Eunuchs from the Ming Dynasty to Qing’s Ethno-Dynastic Order, 1500–1800

Eunuchs were castrated male palace servants who wielded a fluctuating level of political and military powers from the Shang to the Qing. Under the Qing, their number and power reduced significantly. This paper argues that their diminished roles and functions can be explained not only by the process of sinicization but also by the Manchu Altaic system, which shared residual tribal traditions with other conquest dynasties. In particular, the paper will re-examine the place of eunuchs in the Qing ethno-dynastic order on the basis of their representation in two paintings in the University of Alberta’s Mactaggart Art Collection.

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Eunuchs were castrated male palace servants who wielded a fluctuating level of political and military powers from the Shang (1766–1045 BCE) to the Qing (1644–1911). The Qing retained the imperial bodyguard and bondservant traditions that put all the eunuchs under the jurisdiction of the Imperial Household. As personal and menial servants of the emperor, eunuchs were expected to accompany him on hunts and imperial tours. Yet the number of eunuchs hired was reduced from 100,000 in the Ming to 2,000–3,000 in the Qing, and no Qing eunuch acquired the economic, political, or military powers of the Ming eunuchs who threatened the survival of the state.

This paper will examine the presence and representation of eunuchs from 1500 to 1800. It will argue that the process of sinicization does not adequately explain the practice of employing eunuchs in the Qing court. The diminished roles and functions of Qing eunuchs are better explained by the Manchu Altaic system, which shared residual tribal traditions with other conquest dynasties—the Khitan Liao, the Jurchen Jin, and the Mongol Yuan. In particular, the paper will re-examine the place of eunuchs in the Qing ethno-dynastic order on the basis of their representation in two paintings in the University of Alberta’s Mactaggart Art Collection—Kangxi’s Southern Inspection Tour Scroll 7 and Qianlong’s Southern Inspection Tour Scroll 2.

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