of this lack of qualification is seen in the story of two brothers that were raised during the Ming Dynasty. Yang Lian and Wei Zhongxian (later known as Li Jinzhong) were twin brothers that were born to a middling class family³⁴. Both of these brothers wanted to make a difference in Chinese history, but they went about gaining their power in very different ways. Yang Lian decided to become a civil service worker, and took an *extremely* difficult exam that would dictate where he could serve his country best. As he worked at his profession and continued studying, he became a notable scholar and eventually gained the title of Senior Vice Censor in Chief (which was a tremendously prominent position). However, while Yang Lian earned his title through genuine work and an uncanny amount of perseverance, Wei Zhongxian decided to take an easier route. Wei was described as being, “a wily, unprincipled scoundrel, who having no means for education, took a shortcut to position and power”³⁵. Instead of *earning* a position of power, Wei Zhongxian decided to become a eunuch, change his name to Li Jinzhong, and work his way into the imperial court through manipulative and immoral practices. After a few years of constant maneuvers, Li Jinzhong gained the title of Managing Grand Eunuch in the Ceremonial Directorate of the Ming Court³⁶. This was an extremely prominent role in Ming China and could only be awarded by the emperor himself. While Yang Lian genuinely worked to gain his title, Wei Zhongxian simply became a eunuch and gained a higher position of power than his brother, even though he was in no way qualified for the title he was given. This was only one example out of *hundreds* where power-hungry men wanted to gain prestige, so they simply became a eunuch and stole the roles from other, more qualified men. For the most part, this was unnoticed by the emperor and others, but to some it was far too

34 Tsai, 1.

35 Tsai, 1.

36 Tsai, 2.

obvious. One emperor, Emperor Hongwu, *did* in fact notice that these men were unqualified and should be removed from power, but by this time the eunuch's system was far too concrete to be disestablished; even by the emperor himself. In a personal diary in the year eighth moon of his second year as emperor, Emperor Hongwu wrote:

Not one or two of these people [eunuchs] 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.³⁷

It is clear to see that not only one or two eunuchs was untrustworthy, but that it was actually out of the ordinary to find a eunuch who genuinely earned his role in the government, and practiced it in a fair and just manner.

In many cases, trying to evict a eunuch from power or bring their immorality to light was considered dangerous, even if it was done by the emperor himself. While immoral and unqualified, many eunuchs knew exactly how to manipulate the system to the point where they could not be removed from office unless they specifically arranged it. One court official in the Ming Dynasty, who was intimately aware of the dangers provided by eunuchs, wrote a note portraying what he discovered about their habits, practices, and influence on the emperors:

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

37 Tsai, 29.

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?³⁸

While some may claim that this is simply an exaggerated account by a jealous official that cannot hope to gain the title that a eunuch may have stolen from him, there is a good example of one particular eunuch—Wei Chung-hsien—who was “the most reviled and dangerous eunuch in all of Chinese history”³⁹ that follows this description almost perfectly.

Wei Chung-hsien could be considered the epitome of corruption, and is considered infamous by several historians familiar with the Ming Dynasty. The actions of this eunuch were influential enough that he and several other—but somewhat less important—eunuchs are blamed for ending the Ming Dynasty as a whole. His life was chronicled in *Cho-Chung-Chi* by a fellow eunuch that worked beside him for many years named Liu Jo-yǔ. Wei was born 27 February 1568 in Su-ning⁴⁰, and was 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.⁴¹

He became a eunuch not because he wanted to help the empire, but rather *because* he was irresponsible and could not handle money. He started off his career as a eunuch working in the stables under the *Yǔ-ma chien* named Lui K'e-hsiang. He was unsatisfied with this task and wanted a chance to gain more wealth, so he later switched and became a mining tax collector. However, his reputation as a scoundrel and greedy man preceded him, and the manager of the mine beat him to the point where he was almost dead, then locked him in a jail cell and refused

38 Dun Jen Li. *The Essence of Chinese Civilization*. (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1967), Pg148-9.

39 Anderson, Mary. *Hidden Power*. 247.

40 Mammitzsch, 103.

41 Mammitzsch, 107.

to give him food. A traveling Buddhist monk named Ch'iu Yüeh happened to pass by and convinced the manager to set Wei free⁴². Ch'iu Yüeh pitied Wei and gave him some money and sent him to the imperial storehouses to work. While some would take this as a sign to change their ways, Wei seemed to be virtually unaffected by his near-death experience. While in the storehouse, Wei came manipulated his way into the kitchen as a cook for the emperor's grandson Wan-li. He formed a very close relationship with the prince⁴³, and continued to earn his favor by breaking into his former place of employment at the storehouses stealing toys, food, gifts, and other commodities that the prince favored. Due to his relationship with royalty, Wei Chung-hsien was transferred to the kitchen of Hsi-tsung, where he again formed a close bond by stealing trinkets that his master wanted. On October 1, 1620, Hsi-tsung became the Emperor of China⁴⁴ and, since he was only 16 years old when he ascended the Dragon Throne, he was in need of someone who could help him rule until his understandings of politics were fully developed. Since Hsi-tsung already trusted Wei, he promoted him to *ssu-li ping-pi t'ai-chien*, and Wei was suddenly in charge of all of the documents that went to and from the emperor⁴⁵. His affection for Wei was evident to everyone in China when Wei—who enjoyed flaunting his skills on a horse—rose side-by-side with the emperor. At this time, this was an unforgivable breach of etiquette. However, instead of punishing Wei like he should have, Hsi-tsung shot the horse that Wei was riding and continued on his way⁴⁶. Hsi-tsung clearly trusted Wei, and it was recorded that he often asked for Wei's advice regarding political matters and, more often than not, heeded it without question⁴⁷. Essentially, by the time Hsi-tsung was actually old enough to run the empire by himself, Wei had such a firm grasp on the emperor's confidence that it was the eunuch that ran

42 Mammitzsch, 113.

43 Mammitzsch, 115.

44 Mammitzsch, 119.

45 Mammitzsch, 125.

46 Mammitzsch, 135.

47 Mammitzsch, 137.

China and not the emperor. In fact, Wei challenged the emperor himself and, since the emperor had lost so much power and control by this time, was practically unable to contain this power-hungry eunuch. Near the end of Hsi-tsung's rule, Wei promoted himself to the position of supreme duke, and forced people to begin documents with, "The Emperor and the palace minister [Wei Chung-hsien] hereby decree..."⁴⁸. This trend could have continued if it were not for a brave censor who made Wei's atrocities clear to the public. In a list titled the "Twenty-four Great Crimes of Eunuch Wei Chung-hsien," he listed crimes Wei had committed while in the service of the empire which included murder of officials and eunuchs, forcing Madam Chang to commit suicide after she became pregnant by the emperor, taking control of palace guards to keep them from rising up against him, and many more⁴⁹. It also gave proof that Wei Chung-hsien was trying to usurp the throne of China from the underneath the emperor. This censor was later found dead after being brutally tortured. The educated population was in an uproar, and Wei Chung-hsien committed suicide on January 12, 1628 (16 years before the end of the dynasty), and was described as, "a scheming, cruel monster reveling in the glory of his power and using it ruthlessly against upright officials who might have saved the dynasty"⁵⁰.

Part of the reason Wei Chung's hold on the empire was so strong and influential enough that it was considered a major contributor to the end of the Ming Dynasty as a whole was because his power was not situated in one singular position. Once Wei Chung was in the proper position where he could hire other eunuchs, he went to his close family members and gave them positions of power that they could use to help Wei Chung should he ever be in need of assistance. By looking at Wei Chung's family tree, one can note the many relations he added to the imperial court (even though by law he was supposed to break all family ties and serve the emperor

48 Anderson, 253.

49 Anderson, 250-1.

50 Mammitzsch, 112.

wholly). For example, Wei Chung's nephew Wei Liang-Ch'ing was given a position that was so powerful and influential that he actually *substituted* for the emperor at a sacrifice at the emperor's ancestral temple in 1627. Nine of his direct family members, along with 4-5 grandchildren from a marriage he had prior to his castration, were given positions as *chin-i-wei*—or the Imperial Bodyguards—which gave them direct access to the emperor at all times⁵¹. If Wei-Chung was unsatisfied with the emperor or if the emperor tried to remove him from office, the Imperial Bodyguards were going to take Wei Chung's side and could force the emperor—at the point of a sword if necessary—to reestablish their relative's position.

Wei Chung-hsien's actions, due to their timing during the Ming Dynasty, were largely responsible for the collapse of this empire. Since there were so many eunuchs in the government system by the end of the Ming Dynasty, it was clear that many emperors were not in charge, but instead had to yield power to their eunuchs. Wei Chung-hsien was not the only eunuch to overpower his emperor during the Ming reign, but it seems that he was the final straw that showed the surrounding countries that China was no longer a powerful enough empire to repel a direct invasion. He, along with the powerful eunuch hierarchy, the actions of eunuchs before Wei Chung-hsien, and the foothold that eunuchs held in the government were the sole reason for the dynasty's collapse.

The political actions taken by Wei Chung-hsien and other eunuchs were extremely important, but they do not constitute the whole reason why the Ming Dynasty ended. One major factor that attributed to the fall of the Ming Dynasty was the growing problem of economic struggles. Since eunuchs were in control of many economic branches, they had the power to dictate prices and taxes, which helped contribute to the end of this era in Chinese history.

Throughout the Ming Dynasty, eunuchs had a direct impact on economics that ranged

⁵¹ Mammitzsch, 104. Family Tree.

from tax collectors to imperial advisors. Since there was very little oversight because eunuchs were supposed to be trusted, these men allowed greed and pride to trump morals and savvy economic decision making. One thing that became prominent during this time was the formation of Imperial Plantations. It was recorded that, “With few exceptions, all those supply depots and installations [plantations] were supervised by eunuchs”⁵². These plantations would grow food that would be sold to Chinese civilians and other countries that were willing to negotiate a fair deal. The money would then go directly to the emperor, who would typically use it to help expand or better his empire. Of course, since eunuchs were trusted, they were placed in charge of these plantations and could decide what was grown, as well as what it sold for. In order to save money, eunuchs were reported as hiring, “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”⁵³. By gaining more land, the eunuchs could grow more which would bring in more revenue for their own personal use (they would skew their reports to show that they gave the emperor the proper amount of money). It got to the point where eunuchs were even using the military to remove peasants so their land could be farmed and the profit put directly in their own pockets. 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”⁵⁴. If these peasants went to the emperor or another higher authority to complain about their treatment by eunuchs, fictitious charges would be imposed on the peasants and they would have to pay even more money.

Since the eunuchs were in charge of these plantations, they could determine what their products sold for and what they wanted as tax revenue for their services. Between the years

52 Ray Huang. *1587, A Year of No Significance: The Ming Dynasty in Decline*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 13.

53 Tsai, 166.

54 Tsai, 169.

1580 and 1588 (typically noted as the start of the decline of the Ming Dynasty), prices began to rise as eunuchs wanted more and more money for themselves. According to price records from the Ming Dynasty, in only eight years, the price of normal rice went from 0.30 silver ounces per shih (one shih equals approximately 93.5 US liters⁵⁵) to approximately 1.55 silver ounces per shih⁵⁶. As the price of their staple food increased over 500%, many peasants began to get even more angry than they were before. As the dynasty continued to decline, the eunuchs believed that they needed more money, and the prices continued to soar. Later, near the end of the Ming Dynasty, prices began to go even higher and forced many people to revolt, which encouraged the Manchurians to invade China. In 1632, the price of husked rice was 1.0 silver ounces per shih. Ten years later, in 1642 (two years before the fall of the dynasty), the price rose to 5.0 silver ounces per shih. Although it may be argued that the raise in prices was not related to the eunuchs, once the eunuchs were removed from these positions, the prices immediately began to fall. For instance, in 1647—three years after the end of the Ming Dynasty—the price of husked rice fell from 5.0 silver ounces per shih to 4.0 silver ounces per shih. While that is not a significant drop overall, once the new dynasty began getting more established, the prices began to fall even more, and by 1649 the price dropped down to 1.2 silver ounces per shih. Finally, by 1650, the price was back down to its original 1.0 silver ounces per shih⁵⁷. Once the eunuchs were out of power and their greed could no longer touch the peasants that comprised most of the Chinese population, prices plummeted causing the Chinese economy began to stabilize, and the population of China to begin having faith in the government once again.

While the political and economic features of eunuchs were important, it is worth noting

55 Mammitzsch, vi.

56 Ch'uan Han-sheng. "Shung Ming chien pai-yin kou-mai li ti pien-tung chi ch'i yuan-yin." *Hsin-ya hsueh-pao* 8 (1967): 163-5.

57 Ch'uan Han-sheng. "Yeh Meng-chu." *Yüeh-shih Pien*. 7 (1967): 1b-2b, 4b, 5a.

that the Ming Dynasty ended because of a foreign military invasion and not the voluntary seceding of an emperor. Another reason why the fall of the Ming Dynasty should be credited to eunuchs was because of their role in the military.

Up to this point, it would seem that all eunuchs were greedy incompetent men that only wanted power. While this is true for much of the Ming Dynasty, it did not necessarily begin that way. In the early Ming Dynasty, eunuchs were placed in charge of the Chinese army, and were assigned the task of defending the borders and putting down rebellions. Within a couple of years, many of these eunuchs proved their worth and after several genuine victories, in one eunuch's case, he was given the title of the Grand Defender of Gansu. This is an area in Northwest China that borders Mongolia⁵⁸. It is important to remember that the Ming Dynasty was issued in after the Mongols were expelled, and there was still much fighting along these borders. Given the title of the Grand Defender of Gansu was *extremely* prestigious for any man, especially a eunuch. Noting their victories, the military leaders decided that the eunuchs should choose the battalion commanders, which they did with much pride. However, since they were eunuchs, they were expected to award positions of power to other eunuchs that they maybe owed some sort of allegiance to. As the number of eunuchs in charge of battalions increased, the *quality* of the battalions themselves decreased. One historian wrote, "The increase in number corresponded to a decline in the quality of soldiery"⁵⁹. Many of these unqualified eunuchs led troops to battle, and came out devastated. In one instance, a eunuch military commander named Wang Zhen advised the emperor that he should ride out to battle with the troops in 1449. The emperor did this and, to the shock of the Chinese people, he was captured and held as ransom⁶⁰. In another instance, a fresh eunuch commander was given charge of part of the Chinese navy. In

58 Tsai, 60.

59 Tsai, 61.

60 Tsai, 60.

1405, Chêng Ho was put in charge of a fleet of junks at Soochow and sailed south to defend and attack the southern areas around China. Ming Chinese historian Ku Ch'i-yüan (1565-1628) documented this fleet when he counted, "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"⁶¹. This was a massive undertaking for a eunuch with absolutely no military experience, and it ended poorly for Chêng Ho and his brave sailors. These eunuchs were simply not qualified, and not only were their orders wrong most of the time, but they "issue a stream of conflicting and confusing orders which are impossible to carry out and serve... [it] only makes the field commanders' jobs more difficult"⁶².

Another example of the eunuch's role in the military and how it ended the Ming Dynasty can be observed in the year 1465. During this time, high-ranking eunuchs demanded that 140,000 of China's best troops be pulled from their regiments and placed in twelve "Capital Regiments"⁶³. These highly-tuned and well trained soldiers were put under the command of court eunuchs that had absolutely no experience in the military, and were simply given the position as head of the regiment because of influential eunuchs that they were in contact with. These eunuchs would order the soldiers to engage in military maneuvers that, through experience, these soldiers knew would not work. Many of China's best soldiers were killed because of ill-advised decisions on the eunuch's part, and it began to anger the soldiers. Historian Carrington Goodrich wrote that, "As more and more eunuchs were given military command, a feud slowly but inevitably developed between the castrati and the professional

61 Goodrich, 193-4.

62 William Atwell. *Ch'en Tzu-Lung (1608-1647): A Scholar-Official of the Late Ming Dynasty*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1974), 62.

63 Tsai, 64.

soldiers”⁶⁴. This created tensions *within* the military, which directly affected their performance on the battlefields as they faced their enemies. These soldiers saw it as unfair that men were promoted through their political connections as opposed to their merit on the battlefield.

These unfortunate losses and inter-military quarrels, when compounded one on top of the other, led to an extremely weak military during the latter portion of the Ming Dynasty. Goodrich commented, “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”⁶⁵. While they were able to ward off rebellions and invasions for many years from prominent countries like Mongolia and Manchuria, as the eunuchs took control of the military and promoted each other because of their social status, their strength began to fade and China was open for an attack that they knew they could not hope to stop.

While all of the previous examples showed how eunuchs caused the Ming Dynasty to fail from *within* the government, it is clear that some eunuchs that were *outside* of the government also helped bring about the end of this era. At the beginning, the *Tzu-kung*—or self-castrated eunuchs—were described as being a nuisance to the empire, and many were punished for their actions. However, they continued castrating themselves which ended up leading to a surplus of eunuchs⁶⁶. While it may seem odd that they would continue this practice, many eunuchs (like Wei-Chung-Hsien) were in debt and needed someplace to turn that would offer protection from creditors and could give a steady flow of money. Oftentimes, parents would even castrate their children and try to sell them to the imperial court as a means of generating some revenue. One Ming source noted in a journal that:

All of our stupid commoners are dreaming of a rich and powerful life by

64 Tsai, 64.

65 Goodrich, 199.

66 Mammitzsch, 18.

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.⁶⁷

By the time of Emperor Cheng-te in 1506-1521, there were approximately 3,500 *tzu-kung* that were looking for a place in the government that could help them since they could no longer conceive children and make a living for themselves. Since they had no place to go, Cheng-te set aside an area on the outskirts of Peking for these men to live and create their own community where they could sustain themselves. However, more men came seeking the opportunity to work for the government, and the community began to fail. Cheng-te tried ordering them to return to their former homes, but they would not be moved. The rabble became so large and there were so many men out of work that it led to an incredible amount of crimes and banditry both outside of Peking, and inside the capitol itself⁶⁸. Historian Mary Anderson wrote, “As travelers and merchants passed by, the weaker and younger eunuchs came out to beg, while the stronger demanded money with threats, or used violence to rob them. Authorities were well aware of the forays of these eunuch renegades, but were helpless to stop them”⁶⁹. This banditry within the capitol took the emperor's attention away from border defense and forced him to look inward. By doing this, it provided an opportunity for neighboring countries to gain a stronger foothold in parts of China, which would eventually help them when the dynasty fell in 1644.

During the 1500s, the Ming Dynasty began to decline due mostly to corruption within the government⁷⁰. During this time, there was actually a popular saying among the Imperial Court officials that stated that, “Heaven is high and the emperor is far away”⁷¹. Essentially, this meant that if somebody was not located directly inside the court, they could do whatever they wanted

67 Mammitzsch, 21.

68 Mammitzsch, 22.

69 Anderson, 241.

70 Albert Chan. *The Glory and Fall of the Ming Dynasty*. (Oklahoma City: University of Oklahoma, 1982), Pg 212.

71 Chan, 212.

without fear of being caught or punished. With so much corruption throughout the governmental system, what were previously structured and stable establishments began to fail, which opened the door for attacks from other countries even further.

Eventually, in 1644, the Ming Dynasty came to an end when a Manchurian man named Li Tzu-ch'eng led an army to attack China⁷². In 1641, Tzu-ch'eng attacked and conquered Lo-yang and killed the ruling Prince Fu, which came as a major blow to the emperor. Like a plague, Tzu-ch'eng spread across Ming China conquering city after city. After Lo-yang, Tzu-ch'eng attacked K'ai-feng, but were momentarily repelled by opposition. Instead of backing down, the Manchurian army broke the dikes of the Yellow River and drowned every single resident in this city. By 1643, the Manchus were in control of all of Honan (the region bordering the capitol), and from there they turned and attacked the province of Shansi. They conquered the major cities of Ta-t'ung, Chu-yung, and Hsüan-fu, then moved toward the capitol city of Peking after only two days. As Peking was under attack and it was clear that it could not be saved, Emperor Ch'ung-chen climbed a small hill near the palace and hung himself, thus ending the Ming Dynasty⁷³.

While it is clear that the Ming Dynasty fell because of corruption and a mismanaged government and military on behalf of the eunuchs of the time, some historians claim that there were other factors that played a more important role than the eunuchs⁷⁴. These include the peasant rebellions, a weakened and misguided military, and a lack of education for the population at large. While these claims do appear throughout Ming history, they are in no way larger or more important than the power of the eunuchs during this time.

Near the end of the Ming Dynasty, Chinese peasants became angry at the emperors and

72 Chan, 357.

73 Chan, 357.

74 James B. Parsons. *Peasant Rebellions of the Late Ming Dynasty*. (Ann Arbor: Association For Asian Studies Inc, 1970).

advisors for treating them poorly and removing them from their lands for their own special interests⁷⁵. In return for favors to the emperor, other country's leaders were awarded large tracts of land within China to do whatever they wanted. Immediately, all of the peasants were removed. Finally, in 1628 in the province of Shensi (Northwest China), the peasants began to fight back⁷⁶. There was not a lot of good farming land in China for these peasants to begin with, and giving it away to other countries was the final straw. These open rebellions spread quickly, and in the year 1631 there were approximately 47 violent outbreaks against the empire⁷⁷. While these outbreaks certainly worried some people in the empire, they never spread any further than Shensi and the neighboring province of Shansi. In the Ming Dynasty, the province of Shensi was 315,252 acres, and Shansi was 418,642 acres. Totaled up, the area where these rebellions were taking place constituted about 8.63% of China's overall landmass⁷⁸. This area was not large enough to completely overturn the Ming Dynasty, and these rebellions were actually suppressed quite quickly after 1631.

Another argument some make for the fall of the Ming Dynasty was that the military was too weak to defend the country properly. This statement is true in every single respect. The Chinese military, once extremely strong and able-bodied was far too weak by 1644 to repel the Manchurian attacks. However, it should be addressed that the military was so weak *because* it was under the command of misguided and ill-educated eunuchs. If the military commanders that actually had experience on the battlefield and knew how to properly defend and attack a country were placed in charge instead of court eunuchs who merely wanted to gain more power, the military would probably have been able to easily crush the Manchurian army just as they had all

75 Goodrich, 199.

76 Parsons, 1.

77 Parsons, 13.

78 Mi Chu Wiens. *Socioeconomic Change During the Ming Dynasty in the Kiangnan Area*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973), Pg 354.

throughout the Ming Dynasty.

The Ming Dynasty began and ended in turmoil, and it was due largely to the fact that unworthy and unqualified eunuchs were placed in positions where they could constantly exploit their resources in order to gain more wealth and power. This corruption lasted for several hundred years, and by 1644 it had simply become too much for the Ming Dynasty to support. By looking at the various roles of the eunuchs both within the government (court officials, economic dictators, and military leaders), as well as their roles outside of the government, it is clear to see that they were the sole reason for the bloody collapse of this era in Chinese history.

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