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AND ACHIM MITTAG

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# Negotiating Power and Identity: Eunuchs in Qing China (1644–1911)\*

LIN Hang 林航\*\*

## Abstract

While traditional historiography has portrayed eunuchs in imperial China as avaricious and ambitious, a growing number of new studies set out to reverse the stereotypical and biased representations of eunuchs. Focusing on two recent monographs on eunuchs in Qing China, this review article aims to unveil the history of the hitherto lesser-known palace servants to present a more vivid and multi-faceted picture of this marginal yet important group. While most eunuchs in the Qing were relegated to a servile status and subjected to social marginalization, they still enjoyed certain imperial favor and obtained a degree of agency that allowed them to create a collective identity. Because of their proximity to the emperor, they also formed a significant part of the central, and most inaccessible, physical space of the Qing empire.

## Keywords

Eunuch, palace management, identity, Qing rulership

## Introduction

Throughout the dynastic history of China, eunuchs made up an ambiguous yet important group of people at the court. Starting from the Zhou 周 dynasty (c. 1046–256 BC), eunuchs were entrusted by rulers with working in the inner court as attendants for the royal household.<sup>1</sup> With the physical act of genital mutilation, eunuchs were stripped of their reproduc-

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\* Review article, relating to Melissa S. Dale's *Inside the World of the Eunuch: A Social History of the Emperor's Servants in Qing China*. 223 pp. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2018 [ISBN: 978-988-8455-75-1], as well as Norman A. Kutcher's *Eunuch and Emperor in the Great Age of Qing Rule*. 344 pp. Oakland: University of California Press, 2018 [ISBN: 978-0-520-29752-4].

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1 The earliest mention of eunuchs in China appears on oracle bones from the Shang dynasty 商 (c. 1600–1046 BC), on which records of the emasculation of captured enemies have been found. The first instances in which emasculated men worked as imperial servants have been identified as dating back to around the first millennium BC in the Zhou dynasty, recorded as *siren* 寺人 in the *Zhouli* 周禮 (The Rites of the Zhou).

tive ability so that they could wait upon the emperor and his consorts without any possibility of sexual indiscretion. Such service allowed them an intimate foothold at the center of the imperial court, enabling them to lobby for or against causes, keep or divulge palace secrets, and even influence dynastic politics. Indeed, the history of imperial China is rife with tales of powerful eunuchs outgrowing their intended roles as menials of the palace, such as those in the Eastern Han 東漢 (25–220), Tang 唐 (618–907) and Ming 明 (1368–1644) dynasties.

Due to their status as members of the “third sex” and their close relationship to the ruler and his women, eunuchs have been generally perceived with a mixture of fascination and revulsion. Almost immediately after the installment of eunuchs as an institution in the Zhou period, they began to be portrayed as sycophants and liars.<sup>2</sup> Histories of subsequent dynasties are replete with stories of avaricious and ambitious eunuchs who relentlessly interfered in politics and amassed great private wealth. Throughout the three millennia during which the eunuch system persisted in China, the literati eventually created a master narrative that eunuchs, despite their subservient status, were perpetually scheming to exploit their position to the detriment of the country’s social and political order. This distaste for eunuchs was echoed by nineteenth-century European observers, like George Carter Stent (1833–1884), who famously labeled eunuchism as a symbol of the despotism and backwardness of imperial China.<sup>3</sup>

While such traditional historiography on eunuchs has long prevailed, in the past years we have witnessed a surge of new studies that aim at reversing these biased and stereotypical representations of eunuchs in imperial China. With their attention directed at the Qing 清 dynasty (1644–1911), Melissa S. Dale’s *Inside the World of the Eunuch: A Social History of the Emperor’s Servants in Qing China* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2018) and Norman A. Kutcher’s *Eunuch and Emperor in the Great Age of Qing Rule* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018) are the first book-length studies of Chinese eunuchs in English since Henry Shih-shan Tsai’s monograph on the Ming eunuchs.<sup>4</sup> Instead of focusing on prominent eunuchs – such as the ill-reputed An Dehai 安德海 (1844–1869) and Li Lianying 李蓮英 (1848–1911) – both Dale and Kutcher strive to uncover stories of little-known eunuchs to present a more balanced picture of this complicated and much-maligned group. Eunuchs of the Qing, as Dale and Kutcher both demonstrate, served emperors who were determined to limit their influence, but they also found a variety of ways of negotiating power both inside and outside the palace and obtained a certain degree of agency over their own lives.

2 The poem “Zhaomin” 召旻 in the *Shijing* 詩經 (Book of Songs) records that the eunuchs of King You 幽 (?–771 BC) encouraged the king in his evil ways, which finally led to the fall of the kingdom. For a translation of the poem, see Waley 1969, 315.

3 Stent 1877. For more neutral accounts of other Western observers, see Millant 1908 and Trevor-Roper 1977. Unfortunately, neither of these sources were consulted in the books under review.

4 Tsai 1995.

## Living as a Eunuch: Between Entrance to and Exit from the Palace

Placing the community of Qing palace eunuchs at the center of her inquiry, Dale sets out to explore the peculiar life experiences of these men from their routes to reach the palace to their final discharge from the system. In the first chapter, she offers an overview of the institutional history of the eunuch system and its evolution from its origin in the Zhou up to its maturation during the Qing. In chapter 2, Dale proceeds to examine the factors that drove young boys and men to undergo emasculation in order to enter the service. Whereas criminals or prisoners of war constituted a considerable part of the eunuch population during the previous periods, almost all Qing eunuchs had volunteered (or were “volunteered” by their family members) for service because they regarded it as an effective way to lift themselves and their families out of poverty. The Qing court distanced itself from the act of emasculation by licensing a special group of practitioners, known as *daozijiang* 刀子匠 (“knifemakers”), to carry out the procedure of genital mutilation, yet it retained firm control over the selection process by setting a myriad of regulations with respect to the age, character, and ethnicity of the candidates.

Chapter 3 disrobes the eunuch body to reveal the physical and psychological effects of emasculation on the eunuchs. As Dale cogently points out, the removal of male genitalia resulted in sexual dysfunction as well as uncertainties concerning the interpretation of their gender, a matter that was dependent upon the viewer. While for Confucian scholar-officials the emasculated body represented feminized *yin*, the Manchu rulers sometimes viewed them as formerly masculine *yang* and used them as guards of the inner palace.<sup>5</sup> For the Western physicians in nineteenth-century Beijing, the eunuch body represented “something other than male” and thus was “a symbol of China’s backward practices” (p. 63).

Qing palace eunuchs, as shown in chapters 4 and 5, lived within an environment defined by sumptuary rules and protocols. Eunuchs constituted the majority of the palace population, but they occupied the bottom rung of the social hierarchy. As emasculated servants, their identities were soon “eclipsed by the wants and needs of their imperial masters” (p. 66). However, not all eunuchs spent their careers relegated to menial duties. Some tested and transgressed the boundaries of their servile status, acting as gardeners, actors, physicians, clergymen, and even tutors for consorts. The shared experience of emasculation and a similar work environment created a bond among eunuchs and enabled them to obtain a sense of agency by creating “a palace underground world” (p. 106). Some attempted to circumvent their physical and social limitations by creating pseudo-familial bonds through marriage and adoption of children (despite this being officially prohibited) while others found satisfaction

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5 For a detailed study of eunuch guards in the Qing palaces, see Zhang 2018.

in raising dogs or sharing meals provided by the palace kitchens with the other eunuchs. Not infrequently, they tried to escape the drudgery of palace life by engaging in fighting, drinking, gambling, and smoking opium.

This sense of agency was also reflected in the various ways that eunuchs ended up leaving the palace, both voluntarily and otherwise. Through an examination of legal cases and directives on eunuch conduct, chapters 6 to 8 examine the different scenarios that would allow the eunuchs to terminate their service. Those who wanted to receive official approval for their leave had to obtain permission on grounds of old age, illness, or disciplinary problems. Those desiring to escape the system on their own terms essentially had two options: running away or committing suicide. As Dale persuasively argues, these unsanctioned attempts to leave presented eunuchs with “a certain degree of agency rarely afforded to them in their daily lives” (p. 124), though such acts would incur severe punishment including beating, being put in chains, slavery, and exile.

Chapter 9 discusses how the demise of the Qing in 1911 put the palace eunuchs in a precarious position. While some took the opportunity to flee from the palace, a large number of eunuchs continued to serve the court within the Forbidden City until they were finally released in the summer of 1923. With their connections to the emperor now irrelevant and their workplace gone, they struggled to find ways to survive. Aside from a small number of entrepreneurial individuals who relied on their personal connections to earn a living, the majority chose to sequester themselves in Buddhist temples. The last of them, named Sun Yaoting 孫耀庭, passed away in 1996.

### **Eunuch Management: Between Rhetoric and Reality**

Contrary to the widespread notion that Qing eunuchs enjoyed great power and wealth, Dale convincingly shows that most of them had to live under harsh restrictions and were ultimately dependent on their supreme master. The same contrast is analyzed and amplified in Kutcher’s *Eunuch and Emperor in the Great Age of Qing Rule*. Relying on reports of crimes and transgressions committed by eunuchs, Kutcher delves into different aspects of these men’s lives to investigate the complex relationship between emperors and eunuchs in the early and mid-Qing. To do so, he traces the inception of the eunuch institution during the reign of the Shunzhi 順治 emperor (r. 1644–1661), charting the transformation of this system through the reigns of Kangxi 康熙 (r. 1661–1722) and Yongzheng 雍正 (r. 1722–1735) to its maturation under Qianlong 乾隆 (r. 1736–1795). Like Dale, Kutcher presents colorful stories of a number of eunuchs, but his work is also a powerful reminder of a recurrent gap between “how Qing rulers characterized their rule in public pronouncements” and the “reality of that rule as evident in the eunuch case files” (p. xvii).

Bracketed by an introduction and a conclusion, *Eunuch and Emperor in the Great Age of Qing Rule's* nine core chapters are organized in chronological order. In an effort to provide a basic understanding of the leading ideas that came to constitute the golden standard for Qing eunuch management, chapter 1 examines how three great thinkers during the Ming-Qing transition period articulated the master narrative of the eunuchs as a destructive power during the Ming. After a brief treatment of Shunzhi's adoption of and adaption to the Ming's eunuch system, the following two chapters focus on Kangxi's policies toward his emasculated servants. Chapters 5 and 6 turn to Yongzheng and analyze, in detail, the role played by eunuchs in the succession crisis. The final part, chapters 7 through 9, explores the subtle and not-so-subtle changes during Qianlong's long reign that opened up a new world of opportunities for the eunuchs.

Following the twists and turns of Qing's eunuch management policy from the mid-seventeenth to the late eighteenth centuries, Kutcher succeeds in revealing the hitherto obscured gap between the court's uncompromising rhetoric and the reality of its policy, which afforded eunuchs unintended agency. Shunzhi, the first Manchu emperor to inhabit the Forbidden City, agreed with the Ming scholars' "synthesis of collective wisdom on the subject of eunuchs" and instituted strict control over his eunuchs. Yet at the same time, he allowed practices that effectively re-empowered eunuchs, leading to the establishment of the Thirteen Yamen 十三衙門 and the emergence of influential eunuchs such as Wu Liangfu 吳良輔. This pattern of "rhetoric deviating from practice" (p. 43) was reinforced during Kangxi's reign, when the Imperial Household Department (*Neiwufu* 內務府) was installed to replace the Thirteen Yamen with bondservants supervising the eunuchs. Despite the adamant rhetoric of control, however, the "day-to-day management and quiet innovations" of life at the court "diverged from those stated goals" (p. 69). It was during Kangxi's reign that Li Yu 李玉 and Liang Jiugong 梁九功 were commissioned to "transmit orders" (p. 92) while Wei Zhu 魏珠 and Chen Fu 陳福 were entrusted with "serv[ing] as chief negotiator[s]" (pp. 104–105) for diplomatic missions.<sup>6</sup> The role eunuchs played in the succession struggle was not lost on Yongzheng, Kangxi's successor. He created a ranking system to reward the eunuchs, improved their working conditions, and endowed them with land for a cemetery. His son Qianlong noted that Yongzheng's lenient policies were "a dangerous departure from traditional wisdom" (p. 144) and acted to strengthen eunuch oversight to make them "conform to more traditional norms of eunuch management" (p. 172). Yet as Kutcher aptly points out, Qianlong was, like his predecessors, in fact flexible and permissive in his dealings

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6 For Kangxi's relationships to his eunuch servants, see Yang 2018. On the roles of Wei and Chen in various diplomatic missions, see Stary 1976; Chang 2013. Neither Dale nor Kutcher mentioned these two sources.

with the eunuchs; thus they were able to exploit the system's weaknesses and flaws for their own gain. This they did by charging cartage fees and tips, pawning, moneylending, and making investments outside the palace.

Tracing the changes in eunuch management throughout the reigns of successive Qing emperors, Kutcher's inquiry complements Dale's depiction of the Qing eunuchs' social life. Dale should be applauded for exploring hitherto neglected aspects of the Qing eunuchs' lifeworld, yet in comparison to Kutcher's treatment of the subject, her account is markedly essentialist in that it tends to view the Qing eunuchs as a universal category and generalizes their experiences. Although she occasionally provides the readers with temporal information about the individuals she examines, the majority of her case studies are from the final decades of the dynasty, conveying the impression that the Qing "created an atmosphere of mutual anxiety and distrust" and that the eunuchs lived under "strict rules and regulations, beatings and corporal punishments, and collective responsibility" (p. 196). Yet as Kutcher reveals through his analysis on eunuch management during the earlier years of the Qing, constant policy modification meant that "there were important changes in how eunuchs were governed over the course of the [...] Qing reigns" (p. xvii).

### **New Venues for Probing into the Lifeworld of Eunuchs**

What emerges from the two volumes under review is not a uniform picture of the eunuchs in the Qing but a greatly diversified community of individuals living in different times. Both Dale and Kutcher are fully aware that studying the lifeworld of eunuchs and their role in the palace is not without its challenges. The first of them concerns research sources. While stories of avaricious and ambitious eunuchs are abundant, serious records of palace eunuchs are considerably rare, because historical sources for this group "were largely compiled by Confucian historians who despised them" (Kutcher, p. 5). Moreover, eunuchs were required to change their names after entering the palace, quite often more than once, and their new names were almost always "chosen from a startlingly small number of easily recognizable eunuch names", making it hard to track them individually through palace records. As a result, even fundamental personal details about Li Lianying, the most famous Qing eunuch, were almost impossible to substantiate.<sup>7</sup> The materials provided by nineteenth-century Western physicians and travelers, most of them voyeuristic and with an Orientalist overtone, further muddy the waters.

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7 Even though Li is a relatively well-known figure in Qing history, due to the scarcity of sources, scholars are still debating about basic information on him, including how his name should be correctly rendered. On the discussion about Li's name, see Zhang 2008. Interestingly, the author argues that the character *lian* in his original name was written without the grass radical and that it was later written differently because the Confucian historians intended to feminize him.

In their effort to debunk the sensationalism and titillation which have long surrounded accounts of eunuchs in popular writings, both Dale and Kutcher have chosen to delve into the palace archives, including edicts, memorials, depositions, and, most importantly, case reports from the Imperial Household Department containing confessions of eunuchs who committed petty crimes. Combined with autobiographies and oral histories of the last Qing eunuchs and accounts of Western observers, these sources “give voice to this previously silent segment of the palace population” (Dale, p. 8). These sources, however, in particular the case reports, need further processing before they can be properly used. The confessions of eunuchs certainly reflect the voice of eunuchs, yet many stories are undeniably formulaic in both form and nature. To address this problem, both Dale and Kutcher masterfully combed through the archival records to extract useful details that occasionally slipped through the rote presentation and successfully reconstructed these men’s stories from the details that emerged from hundreds of case files.

In addition to the herculean efforts they put into sorting out the sources, Dale and Kutcher have also cleared up some terminological ambiguities that are important for our understanding of the eunuch body and identity. First, although “castration” is widely used to describe the Qing palace eunuchs as the English translation for the Chinese character *yan* 閹, Dale convincingly points out that “emasculatation” is the more appropriate term in terms of medical accuracy because it refers to “the removal of the external male genitalia (scrotum, testes, and penis)”, whereas “castration” only applies to “the removal of testes” (Dale, p. xi).<sup>8</sup>

Second, challenging the conventional notion that eunuchs were commonly termed either *taijian* 太監 or *huanguan* 宦官, Dale and Kutcher point out that Qing sources used the term *taijian* to refer to their eunuchs, while the synonym *huanguan* was reserved for the Ming eunuchs. Neither Dale nor Kutcher provides an explanation for this difference in usage; though, as He Guanbiao has noted, it probably indicates the Manchu rulers’ intention to distance themselves from their Ming predecessors who were notorious for producing many powerful eunuchs.<sup>9</sup>

Third, by presenting various aspects of the Qing eunuchs’ life in and outside the palace, the two volumes also reveal these men’s complex status, since eunuchs do not fit neatly into any of the categories slaves, servants, or officials. There was a certain degree of enslavement involved, as once they entered the palace as emasculated men, they were subjected to servitude, a condition they could only escape by obtaining permission, fleeing, or dying. Yet on the other hand, they were allowed to retire and reintegrate into society as commoners, though this path was

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8 For a detailed discussion of the differences between “emasculatation” and “castration,” see Wu and Gu 1991.

9 He 1990.

filled with enormous obstacles and difficulties. In this respect, eunuchs shared a similar fate with many imperial bureaucrats who also had to obtain permission to retire or take leave. As Kutcher (pp. 20–21) cogently reminds us, Qing eunuchs, much like their counterparts in officialdom, also received monthly salaries in the form of silver and grain allotments (a detailed table of their rates is provided in Dale, p. 154). This invites a more general question on how to define not only the status of eunuchs but also that of officials, individuals who would normally not be mentioned in the same breath as slaves and menial servants.

Readers interested in ethnic relations within the Qing empire should also find the brief discussions in these two volumes on the ethnic dimension of the Qing rulers' eunuch management policy informative as well. Earlier scholars such as Tang Yinian have argued that an inherent issue in the Qing's policy toward eunuchs was its emphasis on Manchu distinctiveness, as the eunuchs were Han Chinese and their masters were Manchu.<sup>10</sup> Despite a certain element of truth in this argument, the case studies provided by Dale and Kutcher remind us that this point should not be overstated. We learn that eunuchs of different ethnicities worked as palace servants during the reigns of both Nurhaci 努爾哈赤 (r. 1616–1626) and Hong Taiji 皇太極 (r. 1627–1643). Whereas eunuchs from Korea and Southeast Asia were not rare at the Ming court, eunuchs of both Han Chinese and Manchu ethnicities lived and worked in the Qing palaces, even though the latter category was officially forbidden.<sup>11</sup> This point is further buttressed by Keith McMahon's observation that from the mid-eighteenth century on, eunuchs employed in the palace theatrical bureau usually came from banner registers.<sup>12</sup> The emphasis on ethnicity in the institution of eunuchs becomes even more questionable if we consider the other dynasties established by non-Han peoples prior to the Qing. The Toba-Xianbei, Khitan, and Mongol all used eunuchs, as did the Jurchen, the ethnic ancestors of the Manchu. In this sense, the authors of the two studies join John Robert Shepherd in emphasizing that such enhanced cultural differentiation between ethnic groups is often "exaggerated" and "politically charged as distinctive markers of group identity."<sup>13</sup>

Throughout their narratives, Dale and Kutcher provide long-overdue corrections to the vilifying stereotypes of eunuchs and piece together their identity as a special community of people who worked in China's most sumptuous palaces. This identity manifested itself in a twofold manner. Due to their shared experience of emasculation and living as emasculated men, the majority of eunuchs shared a sense of collective identity, or to be more precise, a certain degree of commonality and solidarity. No particular reference is made as to how

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10 Tang 1993, 11.

11 On the ethnic composition of Ming eunuchs, see the recent study on the issue by Hu 2019, esp. chs. 2 to 4.

12 McMahon 2016, 168.

13 Shepherd 2018, 164–165. For similar arguments, see Dorothy Ko 2005.

strong this shared identity was, but from other studies we learn that nearly half of the temples in and around Beijing were established by eunuchs who saw these estates as religious homes and living spaces after their retirement from the palace.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, however, we are also reminded that it “would be impossible to generalize about eunuch identity” and that “they were men who differed from one another as much as any humans do” (Kutcher, p. xvii). Indeed, the stories reconstructed from the archives introduce to us a variety of individual eunuchs in different periods, vividly depicting them as “a much more complicated social group than has previously been presented” (Dale, p. 194).

### Examining Qing Rulership through the Eyes of Eunuchs

Based on extensive archival documents, Dale and Kutcher together have furnished us with not only a multifaceted picture of Qing eunuchs but also fascinating perspectives on Qing rulership. Without doubt, the vilified legacy of Ming eunuchs left a strong impression on the Qing rulers. However, even though they took heed of the cautionary tales and were eager to curb these men’s political power, they did not totally abolish the eunuch system. In fact, they introduced informal policies that allowed eunuchs to exert influence and accumulate wealth. Li Dexi 李得喜, a eunuch serving the Daoguang 道光 emperor (r. 1820–1850), profited lucratively from his position as a purchasing agent for the imperial household and used his job to obtain permission to live outside the palace. Besides moneylending and taking bribes, Li also bought houses and land to rent out. He even opened a plant nursery that employed fifty workers outside the capital (Kutcher, p. 236). Whereas Kutcher suggests that Li Dexi was a special case since he lived in the latter half of the Qing, a time when the once-stringent regulations on eunuchs had lapsed, Dorothy Ko reminds us that Li’s predecessors would have enjoyed similar freedoms granted by the emperor. In 1733, Yongzheng was enraged to find that a head eunuch responsible for craftwork in the palace was secretly inducing artisans to make knockoffs of imperial wares for sale in the market.<sup>15</sup> Throughout each Qing emperor’s reign, there always were eunuchs who enjoyed certain degrees of imperial favor despite the court’s official policy of reining in their power.

The Qing emperors thus created a gap between their official rhetoric and the reality of their policies towards eunuchs. As Dale and Kutcher demonstrate, this gap becomes obvious when archival and other new sources are used not to supplement the normative texts, such as the *Qing shilu* 清實錄 (*Qing Veritable Records*) and the *Guochao gongshi* 國朝宮史 (A History of Our Dynasty’s Palace), but rather as evidence of tension between the official voice

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14 Naquin 2000, 180.

15 Ko 2017, 35–36.

and actual practice. Despite the fact that these normative texts were edited based on archival records, they were produced with the purpose in mind of showing that the Qing rulers were uniformly strict on eunuchs. The text is as misleading as it is informative, because “it obscures significant differences between emperors” and it only confirms the established stereotypes of Qing eunuchs “rather than allowing [one] to get beyond [them]” (Kutcher, p. 9).

Although it may appear confusing, we may label this gap between imperial rhetoric and reality as a special form of hypocrisy inherent in Qing rulership. The stories of different eunuchs contained in the two books show that the Qing emperors adopted harsh rhetoric against the dangers of eunuchism but also quietly permitted them freedoms and responsibilities. Despite the constant and harsh pronouncements, the emperors recognized that they needed eunuchs and had to be somehow compliant with such needs, which went beyond the simple rationale of ensuring the purity of the imperial bloodline. As servants and intermediaries, eunuchs were uniquely permitted to cross the barrier between the inner (feminine) and outer (masculine) chambers of the Forbidden City, and that between the “sacred and mundane” as well as the “sequestered inside and public outside.”<sup>16</sup> In other words, they were set up as purveyors of what Mitamura Taisuke called “intimate politics.”<sup>17</sup> In this way, they enjoyed a special degree of proximity to the emperor and formed a significant part of the central, and most inaccessible, physical space of the Qing empire.

As other historians have noted, the Qing emperors were fully aware that eunuchs possessed a unique flexibility and the ability to perform a large range of duties and services that bureaucrats were not capable of or not trusted to do. For instance, Peter C. Perdue notes that in Shunzhi’s effort to counter the influence of the prominent Manchu minister Jirgalang 濟爾哈朗 (1599–1655), he relied heavily on non-Manchu groups including the Jesuits, Buddhists, and eunuchs.<sup>18</sup> As members of the Imperial Household Department, Qing eunuchs had a broad range of responsibilities, one of which was supervising the production of handicrafts and recruiting craftsmen from outside the palace. In this role, eunuchs (along with bondservants) formed a “private bureaucracy” that paralleled the formal government bureaucracy in organization and function, helping the Manchu emperor to counterbalance the power of Han Chinese scholar-officials.<sup>19</sup> Empress Dowager Cixi 慈禧 (1835–1908), in her effort to consolidate her regency and suppress opposition from the Han officials, relied on eunuchs such as An Dehai and Li Lianying to exert influence both in and outside the palace.

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16 McMahan 2013, 13–14.

17 Mitamura 1970. For the functions of the Imperial Household Department and the eunuchs’ role within this institution, see Torbert 1977.

18 Perdue 2005, 114.

19 Ko 2017, 15.

Along with his six associate eunuchs, An was convicted of grossly abusing his power while travelling to supervise the Imperial Textile Factory in Nanjing. His swift execution by local officials was supported by Prince Gong 恭 (1833–1898), the leading minister during the closing years of the dynasty.<sup>20</sup> Li, on the other hand, won the protection of the empress dowager and acted as her deputy in the implementation of the purge of the Guangxu 光緒 emperor (r. 1875–1908)’s supporters.<sup>21</sup>

### Concluding Remarks

While Kutcher focuses on the first 150 years of the Qing, a “calm period in which eunuchs were carefully and effectively managed” (p. 7), Dale traces the persistence of the institution beyond the dynastic lifespan of the Qing. She is certainly right to point out that a number of eunuchs still served the imperial family until they were finally disbanded by the last Qing emperor Puyi 溥儀 (r. 1909–1911) in 1923. Yet critical readers may expect coverage of the Manchukuo period, during which Puyi, now installed by the Japanese as the Kangde 康德 emperor (r. 1934–1945), was still surrounded by a dozen eunuchs.<sup>22</sup> Were their lives in the palace in Hsinking (present-day Changchun), the capital of Manchukuo, different from that in Beijing? To what extent did the Japanese influence impact their lives and their relations to the emperor? How were they viewed by the Japanese who were also serving the court as military advisors and political consultants? How did they survive the defeat of imperial Japan and the collapse of Manchukuo after World War II? These questions would further contribute to a more insightful discussion of the Qing eunuch system as well as the lifeworld of individual eunuchs and that of the community in general.

This caveat aside, these two studies under review contain compelling arguments and are eloquently written, and they invite us to historicize eunuchs in China in a broader scope. Eunuchism is marked by emasculation of the body, but for those who underwent this procedure, it was intended to sever more than body parts. Emasculation is colloquially known in Chinese as *chujia* 出家 (leaving home), the same term for those who give up their worldly relations to join the Buddhist clergy. As such, the term is a potent symbol of the act’s intention to destroy one’s familial and social bonds. Considering that a significant number of eunuchs eventually went on to live in Buddhist monasteries, this presents the new possibility of comparing the eunuch community with that of the Buddhist monks. Akin to the examination of eunuch empowerment through new social bonds, Jinping Wang has recently argued that although many men in the Jin 金 (1115–1234) and Yuan 元 (1271–1368) dynas-

20 Spence 1990, 218.

21 Hsu 1983, 377, 381.

22 See Liu 2019, ch. 9.

ties also underwent *chujia* to become monks, their connections to family and society were never completely severed. In fact, some of them relied on such connections to exert their influence on the local government in much the same way as the eunuchs in the late Qing.<sup>23</sup> In this respect, we may also expect that the insights into the institutions and lives of eunuchs might inspire further studies on Daoist and Catholic communities, secret societies, and craftsmen guilds.

Illuminating and thought-provoking, *Inside the World of the Eunuch* and *Eunuch and Emperor in the Great Age of Qing Rule* make substantial contributions to the long-neglected issue of eunuchism, which, besides foot-binding, is one of the most criticized features of China's traditional practices. Countering the conventional view that eunuchs were all wicked and power-hungry, Dale and Kutcher make a convincing case that most eunuchs were relegated to a servile status and subjected to social marginalization; at the same time, eunuchs did enjoy certain imperial favor and obtained a degree of agency that allowed them to create a collective identity. Even after the final demise of the institution, the topic of eunuchism remains vital for our understanding of how sexual knowledge became a crucial element in Chinese modernity, as Howard Chiang has painstakingly argued in his recent study.<sup>24</sup> Since they contain many stimulating arguments and point to new directions, these two volumes are bound to appeal to both academic and general readers.

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23 Wang 2018.

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