



The Potent Eunuch: The Story of Wei Zhongxian

KEITH MCMAHON

Abstract Literary and historical sources assumed ulterior, even diabolical, motives in the man who voluntarily became a eunuch. If he was lucky, he could become the ruler's confidant and even usurp imperial power. Focusing on Ming eunuch Wei Zhongxian (1568–1627), the article addresses key questions in the portrayal of eunuchs: How and why did a man become a eunuch? What were his motives, as far as can be learned from historical cases; and what did storytellers and other writers think his motives were? In the case of powerful and influential eunuchs, the question also became, how, after his act of self-destruction, did the eunuch reconstruct himself? How did he re-create himself as a newly potent man?

Keywords eunuchs, castration, potency, imperial power, Wei Zhongxian, Ming Dynasty

Since ancient times in China, men voluntarily underwent castration in order to become eunuchs in service to the ruler. As a Han historian said, "men would castrate themselves or their sons for the sake of self-advancement."¹ If a man was lucky, he could become the personal servant of the ruler himself. He could go from being the most worthless person in the realm, especially if he failed to be selected for the palace, to gaining one of the greatest privileges on earth. He could be closer to the ruler than any official or palace woman and perhaps even usurp imperial power. In an 1891 novel, a fortune-teller convinces a man that if the ancient goddess Nüwa 女媧 and Wu Zetian 武則天 of the Tang Dynasty could rule the land, why couldn't a eunuch?² In an 1842 novel, a eunuch takes a potion to regrow his penis so that when he usurps the throne he can enjoy sex with women just as all other emperors did.³ The implicit question of such portrayals was something like this: How, after

his act of self-destruction, did the eunuch reconstruct himself? How did he re-create himself as a newly potent man?

I will answer these questions by using both historical records and fictional fantasy from the Ming and Qing Dynasties to read potency at its core level, that of sexual potency. For a key element in the story of the eunuch's transformation—and a recurrent feature of Ming and Qing descriptions of eunuchs—is his alleged sexuality. Rumors and fantasy alleged that eunuchs were able to enjoy a sexual life as if they had not been castrated at all. Both historical and fictional accounts told about eunuchs who were never castrated to begin with, or were able to use what was left of their penises to have sex, or were even able to regrow their penises. Eunuchs were historically known to take interest in restorative drugs, though we can only guess about the goals and results. We also know that beginning in at least the Han Dynasty, eunuchs took wives and concubines and adopted sons in order to carry on their family line and, we should also presume, sought the respect and advantages that a normally potent man enjoyed. As for what kind of sexual life eunuchs may have experienced, virtually all the sources I have found are sensational and/or secondhand, though scientific and medical reports confirm that even the most spurious sources carry kernels of truth. Since erection, ejaculation, emission of fluids, and libidinous thoughts can all occur separately, a man can experience the contractions of ejaculation with no penis and can have libidinous thoughts even if completely castrated—though in general not in the case of men castrated as boys.⁴

My main example will be one of the most notorious eunuchs in Chinese history, Wei Zhongxian 魏忠賢 (1568–1627), who nearly usurped power from the penultimate Ming emperor in the 1620s. The advantage of this choice is that numerous sources, both historical and fictional, allow us to reconstruct his life and in particular to examine how people imagined his life to be, especially in terms of his castration, the advantages he took of it, and his alleged sexuality. Scientific and medical reports about castration further help our reconstruction, especially when it comes to the physiological effects of castration and the possibility of a sexual life for the eunuch, which was a common part of the eunuch narrative worldwide. Wei Zhongxian was the so-called dining partner of a palace wet nurse known as Madam Ke (Keshi 客氏), who joined him in his near usurpation. *Dining partner* (*duishi* 對食) was an ancient term referring to two palace women or a palace woman and a eunuch who formed a relationship like husband and wife. Such relationships were common in the Ming palace and, in Wei's case, the focus of sensational stories about his supposed sexuality.⁵ Another key part of Wei's story was his association with other eunuchs, in particular one named Liu Ruoyu 劉若愚 (1584–ca. 1642), who wrote an autobiography of his life in the Ming palace and was imprisoned until he died because of his service during the reign of Wei Zhongxian. Liu was one of only a handful of eunuchs in world history to leave an autobiographical account.

Besides telling about his own experience, he supplies important details about Wei Zhongxian, Madam Ke, and their times in the palace. He is an example of a eunuch who engaged in a positive sort of self-reconstruction, if we are to believe his account, that is, one who promoted and was proud of the tradition of loyal eunuch service to imperial rulers throughout Chinese history.

As for using fictional sources to investigate the life of eunuchs, unless there is some sudden discovery, it is apparently the case that no one in history has left much in writing about the details of his becoming a eunuch. Nor do the historians who wrote biographies of eunuchs in both official and unofficial histories. The most one finds is a spare account about where the eunuch was from, his age of castration, and basic circumstances such as having parents who were poor and gave him away, being a captive in war, or in Liu Ruoyu's case, having a strange dream and thus deciding to become a eunuch.⁶ Only fiction and other unverifiable accounts go into deeper detail. Though unreliable in the normative realistic sense, fictional information is key in formulating what the trajectory of the eunuch's life was imagined to be. "What was imagined" means what was fantasized, but also what was speculated, assumed, and expected. Such considerations take us to the margin between historical fact and fictional imagination, assuming the boundary between the two as porous but also meaningful in terms of what both share as representations of reality, in this case, the reality of the imperial eunuch. The goal is not to blur or dismiss the boundary between historical report and fictional fantasy but to examine their common assumptions and expectations about who the eunuch is, even about what they do not actually know about the eunuch. What people fear and hate about him is part of the representation—including the self-representation—of eunuch reality. Key questions are, Why would a man have himself castrated after puberty when he was already an adult, as in the cases of both Wei Zhongxian and Liu Ruoyu, and in some cases after he was married, as was Wei? How did he undergo castration? Given his debased state and status, what could he accomplish by castrating himself? At the core is the self-reconstruction, or simply life continuation, that the eunuch supposedly planned to carry out. In what follows, I will use reliable historical and scientific information when it is available. Otherwise, I will let the range of fictional and historical texts fill in the gaps, trying to be skeptical when necessary but learning even from blatant fantasy what the story of the eunuch's re-creation of the self was about. First it is necessary to summarize the factual information about Wei Zhongxian and eunuchs in the Ming.⁷

Eunuchs in the Ming

The emperor whom Wei Zhongxian served was Zhu Youjiao 朱由校, who ruled from 1620 to 1627 during the Tianqi 天啟 period. He was a weak ruler, ill educated and poor at learning, and he preferred hobbies and entertainment to governing. He

was closely attached to his wet nurse, Madam Ke, who was like a mother to the young emperor, who had lost his own in 1605. He needed her nearly all his life, even after marriage and fatherhood. Before becoming emperor he was already fond of Wei Zhongxian and, after becoming emperor, brutally purged and killed officials who objected to Wei's and Ke's influence. After the Ming lost a large section of the northeast to the Manchus and suffered turmoil in the south and west, the emperor fell ill and died in 1627 at twenty-one, after which the reign of Wei and Ke swiftly ended. How Wei Zhongxian gained such power is a large topic that, after providing some background about eunuchs in the Ming, I will confine to a few of the historical and fictional narratives of his life, including the accounts of one of his eunuch associates mentioned above, Liu Ruoyu. Then I will take a look at fictional treatments of Wei Zhongxian, who because of his notoriety generated a number of spurious and sensational stories, some of which recall other eunuchs in Chinese history, most recently Liu Jin 劉瑾 (ca. 1452–1510) in Emperor Wuzong's 武宗 reign (1505–21), whom I will also discuss. The stories about Wei include things that probably no one could have known much about, such as his early life before entering the palace, including his marriage, how he had himself castrated, and scenes of his relationship with Madam Ke.

The following information about eunuchs in the Ming is common knowledge among historians but worth resummarizing in order to make better sense of the stories about Wei. Eunuchs were prominent in the Ming, reaching as many as 80,000 to 100,000 by the end of the dynasty. Their most notorious role was that of carrying out intelligence work for the emperor, acting as his eyes and ears to ensure that officials in the civil and military bureaucracy were behaving properly. The third Ming emperor, Zhu Di 朱棣 (1360–1424), of the Yongle 永樂 reign (1402–24), established the Eastern Depot (Dongchang 東廠) in 1420, with a eunuch as director. It functioned outside the normal bureaucratic and legal structure to gather intelligence and to imprison and punish offenders. It was linked with another organization, the Embroidered Uniform Guard (Jinyi wei 錦衣衛), which acted as the emperor's personal bodyguard at the capital and which administered a prison inside the Eastern Depot. The eunuch agency did its own espionage work, part of which was to keep an eye on the Embroidered Uniform Guard. By the mid-fifteenth century, eunuchs were a firmly established part of Ming bureaucracy.⁸ As was the case throughout history, some of them were well educated, including Liu Ruoyu. The Yongle emperor had long since begun a tradition of recruiting eunuchs to teach palace women. These included men who had already married and had sons, had a Confucian education, and were willing to undergo castration. The fifth Ming emperor, Zhu Zhanji 朱瞻基 (1398–1435), of the Xuande 宣德 period (1425–35), went further in 1429 by establishing the Eunuch School (Neishu tang 內書堂), the purpose of which was to provide eunuchs with a formal literary education. He

wanted to improve communication between his grand secretaries and the six ministers of the outer court. Qualified eunuchs belonged to the Directorate of Ceremonial (Sili jian 司禮監), the most powerful eunuch agency, handled documents and communication with court officials, and were even allowed to make decisions in cases of disagreement between the emperor and officials. Wei Zhongxian, who was illiterate, and Liu Ruoyu, who was literate, both worked in that agency. Besides intelligence and communication, there was the larger realm of menial duties that included supplying and manufacturing food, medicine, clothing, furniture, and other necessities for the palace; recruiting women, eunuchs, and other personnel; managing palace temples and animals; and arranging entertainment. Some eunuchs were actors and musicians. Wei began his service as a menial but worked his way up to personal attendant of the prince who would soon be emperor. Outside the palace, eunuchs managed imperial mausoleums, supply depots, state granaries, tax collection, and, if the emperor wished it, they directed military operations and went on diplomatic missions to distant places such as Central, South, and Southeast Asia; Korea; and Japan.⁹

One duty that has been questionably ascribed to eunuchs was assisting in the emperor's nightly choice of sexual partner. Apparently, in the late Qing it was popularly believed that this procedure was performed by eunuchs from a particular palace bureau. But there is no concrete evidence for the existence of the bureau or the procedure. Eunuchs did encourage the emperor in his enjoyment of palace pleasures then and in previous dynasties and even supplied him with aphrodisiacs, perhaps prepared in the special bureau in the palace that employed eunuch pharmacists. Eunuchs may have also played a role in steering the emperor toward a particular consort or palace woman. In general, however, intimate sexual matters were not recorded except as hearsay in unofficial accounts or, if in official accounts, mainly to record visitation, pregnancy, and birth.¹⁰ Such a thing as the arrangement of the emperor's intercourse with a consort can for the most part only be imagined. Nevertheless, the concept of eunuch sexuality can be stretched to include their involvement in the sexual activities of those around them, especially the emperor and his wives. That which has been a recurrent focus of attention, however spurious, still deserves to be considered alongside that which can be clearly verified. In Wei Zhongxian's case, he was indeed rumored to have supplied the emperor with both women and aphrodisiacs, in one report even to have caused the emperor's death because of overindulgence.

How did a man become a eunuch? In terms of origins, many palace eunuchs in the Ming came from prefectures south of Beijing, whether castrated as children or voluntarily undergoing castration after puberty. As had long been the case, becoming a palace eunuch was seen as a means of advancing oneself and one's family. But in the Ming the supply eventually far exceeded the demand. At times

thousands appeared wanting to be selected, only to meet with orders from the palace to punish them and drive them away. A late Ming novel portrayed a scene of recruitment. First, the news spread that the palace needed eunuchs, after which thousands of castrated men arrived hoping to be selected. But it turned out that each person had to pay two hundred copper coins in order to get on the list and that, of the 250 eunuchs chosen, each paid three silver taels to get selected. What happened to the rejects? Many became beggars and even bandits who roamed around preying on victims, as a historical source of the time also describes.¹¹

Such stories and reports confirm the stereotype of eunuchs as low-level people who were driven by poverty and desperation. As one of Chinese history's most notorious eunuchs, Wei Zhongxian furthered the stereotype. According to the traditional notion, as Norman Kutcher writes, eunuchs were evil scourges who were "by nature arrogant, corrupt, and power-hungry."¹² But there were also illustrious and meritorious eunuchs, some of whom came into play during Wei's time, who joined the eunuch corps out of sincere dedication. Late Ming eunuchs could look back to one of their most famous and admired predecessors, Zheng He 鄭和 (1371–1433), who served the Yongle and Xuande emperors by leading sea voyages to South and Southeast Asia and west as far as the coast of Africa. He brought back people, animals, plants, and things; collected and dispersed treasures and gifts; and established diplomatic contacts. Many eunuchs were skilled in the arts of poetry, music, and painting. Some came from high-status families. Chen Ju 陳矩 (1539–1607), who entered the palace as a child in 1547, had a brother who attained the highest examination degree. A bibliophile, Chen was put in charge of collecting books for the imperial library and later became director of the Eastern Depot in the Wanli 萬曆 era (1573–1620), when he was admired for his judicious management and spare resort to cruelty and vengeance. He was one of the rare powerful eunuchs who died of natural causes, for it was often the case that the more prominent they were and the more responsibilities they had, the more risks they ran. As the personal servants of the emperor, they were subject to both the temptations of privilege and to an imperial will that could change swiftly, resulting in beatings, imprisonment, banishment, and execution. Some unsung eunuchs were close to members of the imperial family for years and in some cases even served in both the Ming and Qing. Cao Huachun 曹化淳 (1568–1662), for example, lived a long life and was deeply trusted by both the last Ming emperor and the first Qing emperor, whose tutor he became and who was reportedly influenced by Cao to launch the construction of the mausoleum for his Ming predecessor. Other late Ming eunuchs served in the Qing, including ones who tutored the young Kangxi emperor. As it had been for centuries, eunuchs like Chen and Cao served for a lifetime and were buried with honors.¹³

Because of his involvement in the Wei regime, Liu Ruoyu was imprisoned for the rest of his life but was nevertheless free to write his memoirs. He was from a military family that gave him an education for an eventual career in officialdom. But in the summer of 1598, he says, he forsook his studies because of a strange dream, which he does not relate, but after which he had himself castrated. He reports nothing about the operation but says that soon afterward, he began studying medicine and the Daoist science of nourishing life (*yangsheng* 養生). Why he did so is unclear, but one guess is that it was in order to offset the effects of castration. He may, for example, have taken drugs known for renewing vital energy and perhaps specifically recommended among eunuchs for treating the effects of castration. He was selected for palace service in 1601 and worked under the tutelage of the eunuch chief Chen Ju, whom he praised as a good master. Because of his writing skills, Liu first worked as a copyist, was imprisoned for unspecified reasons between 1611 and 1620, and, after his release, served both the Taichang 太昌 (reigned 1620–21) and Tianqi emperors. He had as sponsor another powerful eunuch, Gao Shiming 高時明 (dates unknown), rose in rank, and obtained a position in the Directorate of Ceremonial. He somehow offended Wei Zhongxian, however, and was demoted to a position in the imperial stables. During that time he worked in Gao Shiming's home at the western edge of the imperial city, helping him write a book on "nourishing life." In 1623 Wei Zhongxian summoned him back, when, Liu reports, he had no choice but to comply. He served one of Wei's lieutenants, Li Yongzhen 李永貞 (1583–1628), and from that vantage point observed the people and events during the regime of Wei and Ke. Liu wrote that it was difficult to work under Li Yongzhen, who did not appreciate Liu's work and even slandered him. Because Wei Zhongxian was illiterate, he relied on people like Li and Liu for written communication and interpretation of memorials and other palace documents. With the enthronement of the Chongzhen 崇禎 emperor (reigned 1627–44), Wei Zhongxian and Li Yongzhen fell from power. Wei committed suicide, Li was executed, and Liu was implicated because he worked for them and was put in prison, where he wrote his *Eunuch's Diary*.¹⁴

The Eunuch Dictator and Emperor's Favorite, Wei Zhongxian

I begin with Wei Zhongxian's life according to the *History of the Ming* (*Mingshi* 明史), Liu Ruoyu's *Eunuch's Diary*, and other sources, saving for later the more sensational and less easily verified accounts, including the blatantly fictional ones in late Ming novels. Wei came from a lower social rank than Liu Ruoyu but, like Liu, had himself castrated after puberty. Wei differed, however, in that he had already married and had a daughter. According to Liu, Wei lost his parents when he was young and was left in poverty. He "loved women, liked to gamble, enjoyed drinking and partying, and was fond of flashy clothing and galloping around on horseback."¹⁵

These details and the next were common among sources, both historical and fictional, that appeared directly after Wei's death. Because of harassment by gambling partners, he had himself castrated in order to escape debt and enter palace service. Since he came from a region south of the capital that was a major supplier of eunuchs, doing such a thing was perhaps part of common knowledge for him. He was recruited into the palace in 1589 during the Wanli reign and served many years in lowly positions until finally making his way to his first influential post as a cook for the Tianqi emperor's mother. He got to know the young prince and, because of his aptitude for play and entertainment, won the boy's favor. Wei knew how to please him and get him what he wanted. He also played politics among the important eunuchs. He got to know the eunuch Wei Chao 魏朝, a subordinate of Wang An 王安 (died 1621), a powerful eunuch under Zhu Changluo 朱常洛 (1582–1620), the Taichang emperor. Wei Zhongxian later slandered Wei and Wang and had both killed, but at first they helped him solidify his position. Wei Chao was Madam Ke's "dining partner," says the *History of the Ming*, but she soon switched to Wei Zhongxian, supposedly preferring him because he was strong and athletic. Besides, "traitor Wei," as Liu calls him, was illiterate, and "illiterate people were simple and easy to control" (*bu shi zi zhi ren, pushi yi zhi* 不識字之人, 樸實易制).¹⁶ As powerful as Wei was, Liu thus liked to imply that Wei was under Madam Ke's control. One evening, the two Weis argued loudly and drunkenly over Madam Ke. The emperor heard them and, at Ke's behest, sided with Wei Zhongxian. More about the phenomenon of "dining partners" and Wei's relationship with Madam Ke will appear below.

How did Wei make himself likeable to the emperor? According to Liu, Wei was a versatile man. He liked archery, kickball, and horse racing, and used these and other amusements such as puppet shows, opera, and the firing of guns and cannons to keep the Tianqi emperor entertained. The emperor also liked carpentry and was fond of making lacquered furniture. As Liu wrote, if eunuchs came to the emperor with urgent matters of state, he would listen with half an ear as he kept working on his project and tell them to take care of it. A dangerous episode that occurred in 1625 provides an illustration of the leisure life of the imperial threesome, the emperor, Eunuch Wei, and Madam Ke. The emperor was boating happily with two young eunuchs in a deep part of an imperial city lake. Madam Ke and Wei Zhongxian were on another boat farther away. A sudden wind capsized the emperor's boat, plunging him and the two eunuchs into the water. None of the three could swim. Wei jumped in but was too far away. Someone else reached the emperor and saved him, but the two young eunuchs drowned.

Wei Zhongxian was notorious for his elimination of enemies. After entering the Directorate of Ceremonial, he became head of the Eastern Depot in 1624 and from these vantage points was able to rid himself of opponents, including officials

in the outer court, military men, and other eunuchs. He also eliminated women in the palace. It was said that two of Zhu Changluo's consorts died because of him and Madam Ke. Wei and Ke hated one of the Tianqi emperor's consorts, whom they had confined while pregnant in a place with no food or drink. When they placed another consort in confinement, she saw what happened to the one before her and hid food in advance; she survived but was demoted to palace maid. In his attempts at military control, Wei had up to ten thousand eunuchs trained and armed and put eunuch generals in charge of the most vital post near Beijing, Shanhaiguan 山海關. He was a Buddhist devotee and, in a grand act of self-promotion, beginning in 1626 ordered shrines to be dedicated to himself all over China. Religion and the supernatural played a significant role in the fictional stories about his life, as we will soon see.¹⁷

Madam Ke, Dining Partner

Wei Zhongxian's relationship with Madam Ke gets us to the core of this study, the phenomenon of the eunuch's sexual transformation and the fascination people had with the possibility of sexual life after castration. First let us briefly introduce Madam Ke, as in Wei Zhongxian's case, summarizing information widely known to historians. She entered the palace at about age eighteen, when she already had a son. Her husband died soon after her recruitment. After assuming the throne, Zhu Youjiao granted her the title of Lady Who Serves the Sage (*Fengsheng furen* 奉聖夫人) and gave her a precious golden seal of office. Such a seal was normally only given to an empress and was used to authorize decisions; to give the seal to a wet nurse was utterly unconventional.¹⁸ Wei Zhongxian was likewise awarded imperial honors, including the appointment to the Directorate of Ceremonial, for which he normally would not have qualified because of his illiteracy. Madam Ke helped get him promoted. She was about forty at the time and was at first allowed to live in quarters near the emperor, but when it came time for the emperor's marriage, she had to move elsewhere. She became jealous of the beautiful and well-educated Empress Zhang 張 (the Tianqi emperor's main wife) and soon conspired with Wei to destroy her. In 1623 they allegedly sent a maid to massage the pregnant empress in such a way as to harm the fetus, which was stillborn. However, they never succeeded in eliminating her.

In fall 1621, officials objected to Madam Ke's intimacy with the emperor and demanded that she be banished from the imperial city. She moved to her private residence in Beijing but returned every day at noon and stayed with the emperor until dark. A month later, she moved back because, as the emperor announced in an edict, he missed her deeply. She still kept her private residence, which was near Wei Zhongxian's, and whenever she returned to it she received a special order from the emperor who provided her with a large escort. At the end of the reign, Wei and Ke conspired to usurp the throne. In his *Ming Yi'an huanghou waizhuan* 明懿安皇后外傳

(Chronicle of the Tranquil and Exemplary Empress of the Ming), Ji Yun 紀昀 (1724–1805) of the Qing Dynasty wrote that Wei tried to have the empress adopt his nephew's son as her own and make him heir apparent. The empress was to be regent and Wei's nephew "acting emperor" (*she huangdi* 攝皇帝).¹⁹ Writing before Ji Yun's time, Li Xunzhi 李遜之 (1618 to after 1672) detailed the scene at the emperor's death. Everyone was tense as officials and eunuchs ran back and forth, crying, passing information, and talking together in secret. Wei Zhongxian's eyes were swollen from weeping. In Li's account, Wei and his clique planned to have a consort, not Empress Zhang, pretend that she was pregnant and claim that the nephew's son was hers. In both accounts, the empress vowed to die before agreeing to such a thing.²⁰

In the end, the plot failed, and Wei's and Ke's time was clearly up. As Liu Ruoyu reports, she went to the emperor's coffin, wept, and burned a little box wrapped in imperial yellow in which she had kept the emperor's first-month baby hair, scabs from his childhood, hair clippings, baby teeth, and nail cuttings. Shortly after, the new emperor had her and Wei's houses searched and their property confiscated. It was said that she had eight pregnant palace maidservants living in her home outside the palace in a supposed plot to control the choice of heir apparent. She was flogged to death in the palace women's prison (the "Laundry Bureau," *huanyi ju* 浣衣局) in 1627. As for Wei Zhongxian, accusations began pouring in soon after the emperor's death, leading to Wei's arrest and suicide by hanging. Afterward, his corpse was exhumed and posthumously executed by slicing, such was the hatred of Wei Zhongxian.²¹

The phenomenon of "dining partners," as noted above, goes back as early as the Han Dynasty. In the Ming palace, the term used was *caihu* 菜戶, which can be roughly translated as "dining spouse." Zhu Yuanzhang 朱元璋 (1328–1398) abhorred and outlawed such relationships, but they became so common that by the Wanli era, as the Ming literatus Shen Defu 沈德符 (1578–1642) wrote, a palace woman without a eunuch mate was considered a laughingstock. For centuries eunuchs had taken wives and even concubines, had associated with prostitutes, whom they sometimes married, and adopted children. The pseudo-marriage between a eunuch and a palace woman took place in the palace and, it was suggested at the time, occurred for two basic reasons. First, most palace women never saw the emperor or, even if they did, were unable to engage his attention for long, and thus led lonely lives—as centuries of history and literature, especially poetry, tell us. Second, they depended on eunuchs for their material needs. Whatever the reason, the relationships could become close. According to Shen, people conducted their unofficial marriages as if they were real, using go-betweens and spending large sums. They were even known to take oaths of loyalty and, if one of them died, never to marry again. Shen once visited a temple in which he saw a room dedicated to

eunuchs who maintained offerings for deceased palace wives. The eunuch who explained this to him asked that he keep it secret.²²

Liu Ruoyu had a dim view of eunuchs who took wives from among the palace women and did not present the practice as being as widespread as Shen thought. The reason for Liu's position might be that he represented the type of eunuch who was highly educated, cultivated fine tastes, and loyally adhered to dynastic rules and models of behavior. Since Zhu Yuanzhang strictly outlawed such relationships, Liu Ruoyu could not accept them either. Thus he wrote:

Among the eunuchs who take care of supplying palace women with food, clothing, and jewelry, there is a type lacking in integrity [*wu guqi* 無骨氣] and besotted with the fair sex [*tan zhifen* 貪脂粉], who are called "food spouses." They serve at the woman's beck and call and will get anything for her, even sparing no effort for her parents and brothers. To the end of their days they wallow in meat and drink, greed and lechery.²³

According to Liu, there was a yet lower type of eunuch who did crude physical chores for palace women for a few taels a month. They wore cheap, grease-stained clothing and were looked down upon. Still, he says, poverty forced them into this position. In the end, they were better off than he, whose more reputable status had only brought him calamity. Liu was referring to his life imprisonment after his involvement in the Wei Zhongxian regime.²⁴

Wei Zhongxian's Life in Fiction

As with the earlier Ming eunuch Liu Jin, who served Emperor Wuzong, Wei Zhongxian became the subject of history, fiction, and drama, but in his case immediately after his downfall. Three novels alone appeared in 1628 and another in 1644. Why so soon and why so many hundreds of pages about him? *Taowu xianping* 梟杌閑評 (The Chronicle of the Half-Man Half-Beast, 1644) alone is 566 pages in one of its modern editions. There was already a lively market in publishing in the late Ming, with large numbers of titles appearing, editions issued and reissued, and authors full of drive and, in this case, outrage at the scale of corruption and the ensuing catastrophe. Wei Zhongxian was an illiterate rake and palace slave who almost became emperor. He was a sensational character; in writings about him authors relied on common knowledge, written sources, and hearsay but also gave rein to pure fantasy. *Taowu xianping* has him fighting off the man who in 1615 infiltrated the palace and, brandishing a club, tried to kill the heir apparent, Zhu Changluo. Although the incident was real, Wei could not have been involved. In all four novels, some sort of supernatural force assists Wei, whether it is a fortune-teller predicting his rise to high position, apparitions preventing him from committing suicide and guiding him on his way to Beijing, or a Daoist priest

inexplicably helping him at his worst moment. Liu Ruoyu in fact wrote that once when someone had imprisoned Wei and intended to starve him to death, a Buddhist monk interceded and got him freed. In taking Wei's story to the level of the supernatural, authors were treating him as if he were part of the karmic destiny of China, not just a lowly eunuch who through clever opportunism managed to usurp imperial power. In other words, there were forces beyond Wei Zhongxian the individual that put him on the road he took; he was an instrument of dynastic decline, as if the gods deliberately positioned him.²⁵

The first novel to appear about Wei's life was Chang'an daoren's 長安道人 *Jingshi yinyang meng* 警世陰陽夢 (1628, The Yin and Yang Life of Wei Zhongxian). Both it and *Taowu xianping* portray Wei as having been friends with Li Yongzhen and Liu Ruoyu long before they became eunuchs and worked together in the palace.²⁶ The authors give Li Yongzhen a wife, whereas in reality, according to Liu Ruoyu, he was castrated at age four and by age eighteen in 1601 was a servant of the empress of the Wanli emperor.²⁷ In *Taowu xianping*, Wei Zhongxian and Madam Ke know each other intimately long before they enter the palace, where they are surprised to meet each other after years of separation. After seeing him, Ke becomes so filled with longing that she falls ill until he cures her with a fantastic drug. But now that he is a eunuch, she has to satisfy herself with actors, with whom she has sex one after the other.²⁸ Wei and Ke nevertheless become intimate companions, sleeping together and "drinking under moonlight while palace women play music and sing for them."²⁹ The fictionalization of their lives included motifs that had been common since ancient times and that pornographic tales of the mid- to late Ming had recently recycled and expanded upon, such as the lonely woman succumbing to sexual desire, in particular the widow, nun, or wife whose husband is away. Drinking under moonlight while entertained by palace women was a lofty image that jarred incongruously with the portrait of the illiterate eunuch and his wet nurse food spouse. That such people became so powerful was the ultimate example of people who went from less than nothing to the highest position in the empire.³⁰

Both novels also portray the pre- and postcastrated Wei in desperate straits before entering the palace, even joining a band of eunuch beggars. Although such bands existed, no evidence shows Wei as having joined them. At his lowest point, he develops stinking ulcers all over his body, including his penis, which in *Jingshi yinyang meng* he cures by eating snake meat, in *Taowu xianping* dog meat, in each case carefully cooked and savored.³¹ Now he is ready to go to Beijing and begin his life as imperial eunuch. He is like a mock hero passing through mythic ordeals before achieving success. What novels do that dynastic and other histories usually do not do is detail how things supposedly happened and what people said and thought to themselves, as in the excerpts below about how and why Wei castrated

himself. It is one thing when someone like Li Yongzhen is castrated at age four. Such was the experience of many eunuchs. But when a mature man decided to undergo castration, his motivation became a topic of fascination on the part of writers and other observers, who engaged in remarkable feats of fantasy. Relying on factual sources when possible, I will piece together a composite fantasy based on works that tell how and why a man had himself castrated and what happened afterward. A recurrent part of the fantasy, as I have said, is the man's ability to continue to have sex and in some cases regrow a penis.

Nineteenth-century descriptions report of people in the capital who specialized in the operation to castrate a man, which is referred to as early as the tenth century.³² In the Qing, they received imperial approval to perform the operation, which involved removal of the entire organ. Complete recovery might take several months. Some men died after the operation; most did not, though it is said that many suffered some form of incontinence for the rest of their lives (leakage might occur as a result of a sudden fright, for example).³³ But not everyone went to such specialists, as in the case of boys whose male elders performed the procedure for them (or did they perhaps go to local specialists?). Did some grown men castrate themselves, as portrayed in fiction in the cases of Wei Zhongxian or Liu Jin, who appears in the 1891 novel by Wengshan zhudi 翁山柱砥, *Baimudan* 白牡丹 (White Peony)? As Kutcher has shown, in order to increase the number of eunuchs in his service, the Qianlong emperor loosened previous restrictions, allowing men who self-castrated, whether doing so by themselves or having the operation performed by others without authorization by the Imperial Household Bureau.³⁴ Credible stories about men who castrated themselves are hard to come by, but in 1877 G. Carter Stent told of a beggar who in 1853 castrated himself and pawned the severed penis, which was valuable because of the fact that imperial eunuchs preserved their severed penises but sometimes lost them or never secured them to begin with and needed them for purposes such as periodic inspection, promotion, and burial.³⁵

Fictional re-creations of eunuch self-castration are particularly graphic, as found in *Baimudan* in the case of Liu Jin. First he secludes himself in a room, having left a note with instructions about what to do in the aftermath. He cuts off his penis, applies medicine to the wound, and faints to the floor, with blood gushing out. Others rush in, see the note, and follow its instructions, which are to take the severed penis and heat it on a piece of hot clay tile until it turns to a black crisp, then rub it into a fine powder, form a pill, mix it with strong liquor, and pour the mixture down his throat to stop the pain. They then apply the leavings of the drug to the wound to stop the bleeding. He regains consciousness, the bleeding stops, and he recovers immediately. Whereas Liu learned about the procedure from a Daoist monk, the author himself perhaps took—or indirectly heard about—the remedy of

mixing the severed penis in strong liquor found in a passage of the most famous book of medicine in the Ming and Qing, the *Bencao gangmu* 本草綱目 (Materia Medica). It tells about a man who, after severing his penis, suffered bleeding for a month, took the organ and mixed it with strong liquor, drank the concoction, and stopped the bleeding within a few days. The *Bencao gangmu*, however, mentions nothing about heating the penis on a hot tile.³⁶

Historical studies of Wei Zhongxian can uncover no evidence about how Wei conducted his castration, but three somewhat overlapping fictional versions portray his doing it by himself or, in one case, suffering it as an accident. In *Jingshi yinyang meng*, as noted above, the ulcers on his body affect his penis, assailing him to the point that he tries to kill himself. But an apparition prevents him, after which he sees how well eunuch beggars do and decides to join them. He hides in an abandoned shrine and applies the knife, after which he puts ashes from old incense remains on the wound to stanch the blood. Although it hurts, "in the end," as it is told, "he was a treacherous and evil person, and crude and fearless, so it didn't bother him."³⁷ Three more critical points in the description are that it was important for the recently castrated man to avoid windy drafts, a recommendation found as early as the Han Dynasty, to lose as little blood as possible, and to use old but not recent ash, thus the convenience of the abandoned shrine with its old incense ashes.³⁸ In *Taowu xianping*, Wei likewise suffers from ulcers all over his body and, homeless and penniless, joins a band of beggars. A Daoist priest gives him money, but the beggars find out, get him drunk, strip him naked and take his things, then throw him in the river. The current of the river carries him to the opposite bank, where two dogs happen to be, who sniff him and bite off his penis and testicles. Their curiosity is aroused because, as the narrator explains, he is drunk and has been plunged in cold water, which makes his penis grow stiff. When he discovers that his penis is gone ("Am I dreaming," he says to himself), he figures that the beggars cut it off and takes old incense ash to apply to the wound to stop the bleeding and relieve the pain. As the narrator explains, "as it turns out, old incense ash can halt bleeding and stop pain" (原來陳香灰可以止血定疼).³⁹ Later he joins a band of eunuch beggars and robbers, but he finally meets a fortune-teller who gives him money and points his way to Beijing and the palace.

In the second novel about Wei to appear in 1628, Lu Yunlong's 陸雲龍 (ca. 1595-?) *Wei Zhongxian xiaoshuo chijian shu* 魏忠賢小說斥奸書 (The Denunciation of a Traitor), he is severely indebted when he suddenly remembers how well-off palace eunuchs are. If he dies from castrating himself, he thinks, then that is his fate. If he lives, then when his creditor shows up demanding money, he can give him his wife in exchange for a payment of silver that he can use to repay his debt and travel to Beijing. That night his wife notices him lost in thought, though she doesn't dare ask him about it. After getting in bed, "he hugged her and wanted to make love. She

said, 'What is there to be so happy about?' He answered, 'It's for pleasure in spite of pain.' After doing it once, he wanted to do it again. His wife asked, 'Isn't there a tomorrow night?' 'It's just that there is no tomorrow night,' he answered, and they made mad love all night."⁴⁰ He cuts off his penis the next morning and faints to the floor, after which some neighboring eunuchs tell them how to apply powder to the wound to stop the bleeding. Wei recovers after a month, loses his whiskers, then divorces his wife. Although she prefers to stay married, he departs to Beijing, leaving his creditor too afraid to dun him after hearing what he did. All three portrayals include the use of ash to contain the bleeding, a detail that perhaps added a note of credibility, implying that the authors knew what they were talking about.⁴¹

The Sexual Potency of Eunuchs

As I said at the beginning, the sexual potency of eunuchs was a key element in the portrayal of their diabolical character. Before delving into descriptions of eunuch sexuality, it pays to consider contemporary medical knowledge and studies of late-era eunuchs, which indicate that men underwent a varied range of side effects, possibly including atrophy or cessation in growth of the prostate, breast enlargement, thinning of the bones and curvature of the spine as they aged, and enlargement of the pituitary.⁴² Boy eunuchs probably became adults with virtually no sexual appetite, which, according to Stent, led to their being prized by palace women as personal servants.⁴³ However, men castrated after puberty could to varying degrees still experience sexual desire and in external appearance pass as ordinary men. Important variables in the aftereffects of castration included the way in which a man was castrated, whether by violent injury or surgical removal, for example; how extensive the injury or removal was (even a small fleshy root of the penis could become erect); and whether the castration occurred in an individual who was healthy or diseased, strong or weak. Psychological and emotional factors also made a difference. In general, there had to have been a variety of results in terms of bodily change and sexual function and desire. To repeat what was said above: erection, ejaculation, emission of fluids, and libidinous thoughts can occur separately; a man can experience the contractions of ejaculation with no penis; and he can have libidinous thoughts even if completely castrated. Bizarre and sensational stories about their sexual activity were common in the Ming, many spurred by the hatred of characters such as Wei Zhongxian. Less sensational accounts tell of emperors who prized handsome young eunuchs.⁴⁴ Although contemporary scientific evidence allows us to only guess about the historical records, we can do so without imposing a rigid model of what sexual intercourse was supposed to be upon such distant figures.

First to be considered is the early Qing writer, Song Qifeng 宋起鳳, who asserted that Wei Zhongxian did not entirely castrate himself. It is safe to approach

the story with disbelief without surrendering interest in the possibilities that it raises. Song states that Wei had no testicles but still had a penis and could get erect. The procedures for selecting eunuchs for the palace would presumably have ensured that no such thing could happen, though hypothetically, if Wei had slipped through the screening process with a remnant penis, the evidence is clear that such a man could be sexually active. The rigorousness of palace inspection can be guessed from a report by the late-Qing French doctor, Jean-Jacques Matignon (1866–1928), who referred to a twenty-two-year-old eunuch who once came to Matignon's hospital in Beijing desiring the removal of what palace inspectors had told him was too much of a stump of remnant flesh. Song Qifeng continues by saying that Wei presented the emperor with a group of female singers and "secretly gave him a fragrant drug that he could light up like incense, the smell of which caused instant erection. Not long after, the emperor became seriously ill."⁴⁵ That Wei indirectly caused the emperor's death is impossible to verify, but eunuchs or others supplying an emperor with aphrodisiacs was common in Chinese history. As for Song's assertion that Wei still had a penis, this makes sense mainly as part of the code of portrayal of the diabolical eunuch and has its locus classicus in the case of Lao Ai 嫪毐, the third century BC man who, according to Sima Qian 司馬遷 (145?–190? BC), disguised himself as a eunuch but was never castrated, had an affair with the queen, and was the true father of the first emperor of the Qin (a probably untrue story).⁴⁶

Another early Qing writer, Tang Zhen 唐甄 (1630–1704), wondered how Madam Ke could have preferred Wei Zhongxian's strength to Wei Chao's weakness, since both men "lacked the yang." But Tang had once heard a rumor, which perhaps explained why: "Although eunuchs have been castrated, they still retain both potential and actual energy. Although their *yang* lacks the wholeness of normal men, it still protrudes to a certain degree. I have also heard that they practice exotic techniques allowing them to regrow their *yang*. I always laughed at such stories and refused to believe them" 閹人雖閹, 精氣自在, 其陽雖不能如常人之具形, 亦稍突長; 又聞有異術能使陽長; 固笑而弗信也.

Then he heard about a eunuch, now dead, who had two concubines, one of whom visited Tang's household, where the female servants asked her what it was like in bed with a eunuch. Her eunuch was quite lusty, she said, and during intercourse his penis extended about an inch or so. The moral of the story, Tang concluded, was that eunuchs were still inherently men and therefore dangerous if allowed to mingle with the women of the harem. Moreover, because they were sex-starved and resentful, palace women were prone to have affairs with them.⁴⁷ If we recall, one of the interests of Liu Ruoyu and other eunuchs was the science of "nourishing life" (*yang sheng* 養生). Liu may have known about drugs that contained male hormones made from urine or that took tissue from parts of animals,

including the testicles, to treat sexual debility and impotence, as was common in China and elsewhere.

The Ming Dynasty writer Shen Defu tells a horrific story purporting to describe the extreme lengths to which eunuchs went to regain potency. Few accounts outdo his, though he distantly recalls the episode in the late Qing novel *Zhengde you Jiangnan* 正德游江南 (The Zhengde Emperor Gallivants in the South), in which Liu Jin takes a drug to regrow a penis. Among other things, Liu's drug contains the flesh of a young woman's first-born boy, stewed until the meat falls off the bones, and the penis and testicles of both a dark-haired donkey and a dark-furred dog.⁴⁸ Shen's more gruesome account tells of a sorcerer who once fooled a eunuch tax commissioner into thinking that he could grow a new penis by eating the brains of young boys, who were murdered in order to concoct the drug. Shen writes as if telling of fact. Similar stories appear in fictional Ming sources, including Fang Ruhao's 方汝浩 late Ming novel, *Chanzhen houshi* 禪真後史 (Later Tales of the True Way), in which an evil eunuch in search of long life sucks the brains of 490 boys. He takes a gold pipette, heats it up, and plunges it into the skull of plump young boys.⁴⁹ Stories like *Zhengde you Jiangnan* are examples of scapegoating vilification. It is similar with *Chanzhen houshi*, which appeared just after the fall of Wei Zhongxian and, like other novels appearing at the time, reflected the fresh indignation at the effects of his rule. Its descriptions were part of a portrayal of the evil elements eating away at a society that only a high mythic hero could save. Shen Defu's account was part of his wide-ranging documentation of facts and hearsay that, he presumed, would be remembered only if he recorded them. Tang Zhen's passage about the sexually active eunuch was part of his portrayal of late Ming decadence and contained a moral: always be on guard about eunuchs, for what you thought was most reliable about them, their impotence, was utterly suspect.

Concluding Thoughts

In whichever case, the image of the lusty eunuch was never going to be charming or appealing. He was a marginal figure who was never going to be vindicated or revered. It was impossible for him to join the ranks of heroes and gods or the characters told about in centuries of stories about the strange and the supernatural, such as feathered immortals or Daoist adepts. He was like the animal or insect demons in *Xiyou ji* 西遊記 (Journey to the West), who stole vital essence from humans in order to achieve long life and immortality. Like them, the eunuch was stuck at the low end of the hierarchy of sentient beings. He was supposed to be so low that he had no choice but to enslave himself to the emperor and be thankful for being able to do so. The best he could do was to be loyal, which meant contributing to the fine functioning of the palace while keeping a low profile, perhaps influencing

the emperor subtly from behind the scenes, but always in the end deferring to those with true sexual capacity.⁵⁰

After Wei Zhongxian, the book about evil eunuchs was nearly closed for good in Chinese history. Qing eunuchs had nothing like the privilege and power they had in the Ming. They were fewer in number, peaking at over three thousand during the Kangxi 康熙 era (1661–1722) and declining during the nineteenth century owing to the lesser number of consorts and imperial children. Qing rulers prohibited Manchus from becoming eunuchs—resembling the Ottoman Empire that likewise prohibited eunuchs coming from its ruling people—though the rule was not followed consistently, since many members of the Qing Court Theatrical Bureau, for example, came from banner registers.⁵¹ As mentioned above, the Qianlong emperor loosened restrictions on the recruitment of eunuchs, which among other things led to their greater freedom of movement, as is evident from reports of the frequency of runaways and eunuchs who moved from one station to another.⁵² With the emergence of Empress Dowager Cixi 慈禧 (1835–1908), stories of evil eunuchs appeared one last time. Her opposition to the 1898 reforms gave rise to resentment and led detractors to resort to old methods of vilifying women rulers. Rumors ascribed a hidden penis to her first eunuch favorite, An Dehai 安德海 (1844–1869), alleged that they had a son, and told about her involvement with her second favorite eunuch, Li Lianying 李蓮英 (1848–1911). Another story said that the dowager had a man delivered to her bedroom in a food trunk. A 1901 book by a political activist from Singapore, Lim Boon-keng 林文慶 (1869–1957), spread rumors about her affairs with men disguised as eunuchs smuggled into the palace, adding that the dowager had them murdered after having sex with them.⁵³ In 1916, Cai Dongfan 蔡東藩 (1877–1945) wrote a novel, *Cixi taihou yanyi* 慈禧太后演義 (The Saga of Dowager Cixi), in a scene of which Cixi murmurs intimately with Li Lianying, her foot resting on his knee for him to rub; they compose themselves when someone enters the room.⁵⁴ The belief in the dowager's intimacy with eunuchs was stubborn. According to her palace maid, He Rong'er 何榮兒 (1880–1950), however, there were always court ladies and servants with the dowager. How, the maid asked, could such things occur without their knowing? She condemned as nonsense the reports about An Dehai having a penis or Li Lianying massaging the empress. Only Liu 劉 the hairdresser, a eunuch whom He Rong'er was forced by the dowager to marry, was allowed to enter and tend to the dowager's hair. No men ever touched her otherwise.⁵⁵

I will end by citing a series of foreign writers and their characterizations of eunuchs, starting with the Frenchman, Georges Soulié de Morant (1878–1955), a scholar, novelist, and diplomat who, among other things, introduced acupuncture to France. He wrote a semifictional biography of the empress in 1911 that similarly mixed fantasy with fact, *T'seu Hsi: Impératrice des Boxers* (Cixi: Empress of the

Boxers). In de Morant's story, the dowager made love to young men brought to her by Li Lianying, who as ordered by the dowager stabbed the men to death just as they reached sexual climax. In de Morant's words, Cixi experienced a "strange love" for eunuchs, especially An Dehai and Li Lianying, relations with whom "had a peculiar and incomplete sort of charm, as if taking place in a dream." There was a delicateness about eunuchs that she loved, yet also a remnant touch of masculinity. De Morant described the day in November of the year in which the young Cixi first entered the palace, when An Dehai was delegated to examine her. His job, which in reality could never have been so, was to make sure she had no defects and to verify that she was still a virgin. He had loved her since the first day he had seen her. "His hands trembled" as he helped her undress, "his eyes laden with unfulfillable desire."⁵⁶ The strange being of the eunuch in de Morant's fantasies can be juxtaposed with descriptions by witnesses who saw and heard eunuchs but likewise presented them in an alien light. Stent referred to young eunuchs as being "very handsome and feminine" but found the older ones "repulsive looking." As he wrote, "there [was] something painfully comical in their appearance." To him they were all hairless and spoke in a "cracked falsetto—as a Billingsgate fish-fag might" (a coarse and foul-mouthed woman who sold fish in that part of nineteenth-century London).⁵⁷ Medical and scientific reports, as noted above, indicate that the voices of men castrated after puberty do not change, but that the voices of castrated boys remain high; men castrated as adults may still grow beards. Matignon wrote of an old eunuch who visited his hospital, who had a "particularly strident falsetto, which could be heard from a distance." He was "noisy and exuberant, talked about everything to everyone and, like a grown-up child, showed surprise at everything he saw."⁵⁸ On the other hand, the American Katherine Carl, who lived in the Qing palace for nine months in 1903–4 while painting the dowager's portrait, wrote of high-ranking eunuchs who had clear melodious voices and spoke beautiful Chinese.⁵⁹ In the description by the maid He Rong'er, the eunuchs who attended the dowager walked slowly and serenely, spoke softly, and maintained an attitude of dignity and respect.⁶⁰

Eunuchs were the emperor's personal slaves. They belonged to the category of what Confucius called "petty people" (*xiaoren* 小人), whom he defined side-by-side with women in a famous saying in the *Lunyu* 論語 (Analects): "Women and servants are especially difficult to deal with. If you get close to them, they take advantage of you; if you distance yourself from them, they become resentful" 唯女子與小人為難養也, 近之則不遜, 遠之則怨 (17.25). The Kangxi 康熙 emperor (1654–1722) quoted the same words in his maxims to his sons, adding, "I have often observed how members of the base class in the palace behave when you extend them a bit of kindness because of some slight diligence on their part. The inevitable result is a display of unbridled recklessness, which leads to mishaps that completely



Waist tag for eunuch of the imperial stables, Ming Dynasty.
Photo by Li Ling, Haidian District Museum, Beijing

cancel the effect of their previous good behavior. Yet if you treat them distantly, they are full of resentment behind your back." Base people included eunuchs, whom he claimed to keep solely "for common personal tasks and casual everyday conversation and amusement."⁶¹ He never discussed political affairs with them, nor did he allow them out of the palace, and he kept their pay low. He did, however, employ them to convey confidential information to major political figures and had several trusted eunuchs, to one of whom he wrote seventeen letters during his campaign against Galdan in 1697.⁶²

When he was a boy, moreover, two of his earliest teachers of calligraphy were learned eunuchs from the Ming palace.⁶³ In warning about petty people and eunuchs, Kangxi was in general referring to the fact that an emperor and his sons, especially the son who was to be successor, lived in an environment surrounded by women, children, and slaves. He thus summarized a key question: How was a boy or man to avoid the debilitating effects of life among those without a full-fledged penis? The potent eunuch, an imaginary figure who occasionally entered reality, answered by implying that the full-fledged penis was as potentially hollow as the castrated one.



KEITH MCMAHON
University of Kansas
kcmahon@ku.edu

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Notes

1. See Fan, *Hou Hanshu*, 78.2510.
2. Wengshan, *Baimudan*, 3.13.
3. He, *Zhengde you Jiangnan*, chap. 5. Both *Baimudan* and *Zhengde you Jiangnan* contain fictional re-creations of the same Ming eunuch, Liu Jin (see below).
4. It was also the case that eunuchs were sexual favorites of emperors, with whom they engaged in intimate activity without the necessity of having a penis. On medical aspects, see below and footnote 42. For references to the sexual lives of Byzantine eunuchs, see Tougher, *The Eunuch in Byzantine History*, 33, 77–79, and 97–98. On the sexual life of eunuchs in Mughal India, see Findly, *Nur Jahan*, 99.
5. See the earliest use of "dining partner" in Ban, *Hanshu*, 97b.3990 and 3992, where it refers to two women having such a relationship. At least two other eunuch accounts by survivors of the Qing palace exist; see Xin, *Taijian tanwang lu* and Jia, *Modai taijian*.
6. As another example of how one became a eunuch, a eunuch from the sixteenth-century Wuzong 武宗 court was said to have been castrated as a boy because his parents believed the words of a fortune-teller. See Beijing shi wenwu yanjiusuo, *Ming taijian mu*, 29.
7. The reign of Wei Zhongxian and Madam Ke is the subject of a detailed study of the Tianqi 天啟 reign and the Donglin 東林 faction by Dardess, *Blood and History*, whose thorough and vivid account I have relied on for the general narrative of Wei's life outside fiction. In addition, Paul Vierthaler, a PhD student at Yale University, generously shared the chapter of his forthcoming dissertation on Ming and Qing sources about Wei Zhongxian, tentatively titled, "Quasi-History and Public Knowledge," which is more detailed than I am in examining and qualifying the range of fictional and historical texts about Wei. I have also consulted Hummel, *Eminent Chinese*, 846–47; Zhang, *Mingshi*, especially 7816–25 (Wei's biography); Gu, *Mingshi jishi benmo*, 1359–1407; Atwell, "The T'ai-ch'ang," and other sources, mainly fictional ones, listed below.
8. John Dardess notes that many non-Chinese made up the members of the two agencies and that in general the "Guard policed the official class, while the Depot handled commoners," which remained in effect for the rest of the dynasty; see Dardess, *Ming China*, 36.
9. Most of this information comes from Tsai, *The Eunuchs*.
10. On the selection of partners, see Stent, "Chinese Eunuchs," 174–75. Tsai cites an early twentieth-century scholar describing the procedure of selection of sexual partner, *The Eunuchs*, 43–44, and on 52 regarding the palace pharmacy and "elixir pills." A recent book for popular reading about Chinese eunuchs also reports about the procedure, which involved the use of a silver tray with the names of consorts on it, presented to the emperor after dinner. But likewise there is no concrete reference cited. See Yu, *Yanhuan*, 323–24.
11. See Miao, *Wei Zhongxian zhuanquan yanjiu*, 12 (oversupply). The scene of recruitment and becoming a beggar and bandit appears in the novel *Taowu xianping*, 20.249. Excess

numbers, including the old and ugly ones rejected, and rejects becoming beggars, appear in the novel by Lu Yunlong, *Wei Zhongxian Xiaoshuo chijian shu*, 3.819–20. Eunuchs who become beggars and bandits also appear in Shen, *Wanli yehuo bian*, 6.178–79.

12. Kutcher, "Unspoken Collusions," 449.
13. On Chen, see Liu, *Zhuozhong zhi*, 7.37–40; Zhang, *Mingshi*, 93.7813–15; and Tsai, *The Eunuchs*, 109–12. On Cao, see Xie (Hsieh), "Xinjun jiuzhu yu yichen." Cao was most prominently known for opening the gates to Li Zicheng 李自成 (1606–1645?) when he invaded Beijing. Thanks to one of the reader-referees for the reference to the article by Hsieh. For a study of tombs of Ming eunuchs, see Beijing shi wenwu yanjiusuo, *Ming taijian mu*.
14. See Liu, *Zhuozhong zhi*, 23.208–10, for which *Eunuch's Diary* is a rough but convenient translation of the title. Gu's *Mingshi jishi benmo*, 1397, refers to Liu's erudition as a cause for his imprisonment. See also Chaoying Fang, in Goodrich and Fang, *Dictionary of Ming Biography*, 950–53, including reference to his trial and sentence, 951. According to Fang, both Li and Liu were noted for their long beards (952), but I have not succeeded in finding the source that says so.
15. Liu, *Zhuozhong zhi*, 68–70.
16. Ibid.
17. See Liu, *Zhuozhong zhi*, 14.68–70 (Wei's likes, his history, illiteracy, Buddhism), 72 (emperor's hobbies, listening with half an ear); Zhang, *Mingshi*, 305.7816 (early life and palace career, Ke's switch, emperor's hobbies); Gu, *Mingshi jishi benmo*, 1360, 1364, 1388 (attempts at military control); *Zhuozhong zhi*, 10.52–53 (drowning); *Mingshi*, 114.3543 (pregnant consort), 305.7818; *Zhuozhong zhi*, 8.44, and Mao, *Shengchao tongshi shiyi ji*, 6.12a (Zhang and persecuted consorts). On Wei's prepalace life, see also Zhu, *Yujing xintan*, 2–4, the first work about him to appear (1628), discussed in Vierthaler, "Quasi-History and Public Knowledge." One early Qing account says that the emperor was drunk and lost his footing when the wind blew up and shook the boat; Song, *Baishuo*, 3.61. In the novel by Chang'an daoren, *Jingshi yinyang meng*, Wei deliberately causes the emperor to fall into the water (22.106).
18. See Soulliere, "Palace Women," 179–83.
19. Ji, *Chronicle*, 9b.
20. Most of this information is summarized from Dardess, *Blood and History*, especially 35–44 (regarding the stillborn fetus, see nn. 31, 175), from which I have gotten sources such as Li Xunzhi's and Song Qifeng's. Li wrote about political events in the last three reigns of the Ming in Li X., *Sancho yeji*, preface, 1671, 425–26 (3.61ab).
21. Again, most of this information is summarized from Dardess, *Blood and History*, 150–56. See also Liu, *Zhuozhong zhi*, 14.75–76, 16.124–25; Zhang, *Mingshi*, 305.7824–25; Gu, *Mingshi jishi benmo*, 1392–93, and 1395 (pregnant consorts). If the report that Ke kept pregnant maidservants at her home was true, it fits with other episodes in Chinese history in which the death of an emperor was accompanied by attempts to take advantage of pregnant consorts by naming one of the newborn sons as heir apparent. Recall the case of Jin 金 emperor Zhangzong 章宗 (reigned 1189–1208), after whose death there was a conspiracy involving pregnant consorts; see Tuotuo, *Jinshi*, 64.1527–31.
22. Shen, *Wanli yehuo bian*, 6.158–59, 176–78; and Miao, *Wei Zhongxian zhuanquan yanjiu*, 68–69 (*caihu*).
23. Liu, *Zhuozhong zhi*, 16.130.
24. Ibid.

25. Ibid., 14.68–69 (help from monk). A spirit and fortune-teller help him at his lowest point in Zhu, *Yujing xintan* (2–3), a 1628 account of Wei's life, which inspired novels and plays that followed shortly; fighting off the man with the club occurs in *Taowu xianping*, 17.257–58.
26. Li and Liu are given slightly different but recognizably alternate names; the three swear brotherhood. The author of *Jingshi yinyang meng* claims to have been a close friend of Wei's and to have tried to prevent Wei from doing harm, but to no avail. The author of *Taowu xianping* is anonymous, though recent scholars have claimed that he was a Ming official and writer named Li Qing 李清 (1602–83). See, for example, Jiangsu sheng shehui kexue yuan, *Zhongguo tongsu xiaoshuo zongmu tiyao*, 291–92. For more careful examination of the sequence of and overlap between these and the other novels discussed below, see H.L. Wu, "Corpses on Display," 42–46, and Vierthaler, "Quasi-History and Public Knowledge."
27. Liu, *Zhuozhong zhi*, 15.79.
28. *Taowu xianping*, 23.277.
29. Ibid., 38.432.
30. The wanton Empress Zhao Feiyan 趙飛燕 of the Han likewise had sex with one man after another, whom she smuggled into the palace, for which see Cheng Lin and Cheng Zhangshan, *Xijing zaji quanyi*, 60–61, from perhaps AD 500. For an example of a woman succumbing to desire, see the late Ming novel by Fang, *Chanzhenhoushi*, chap. 1; and of emperor and empress drinking at night, Wu R., *Shiguo chunqiu*, 18.264–69 (about Southern Tang emperor Li Yu 李煜, 937–978).
31. See Chang'an daoren, *Jingshi yinyang meng*, chap. 9 (which says the disease is venereal, chap. 6); and *Taowu xianping*, chap. 18. The motif of skin ulcers and their effect on the penis first appeared in Zhu, *Yujing xintan*, 2.
32. See the article by nineteenth-century English observer G. Carter Stent, "Chinese Eunuchs," 143–84 (170–71, operation). Although widely cited, he commits numerous errors of historical fact. See also Yu, *Yanhuan*, 7–14 and 27. An interview with a twentieth-century Qing eunuch refers to the man's father's castrating the boy at age eight; see Xin et al., *Taijian tanwanglu*, 215–17.
33. Matignon refers to incontinence, "Les eunuques," 324.
34. See Kutcher, "Unspoken Collusions," 457, 475, and 480. Qianlong also accepted eunuchs who were sons of rebels and murderers (as long as they murdered multiple family members); *ibid.*, 473–74.
35. Eunuchs liked to be buried with the original organ or, if that was lacking, a replacement. It is said that fake penises made of sandalwood were found by modern archaeologists in eunuchs' graves in Beijing but were discarded because of their sensitive nature during politically dangerous times in the post-1949 period (Li Ling, Beijing University, pers. comm., April 2013; information is from a third party). For Stent, see "Chinese Eunuchs," 169–70 (beggar), and 172–73 (reference to the preservation of penises).
36. See Wengshan, *Baimudan*, 1.3–4: 先取瓦一塊，無灰酒一瓶，並火炭等物……將陽物放在瓦上，扇起炭火燒焦，搗成細粉，和一粒藥丸調酒灌下，便可止痛。快將此藥散塗敷割傷處，立即止血；and Li S., *Bencao gangmu*, 52.2967.
37. See Chang'an daoren, *Jingshi yinyang meng*, 7.35–36.
38. See Ban, *Hanshu*, 59.2652 (drafts); and on the use of ash, Yu, *Yanhuan*, 7. See also Miao, *Wei Zhongxian zhuanquan yanjiu*, 11–12 (lack of information on Wei's castration) and

Vierthaler, "Quasi-History and Public Knowledge," who among a wider range of sources discusses the same passages of the fictional treatment of Wei's self-castration.

39. *Taowu xianping*, 18.220–222.
40. Lu, *Wei Zhongxian xiaoshuo*, 2.816–17.
41. Ibid. Lu Yunlong's *Wei Zhongxian xiaoshuo chijian shu* appeared a month after *Jingshi yinyang meng*. Lu, a well-known editor and publisher, was associated with Li Qing, the possible author of *Taowu xianping*. A third novel about Wei Zhongxian from the same year, 1628, was *Huangming zhongxing shenglie zhuan* 皇明中興聖烈傳 (The Heroic Recovery of the Ming), in which Wei likewise suffers from skin ulcers, and an apparition tells him he should become a eunuch.
42. Regarding the physiological aspects of eunuchism, I have consulted Tauber, "Effects of Castration"; Hamilton and Mestler, "Mortality and Survival"; Peschel and Peschel, "Medical Insights"; and Wilson and Roehrborn, "Long-Term Consequences." I am grateful to my stepdaughter, Maija Cheung, MD, for help in locating some of these sources. Eunuchs castrated before puberty might have disproportionately longer arms and legs, which was due to the fact that increased androgen production in normal males brings about a cessation of bone growth that continues in the boy eunuch. This feature is reported in Islamic and European sources (among castrati singers in the latter case), but I have not been able to find clear evidence in China, though some sources report tall eunuchs (e.g., the Tang eunuch Gao Lishi 高力士, 684–762, who was castrated as a boy). Katherine Carl, a late nineteenth-century American, reported tall eunuchs in *With the Empress Dowager*, 94, 125–26.
43. See Stent, "Chinese Eunuchs," 177 (this assertion needs further verification); and Matignon, "Les eunuques," 334, who in a voyeuristic flourish added that the eunuchs could assist the women in their "most intimate toilette." See also Kutcher, "Unspoken Collusions," 474, n. 67.
44. See Shen, *Wanli yehuo bian*, 21.548 and *Wanli yehuo bian, buyi*, 1.820 (from the Wuzong and Shenzong 神宗 eras).
45. See Matignon, *Chine hermétique*, 229, n. 1: "Ce bourgeois charnu rappelait trop la verge absente" (The fleshy stump too resembled the absent penis). For Song, see *Baishuo*, 3.59, 61.
46. See Sima, *Shiji*, 85.2505–14.
47. See Tang, *Qianshu*, 170, a book of political thought especially in regard to late Ming decadence.
48. He, *Zhengde*, 5.191.
49. See Shen, *Wanli yehuo bian*, 6.158; and Fang, *Chanzhen houshi* (preface 1629), 37.280. Possibly getting the same information from Chinese informants in twisted form, Stent writes that Wei Zhongxian "procured seven criminals, had their heads split open, the brains extracted from them, and devoured the revolting mess" ("Chinese Eunuchs," 159).
50. Kutcher points to the essentialist views of eunuchs and the formulaic characterizations of their traits, "Unspoken Collusions," 455 (e.g., the Qianlong emperor's opinion that eunuchs were by nature bound to flatter and try to usurp power), 462–63. As Kutcher points out, eunuchs themselves resorted to formulaic characterizations of their traits in their excuses for and confessions of misdeeds.
51. Information about eunuchs in the Qing comes from Rawski, *The Last Emperors*, chap. 5; Torbert, *The Ch'ing Imperial Household Department*, 1–80; and Kutcher, "Unspoken Collusions."

52. See Kutcher, "Unspoken Collusions," 457, 475, and 480.
53. See Lim Boon-keng, under the pseudonym Wen Ching, *Chinese Crisis from Within*, 75–76, 88–89. Lim and others may have been inspired by the stories told long since about Jin 晉 Empress Jia Nanfeng 賈南風 (257–300), who allegedly had men secretly brought to her for sex in the palace and then had them killed. The story about men delivered in a trunk may have come from the *Jinshi* 金史, in which the consort Dingge 定哥 of Emperor Hailing 海陵 (1122–1161) had a lover sent to her in a clothing trunk. See Fang, *Jinshu*, 31.963–65, and Tuotuo, *Jinshi*, 63.1510.
54. Cai, *Cixi taihou yanyi*, chap. 17. In their 1910 book, the Englishmen John Bland and Edmund Backhouse refer to the story that Cixi had a son by An Dehai, but they deny its truth. They write of Li Lianying as an "arch villain" and refer to his giving the dowager massages; their book was translated into Chinese and probably read by Cai. See Bland and Backhouse, *China under the Empress Dowager*, 79.
55. See Jin and Shen, *Gongnü tanwang lu*, 40–42 (An, Li), and 44–47 (Liu).
56. De Morant, *T'seu Hsi*, 18–20.
57. See Stent, "Chinese Eunuchs," 178–79.
58. Matignon, *Chine hermétique*, 245.
59. Carl, *With the Empress Dowager*, 94, 125–26.
60. Jin and Shen, *Gongnü tanwang lu*, 33–34, and the French translation of the book, *Mémoires*, 140–41.
61. *Shengzu Renhuangdi tingxun geyan*, 27ab.
62. Spence, *Emperor of China*, 156–66.
63. *Shengzu Renhuangdi tingxun geyan*, 2b–3a. See also Spence, *Emperor of China*, 45–46, on eunuchs. The Kangxi emperor ruled that if eunuchs left the palace, they had to return the same day.

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