

Inside the World of the Eunuch: A Social History of the Emperor's Servants in Qing China. By Melissa S. Dale. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2018. Pp. x + 223. \$55.00.

Eunuchs had played a part in Chinese court life for up to three thousand years, from the Shang and Qin dynasties down to the end of the imperial system in the early twentieth century. They were particularly numerous and influential in the Tang and Ming periods; at the Ming court, there were as many as one hundred thousand eunuchs! For someone like myself whose research interests lie in the late Qing, when the eunuchs An Dehai and Li Lianying figured prominently in the politics of the Cixi 慈禧 era, it comes as something of a surprise to learn, from the book under review, that there were only about three thousand eunuchs at the Qing court.

Melissa Dale's study of the Qing eunuchs, those who were "the emperor's servants," is a revised and expanded version of her Ph.D. dissertation at Georgetown University. Unlike other scholars on the subject, who "tend to write about eunuch interference in politics and the corrupt practices of a small number of notorious eunuchs such as Li Lianying 李蓮英 or An Dehai 安德海," she sets out to "present the other side of eunuch history" (pp. 2–3). In doing so, she has drawn on two main sets of sources: various palace archives (published and unpublished) in Beijing and Taipei, and published memoirs of late-Qing eunuchs.

The book covers the entirety of the Qing period as well as the early post-Qing years. It is organized topically. Chapter 2 describes how eunuchs entered imperial service. They were generally emasculated—a term that Dale prefers over "castrated"—by government-licensed professionals known as *daozijiang* 刀子匠 (knife experts), after which they would present themselves to the court for selection. Chapter 3 examines how the eunuch's mutilated body was "read by others and by eunuchs themselves" (p. 48). Eunuchs, Dale argues, "continued to self-identify as gendered male" (p. 55); the Qing court, too, tended "to view eunuchs as more yang than yin" (p. 65), while to Western observers the eunuch's body "was simply and undeniably gendered female" (p. 61).

Chapter 4 discusses the eunuchs' role at court. They were not only "keepers of the harem," as they are often portrayed, they also "performed a myriad of [other] duties within the palace" (p. 79). Chapter 5 looks at the society that the eunuchs created for themselves within and without the palace. For example, "many eunuchs still retained some measure of contact with their natal families" (p. 90), and they often "subverted their required submissiveness by engaging in prohibited forms of entertainment and leisure activities" (p. 97), such as gambling and drinking. They "were not the docile, submissive servants they have traditionally been portrayed to be" (p. 102).

Chapters 6 and 7 deal with two ways the eunuchs tried to escape from their harsh and oppressive life: running away and suicide. Chapter 8 describes the “only three types of [authorized] exit from the eunuch system: sick leave, retirement due to old age or illness, and natural death” (p. 145). Finally, Chapter 9 discusses the fate of the eunuchs after the fall of the Qing in 1912. About half of them fled the court immediately, while the other half, numbering about 1,400, continued to serve Puyi 溥儀 in the Inner Court of the Forbidden City under the terms of the abdication agreement. In 1923 most of these remaining eunuchs were evicted from the palace, and then in the following year, when Puyi himself was chased out, so were the rest of the eunuchs.

Aside from Chapter 9, the book, by and large, ignores the temporal dimension of the story. Only occasionally does the author mention how the eunuch system might have changed over the course of the Qing dynasty. At one point she writes, “From the initial inception of the Qing eunuch system through the reign of Daoguang in 1850, Qing emperors continuously enacted policies aimed at preventing a reassertion of eunuch influence and power. . . After 1850, Qing emperors gradually became laxer . . .” (p. 26). Hence the emergence to prominence of An Dehai and Li Lianying in the late Qing. Otherwise, however, Dale treats the various topics statically. There is thus, for example, no discussion of whether the number of court eunuchs may have changed over time. Or did it remain at around three thousand from beginning to end?

The book also focuses only on the eunuchs at the imperial court. But there were other eunuchs in Qing China as well. As the author acknowledges, not all emasculated men who presented themselves for service were accepted as court eunuchs: “a population of emasculates not employed by the palace existed during the Qing” (p. 46). Some of them, for example, found service in princely households. But how widespread was this practice? Were there imperial restrictions on who could employ eunuchs? Were they only Manchu princes? How about wealthy Han Chinese households? Granted that these other eunuchs may fall outside the declared scope of the book, but they seem to merit at least some discussion.

The book is greatly enhanced by the inclusion of Chinese characters in the text and in the footnotes. It is, however, marred by a few instances of careless proof-reading. The Qing agency responsible for screening prospective court eunuchs is said to be the Imperial Household Department on p. 41 and the Board of Rites on p. 45. A sentence in the text on pp. 171–72 is repeated in n. 5. The footnote about Dasheng Wula on p. 83, n. 94 is repeated, almost word for word, on p. 98, n. 45 and again on p. 111, n. 19.

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