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## Children in Slavery through the Ages

Gwyn Campbell, Suzanne Miers, Joseph C. Miller

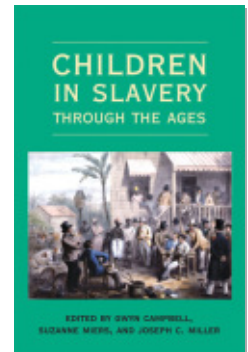
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## THE THIRD GENDER

### *Palace Eunuchs*

BOK-RAE KIM

Societies using eunuchs have two common characteristics: first, they possess a despotic monarchy and a strong state autocracy, second, they practice polygamy or concubinage. In premodern China concubinage is officially recognized by Confucian ideology. The Forbidden City, home to the Imperial Palace of the Ming and Qing dynasties, was divided into two sections: the inner court, or living quarters, and the outer court, or working area. Only the emperor and his sons lived in the inner court, where three hundred court ladies, including the empress, perfumed the air with their cosmetics. Owing to this temptation (and in order to run a palace household on such a grand scale), it was necessary to employ eunuchs to guard the inner court because they were not “real” men. Their responsibilities were mostly related to the emperor’s sexual life. A eunuch was allowed to carry naked concubines into the emperor’s bedroom on his back or to give a lady who had won the emperor’s favor an imperial gift.<sup>1</sup>

One would expect that no man would be more melancholy than a sexually impotent one; yet people without physical defects or disabilities emasculated themselves. It was the avenue to power, as was shown when eunuchs ruined the Qin dynasty (221–206 BC), dethroning three emperors and killing four. They also enthroned a total of seven rulers during the three hundred years of the Tang dynasty (618–907). In Korea a eunuch named Man-saeng Choe assassinated King Kongmin (r. 1351–74) of the Koryo dynasty (918–1392).<sup>2</sup> The mystery is how such a strange group came into being and harnessed such power. If the eunuch system was a necessary practice of so-called Oriental

despotism, why did it not exist in Japan? What alternate system existed there? In order to answer these questions, the origins and practice of the system must be examined. We must compare the recruitment and functions of Korean eunuchs with those of their Chinese counterparts.

#### THE FIRST EUNUCHS

Chinese scholars presumed that eunuchs existed before the Zhou dynasty (1046–221 BC) on the basis of the Zhouli (Rites of the Zhou), which contain the first historical record of the eunuch system. According to the Zhouli, the emperor had “one queen, three madams, nine concubines, twenty-seven varied ranks of consorts, and eighty-one court ladies.” These women all had to be guarded by eunuchs.<sup>3</sup> In this book, Zhou Gong describes castration as a form of severe punishment ranking somewhere between amputation and decapitation. Castrated prisoners were kept as palace servants. Oracle bone (*jiagu*) inscriptions found among the relics of Wu Ding (Martial IV, China’s first historic ruler) are the oldest known documentation of a eunuch system, dating to around the thirteenth century BC, during the Shang dynasty (1600–1046 BC). According to the hieroglyphs, King Wu Ding was interested in knowing whether he could make captive Western Barbarians, called *qiangren*, into eunuchs.<sup>4</sup> Even though the castration of prisoners has existed since prehistoric days, it is difficult to say for certain whether or not the eunuch system was firmly established as an institution during the Shang period.

In Korea eunuchs were variously referred to as *nae-si* (Chinese, *nei-shi*), *hwan-kwan* (*huan-guan*), or *hwa-ja* (*huo-zhe*). During the later Koryo period, the Chinese eunuch system was introduced into Korea under the influence of the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368), which ruled the Korean peninsula for close to one hundred years. In the beginning the *nae-sis* were government officers charged with secretarial tasks and serving as a royal guard for the king; they had no relation to castrated males. A maximum of twenty good-looking men suited for the civil service were selected. Gradually, the number increased, augmented by the children of powerful families and successful candidates for the civil service examination.<sup>5</sup> The Korean *nae-si* system was limited in the beginning, but became grotesque during the Yuan dynasty, when castrated eunuchs were offered as tribute. A Mongol princess married to the Koryo king Chungyol (r. 1274–1308) dedicated the Korean eunuch Su-myong to the first Mongol emperor of China, Shizu (Qubilai Qan, r. 1260–94).<sup>6</sup> Thereafter, the demands of the Yuan dynasty (1206/79–1368) for Korean eunuchs as tribute became excessive. With this heightened demand for Korean eunuchs, a surgical method of castration was introduced.

(Before that, castration had been accomplished by dog bite.) In general, Korean eunuchs succeeded in winning the Yuan royal family's favor. They were then redispached as special envoys to Koryo. The government was often obliged to grant them the title of prince. Their families, and even their remote relatives, also enjoyed greater influence. As a result a father would castrate his son, or an elder brother his younger brother, as becoming a eunuch at the Yuan court was considered to be a golden opportunity for success.

In Korea the office of eunuchs was first established in the fifth year of King Kongmin's reign (1355). Before that, a minority of eunuchs were engaged in miscellaneous services without belonging to a government office. With this "institutionalization," eunuchs were now given important posts in the royal court. They gained power through proximity to the king and began to intervene in politics and seize sizable estates. Under the last king, Kongyang (r. 1389-92), the number of eunuchs reached one hundred. After the collapse of the Koryo dynasty, the office of eunuchs was inherited almost intact by the Chosun dynasty (1392-1910). Their numbers increased to 240, with fifty-nine receiving an official rank.<sup>7</sup> Although most of the evil practices seen during the Koryo period vanished, eunuchs continued to make their fortunes by attending the king and queens.

#### THE RECRUITMENT OF EUNUCHS

It is not known for certain when castration began in China, but it was one of the five punishments during the Han period (206 BC-AD 220), along with decapitation, cutting off the nose, cutting off the heel, and tattooing the crime on the face. In two particular periods, the Qin (221-206 BC) and Han dynasties, castrated prisoners acted as the main source for new eunuchs. It was only under the Sui dynasty (581-618) that castration was completely abolished. In the Sui or Tang (618-907) periods, only volunteers could be selected. Nevertheless, a few eunuchs were still recruited from among the ranks of condemned criminals, neighboring barbarians (as tribute), prisoners of war, foreigners, and so on.<sup>8</sup>

Most so-called self-castrated eunuchs—those deliberately castrated for their political or social advancement—were castrated in early childhood through the will of their parents rather than their own. Parents might tightly bind the genitals of their newborn son with a silk thread. The part below the knot would then die and eventually fall off.<sup>9</sup>

In front of the western gate to the Forbidden City there was a building where several "knifers," recognized by the government as qualified to perform castrations, ran their businesses. The existence of these professionals

proved there was a significant demand for eunuchs. A male candidate was tied to an operating table and was asked one last time if he would ever regret being castrated. If the candidate had no doubts, both penis and testicles were swiftly cut off as close as possible to the body with a small curved knife.<sup>10</sup>

The main supply center of eunuchs was located in the southern part of China. At the end of the Ming dynasty (1568–1644) there were one hundred thousand eunuchs and nine thousand court ladies. Some scholars estimate the total number of eunuchs during the Shang and Qing dynasties to have been around 10 million.<sup>11</sup>

In Korea not many sexually impotent or castrated males were available, unlike China, where the palace eunuch system was fully developed. Additionally, there is no literature that explains exactly how palace eunuchs were recruited in Korea. According to the vague testimonies of descendants of eunuchs, their ancestors had become eunuchs by accident. For example, being bitten by a dog during childhood. U-chol Yi divides eunuchs into four categories: involuntary eunuchs, accidental eunuchs, congenital eunuchs, and self-castrated eunuchs.<sup>12</sup> He pays particular attention to the latter category (which includes what he calls semi-self-castrated eunuchs). In the *Koryo-sa* (History of Koryo, 1452) self-castration is mentioned but the method of the castration is not; probably castration was considered taboo.<sup>13</sup> Voluntary castration was primarily limited to the lower classes. This included *nobis* (slaves), who underwent self-castration to escape poverty, the extortion of local officers, the domination of owners of *nobi*, or military service. Unlike in China, castration was never instituted as a form of punishment in Korea. This complicated the recruitment of eunuchs. Jae-ryun Cheong records that when he was young, he heard the following statements from several old eunuchs. “There was a noble [*yangban*] boy with underdeveloped genital organs. A eunuch adopted him as his child.”

The adoptive system was also used to recruit eunuchs, especially during the Chosun dynasty (1392–1910). According to Chosun adoptive law, it was customary to adopt a child with the same family name. However, the Chosun government permitted eunuchs to adopt a child with a different family name, to prevent the extinction of their lineage. The *Kyongguk taejon* (Complete Code of National Law, 1470) prescribed that a child adopted by the eunuch class should be under three years old, but that rule was not strictly enforced.<sup>14</sup> There are many cases of eunuchs adopting intrinsically impotent or postnatally castrated boys (or occasionally normal boys) as their heirs. For instance, under the reign of King Sejong (1418–50) the eunuch Yong-gi Kim raised a child from infancy and made him a palace eu-

nuch. Under the reign of King Myongjong (1545–67), the number of baby eunuchs dramatically increased, causing political tension. At times there were as many as four or five adopted baby eunuchs per person, doubling the expenditure of the royal warehouse.<sup>15</sup> A shortage of eunuchs could also create political tension. Under the reign of King Songjong (1469–94), an ordinance was promulgated prohibiting the raising of baby eunuchs within the residence of high- or middle-ranking government officials. The ordinance prevented private individuals from keeping baby eunuchs as domestic nobis in order to meet the royal court's demand for eunuchs. This form of prohibition was then repeated. According to the *Daejonheotong* (Final Code of National Law), in 1865 there were ninety baby eunuchs in the royal court.<sup>16</sup> It is thus probable that eunuchs were recruited by simply bringing up adopted baby eunuchs in the court. Rich and powerful eunuchs often enjoyed the benefits of their high positions. For example, they could adopt several children. In addition, some had wives and even concubines. Their colleagues who had neither children nor spouses looked upon them with envy.

Unlike their Chinese counterparts, Korean eunuchs were said to have sexual relations. In many cases of self-castration, only the testicles were cut off, leaving the penis intact. Thus, although a man's generative power quickly died away, sexual intercourse was said to be possible for some time. According to the *Diary of Prince Yonsan* in 1507, there were love affairs between eunuchs and court ladies. In such cases, the guilty parties were expelled from the royal palace.<sup>17</sup> It is not known exactly whether the men whose sexual power remained intact were false or authentic eunuchs. In the event, eunuchs were occasionally obliged to take their pants off in public to provide physical proof. In this respect, the Korean eunuch system was nonsystematic and somewhat vague in comparison to the Chinese system.

#### THE FUNCTIONS OF EUNUCHS

In the beginning, Korean eunuchs usually engaged in various petty works at court. However, as they took the place of the *nae-sis* (precursor form of eunuchs), they progressively took over their former duties. Those duties can be divided into six categories: administration of the royal harem and concubines, public works, transmission of royal orders, inspection of the loss of crops or the condition of people (as a special envoy dispatched to the provinces by royal order), protection of the crown prince, and administration of the office for hunting with hawks or breeding them.

In both Korea and China the supreme ruler tended to have as many wives and concubines as possible, though their number was often subject to certain restrictions, primarily due to financial problems. According to

the encyclopedia *Tongdian* (Comprehensive Manual), written by a minister of the Tang dynasty, Du You (735–812), the emperor had four wives, four being a sacred number that symbolized the four cardinal directions. During the Shang dynasty, the number of wives and concubines increased to thirty-nine. Under the Zhou dynasty their number increased to 121, which was proportionate to the extension of royal authority during that time.<sup>18</sup> Assuming that a single concubine would have twenty-five lady attendants on average, the total number of court ladies could exceed three thousand. This number seemed too much for one man, even though it may have included many older women whose beauty may have faded. It also cost a great deal. The emperor, called the Son of Heaven, under the pretext of having as many heirs as possible, had many wives and concubines. The practice of polygamy, however, often led to quite contrary results. There are many examples in which those emperors who overindulged in carnal pleasures ended up injuring their health and dying at a young age without leaving any successors, and this led to political disorder.

Moreover, the history of the imperial harem was far from romantic and quite devoid of common sense. Each concubine had a green nameplate. After the emperor finished dinner, the chief eunuch would offer him a score of nameplates on a silver tray. If the emperor put a nameplate upside down, the concubine could serve him that night. However, without the consent of the empress, whose seal was needed on the document in which the name of the concubine was recorded, even the emperor could not have his way. The exercise of this veto depended not only on the empress's mood or health but also on the power of her clan, that is, the status of her family. Even with the approval of the empress, the emperor could spend only a limited time with his chosen concubine. The duration of the visit varied according to periods and dynasties but, generally speaking, it ranged from two to four hours. When the fixed time came to an end, the chief eunuch would announce loudly, "Time is up!" If the concubine failed to come out, or if she or the emperor were unduly stubborn, the eunuch would remove her from the emperor's bedroom by force.<sup>19</sup> According to this example, it seems that eunuchs were quite powerful. In accordance with the emperor's special order, the eunuch would document the visitation as a form of proof. If not, he took measures to prevent conception. Thus, the emperor's *ex post facto* indication in the form of a gift bestowed as a pledge of affection if the concubine greatly pleased him was for concubines a matter of primary concern, as the status of a concubine depended on whether she could give birth to a son or not. Using this process, some eunuchs once more exhibited their trickery. They modulated the length of the visitation, which could vary to some degree, according to their whim.

Taking advantage of their proximity to the supreme ruler both day and night, eunuchs ingeniously manipulated him. If the emperor was not clever, he would be like a marionette in their hands. If he was clever they were convenient instruments that operated according to his direction. However, with time the system gradually expanded. In proportion to their octopuslike expansion, the eunuchs' institutional and politico-economical power increased. Even though they suffered through massacres and harsh retrenchments of their organization, their inscrutable power as an eccentric castrated group permitted them several times to win key positions in government.

In Korea the first precise documents on royal concubines appeared during the Koryo dynasty. The Korean royal concubine system was a miniature of the Chinese one, but the rank of Korean concubines was nonetheless equal to that of their Chinese counterparts during the Koryo period. The founder of the Koryo dynasty, Wang Kon (r. 918–943), had no less than six queens and more than twenty madams. Through politically expedient marital arrangements and settlements he won over powerful family clans and meritorious subjects.<sup>20</sup> In the Chosun period, under the ideology of *sadae*, or serving the Great (toadyism)—which was instrumental in shaping both Korea's foreign policy and cultural identity—the title given to the king's legitimate spouse deteriorated to that of queen consort. Royal concubines were granted the official rank of court ladies. According to the *Kyongguk taegjon* (Complete Code of National Law), the office of court ladies (*naemyongbu*) comprised not only the court ladies charged with miscellaneous services and administration but all royal concubines.

Court ladies were chosen from among the four-to-five-year-old daughters of *yangban* (noble) families to receive training in court manners and etiquette. Court ladies were highly disciplined. They could not marry any male except the king, and their dress, ornamentation, and salary differed according to their position or class. Their average salary is estimated to be around 240 (old) Korean won during the middle of the Chosun dynasty (approximately 1.5 million won today). Even a lady's maid-of-all-work was granted either the ninth rank of government office (which was nominal) or funeral expenses for her parents and herself. It is not surprising that eunuchs or court ladies serving the king and his royal concubines received such preferential treatment. According to an old Korean proverb, "If you wear your skirt wrong-side-out, you will come into unexpected fortune."<sup>21</sup> This proverb originated from the tradition of the royal harem. If a court lady who managed to attract the king's attention by chance succeeded in sleeping with him, she received the fourth rank of *naemyongbu*. For the following few days, she should wear her skirt wrong side out. This odd behavior was to



publicly show that she had taken off her skirt. In other words, nobody but the king could now take off her skirt. This was viewed by the outside world as a token of royal favor. Most court ladies, those who could not receive the king's favor, were expected to live and die as virgins. Court eunuchs were best suited to protect the purity of all court ladies, and to enforce the strict court laws placed upon them. Since the private life of kings was nothing but a history of the royal harems, that made placing eunuchs in charge of the royal harem a necessity.

By royal order eunuchs also engaged in construction work. The eunuch Sa-haeng Kim (d. 1398), for example, took a very active part in palace construction. In 1357, under the reign of King Kongmin (r. 1351-74), Kim began construction of the royal palace. This led to an exhaustion of Korea's resources and widespread economic distress. As soon as King U (r. 1374-88) procured the throne, Kim's fortune was confiscated as he was charged with starting the large-scale public work by deceiving the assassinated King Kongmin with flattery. This was followed by his exile as a public nobi (slave). He was released and rehabilitated in 1391, under the reign of King Kongyang (1389-92). After the foundation of the Chosun dynasty, he succeeded in winning the favor of the first king, King Taejo (r. 1392-98). The king ordered him to survey land in order to construct an ancestral shrine for the royal family, an altar to the state deities, a royal palace, market, towns, and so on. During the first rebellion of princes, Kim was charged with conspiracy and decapitated. His head was displayed as a warning to the people.<sup>22</sup> Thereafter, the responsibility for public work was assumed by civil officials, though they were still accompanied by eunuchs. During the reign of King Taejong (1400-1418), the eunuch Yu-chi Kyom supervised construction of the main building of the palace by royal order. During the reign of Prince Yonsan (1494-1506), the eunuch Ja-won Kim constructed the residence of a princess and won the king's favor.<sup>23</sup> It is clear that Korean eunuchs were actively engaged in the construction of royal palaces, temples, and various other public works embodying the authority and prestige of the king.

Aside from such duties as guarding the royal gate, cleaning, and cooking, the eunuch's most important responsibility was the transmission of royal orders. Officially, this was the responsibility of the royal secretariat (*sung-jongwon*), but in reality it was through the office of the *nae-sis* (eunuchs) that documents were transmitted to and from the king. When a censor-general advised the king verbally, for example, the chief secretary would dictate this to the eunuch again, and then the latter would report it to his majesty. Through the use of two- to threefold reports, a biased interpretation could be obtained by the eunuchs. During the reign of King Sejong, on account

of problems during the transmission of royal orders, the king separated the duties of the royal secretariat from those of the office of the censor-general (the Saganwon). Charging the censor-general with the transmission of royal orders, he ordered that all reports be in written form and that all officials' opinions be announced through the royal secretariat without transmitting them directly to eunuchs. However, most officials preferred giving an oral report to a eunuch rather than giving it in written form by way of a secretary.<sup>24</sup> King Munjong (r. 1450–52) thus made it a rule to report all opinions through the royal lecture sessions held between king and subjects.<sup>25</sup> In theory there were six secretaries reporting directly to him, but these rules were not observed in practice. Gradually, the eunuchs assumed responsibility for the transmission of royal orders. Under this system of informal politics, personal relationships and informal networks played an important role behind the scenes, while often also providing the basis for factional politics. The shadow power of eunuchs who secured information grew and contributed in part to King Sejo's coup d'état in 1455. As in China, the main reason eunuchs in Korea could hold power was that they were able to play a part in deciding the succession to the throne.

Beyond these functions, the eunuchs also acted as the king's special envoys. This role involved the inspection of crop loss, flood damage control, and monitoring the condition of starving people within the provinces. The eunuchs investigated not only natural disasters but also the diligence of local governors. However, documents indicating this are found only from the early Chosun period. If the Chinese demanded virgins as a tribute, or if the Korean royal family was selecting a spouse for a prince, eunuchs were also dispatched to look for suitable candidates. During the reign of King Taejong, for example, the virgins selected by the eunuch Um Hwang were criticized as "too plain."<sup>26</sup> Thus, the king redispached the inspectors of the provinces to be accompanied by a different eunuch. During the early Chosun period, the eunuchs took part in the selection of the crown princesses, but under the reign of King Songjong this role passed to civil officers. Also, the protection of a crown prince by eunuchs was a target of criticism among officials, including ministers. During the reign of Taejong, the bureaucrats of the Saganwon admonished the king to separate the prince from his eunuchs: "A group of eunuchs was bent on currying favor with the young prince. Thus, it is necessary to keep the flattering eunuchs at a distance." The king reportedly replied, "Your demands are entirely right. But the eunuchs undertake the cleaning of the royal court, so I could not abolish them."<sup>27</sup> Several eunuchs brought up young princes or princesses within their own homes. For instance, under the reign of Yejong (1468–69)

the eunuch Kyun Chon raised the crown prince in his house. And because he had assisted the young prince, the eunuch Jung-kyong An was able to secure a high government position for his brother. The famous eunuch Han-jong Park also reared a crown prince and received many bribes as a result.<sup>28</sup>

The administration of hunting with hawks and breeding them was one of the main tasks of the eunuchs. These activities became especially important as the Yuan dynasty increasingly demanded hawks as tribute. The hawk was necessary not only for the tribute, but also for the king's hunt. Under the reign of King Sejong, the eunuch Duk-bu Yun, a trainer of hawks, practiced extortion in the province of Hamkil under the pretext of investigating the conditions for hawk-hunting. The eunuch Jon Chong became a high-ranking officer due to his great hawk-training skill.<sup>29</sup> Eunuchs also engaged in memorial services for ancestors and the maintenance of the royal family shrines. After the death of the king some eunuchs became guardians of the royal tomb. From the cradle to the tomb, the eunuchs took charge of their king's public and private life.

#### JAPAN'S LACK OF A EUNUCH SYSTEM

Several hypotheses attempt to answer why the eunuch system did not exist in Japan. First, unlike other European and Asian countries, Japan was not subject to foreign rule. In fact, the Japanese had little contact with the outer (*soto*) world before the open-door policy created by the Meiji reform of 1868. Thus, on the Japanese archipelago there were no foreign prisoners, presumed to be the first object of castration in other societies. Second, Japanese society depended essentially on the growing of cereal crops. Therefore, the culture of animal castration was unfamiliar to them. Third, a system of absolute (or despotic) monarchy was not established in Japan. Finally, the Japanese have seldom engaged in wars with foreign countries. Although they fought fiercely among themselves, the nation's ethnic homogeneity was so strong that all members were administrated under the dominance of inner (*uchi*) logic, in spite of a rigid social hierarchy based on the norms of domination-obedience.<sup>30</sup>

The eunuch system never existed on the Japanese archipelago, but did a similar system exist in its place? The Japanese king is called *tenno* (emperor); however, the position of the *tenno* lost much of its political power with the advent of the samurai shogunates. After the Meiji reform the offspring of a concubine could no longer become a member of the royal family.<sup>31</sup> In the Heian period (794-1192), the civil officers guarded the entrance to the emperor's royal harem, but any man with a royal permit was allowed free access to it; this was quite different from the case in China, Korea, or even

Japan in the later period of the Tokugawa shogunate. According to *Nihon shoki* (Chronicle of Japan), the office of *nai-ju* (eunuchs) existed as early as the middle of the Nara period (710–94). In the memorial to Chinese empress Wu Zetian (r. 690–705), during the Tang period, it was recorded that the *nai-ju* worked at the royal harem.<sup>32</sup> However, it appears that the Japanese *nai-ju* were not castrated. For example, among *nai-ju*s the renowned litterateur Oumi no Mifune (722–85) and the brave warrior Takakura Fukunobu were not only married but sired many children. Thus, the *nai* (inside) *ju* (boy) was merely a boy with disheveled hair rather than a eunuch. Probably due to Japanese social repugnance regarding castration, the *nai-ju* class was not composed of castrated eunuchs but of (still sexually immature) errand boys engaged in miscellaneous services around the royal harem.

As the emperor's authority was merely symbolic during the twelfth century, true national power rested with the leading vassal of the emperor, the shogun. If we consider the Japanese royal harem, it is much better to examine the *ooku*, the shogun's exclusive harem. It was not until the establishment of the Tokugawa shogunate that the Japanese royal harem was institutionalized by Kasuga no Tsubone, who was the nurse of Iemitsu Tokugawa (r. 1623–51), the third shogun during the Edo (or Tokugawa) period (1603–1868). The women of the *ooku* were charged with guarding the royal court at all times, without relying on eunuchs. These women were divided into twenty-seven different ranks, each with a different salary. Women of ranks one to twenty were called *ome mie*.<sup>33</sup> They were allowed the honor of meeting the shogun and his legal wife. In theory, they had to work twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year. But the maids in the ranks below twenty could not only take holidays once a year but could also quit their jobs with permission. These low-ranking maids were mostly commoners.

Serving in the *ooku* was not only a great family honor but a guarantee for good marriage. To enter the *ooku* required three qualifications: personal connections, wealth, and pleasant physical appearance. Special agents designated by the *ooku* were responsible for recommending *ooku* candidates from within the country. There was serious competition among these agents to discover beautiful and talented women of good pedigree because the promotion and power of the ladies they recommended was directly linked to the agents' wealth and power. However, these women, with the exception of the shogun's favorites, were partnerless—although on occasion a select few were lucky enough to wear their skirts wrong side out, as in Korea. That said, almost all women except the general maids were forbidden to have contact with men. With the exception of a rare group viewing of Kabuki,

they remained in an entirely women's world. This extreme sexual repression led to two distorted outlets. One was autoeroticism or lesbianism. The other was the smuggling of a man inside a crate bound for the ooku. Later, such practices became open secrets. Even the shogun deliberately overlooked them, fearing a strong reaction from the ooku. The seventh shogun, Ie Tsugu, who died as a child, was too young to take an interest in the ooku. Seizing this opportunity, a court lady (Eshima) fell in love with an actor. With momentum from this scandal, the splendor, extravagance, decadence, and political power of the ooku was soundly attacked by the tight-money policy launched under the initiative of Arai Hakuseki (1657–1725), chief counselor to the sixth shogun. At that time, around fifteen hundred persons of the ooku were executed, condemned to exile, or ousted from their position by the system of guilt by association. In a sense, Eshima was a scapegoat for the ooku purge-through-retrenchment policy. After the great purge, the Kansei (1787–93) and Tembo reforms (1841–43) were carried out by regent-minister Matsudaira Sadanobu (1758–1829), and later by Mizuno Tadakuni (1794–1851), to reverse the decline of Tokugawa through restructuring finance, enacting a sumptuary law, and controlling public morals.<sup>34</sup> The stronger the retrenchment policy became, the greater the reaction from the ooku. The reforms failed due to pressure from the ooku, and Mizuno was removed from office. Even the rulers of the shogunate were unable to reform. There seemed to be a common thread between the eunuchs and the women at the ooku, the latter having substituted for the former.

Korean eunuchs would not have appeared on the historical stage if the yoke of Mongolian rule had not been imposed on the Korean peninsula for over a hundred years. During the intervention period of the Yuan dynasty, Korean-Japanese diplomatic relations nearly reached a standstill. Thus, there was (fortunately) no political background with which the Chinese custom could be transplanted onto the isolated Nihon archipelago.

So, if the eunuch system is supposed to be a byproduct of so-called Oriental despotism, let us consider it within this context. In China it is rumored that the eunuchs stemmed from the jealousy of the Chinese people, but the eunuch system was more closely linked to power than to psychology. It is said that appetite comes from eating. Anyone coming into power aspires to have absolute power and to maintain it permanently, if possible. By avoiding presenting himself openly, a leader begins to be deified, making his body sacred and inviolable. However, a king ruling over an entire country could not be completely separated from the everyday world. An unchallenging, asexual mediator was needed. The mediator could not be a real man,

hence the neutral eunuch. For example, entering the Buddhist priesthood requires becoming newly born, transforming oneself into a being different from other worldly men. Thus, the monk has his head shaved as a token of otherness or transcendence. In premodern Japan the physician attending the emperor in royal court had to have his hair shaved, in order to examine the sacred and inviolable body of a royal family member without violating such a sanctuary. In a sense, this shaven physician was not a human being, but an outer being.<sup>35</sup> In any period, the power holder is in need of close associates devoted to him and in whom he can put his confidence. In the early stages of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) people called the eunuch *huozhe*, from the Hindu *khoja* (castrated man), implying that many eunuchs were imported from India. Indeed, the Yongle (Everlasting Joy) emperor (r. 1402–24) was surrounded by a variety of foreign eunuchs (Koreans, Mongols, Annamese, Arabians, etc.).<sup>36</sup> In Islamic countries neither black nor white eunuchs were uncommon. Foreign eunuchs were in fact quite welcome. They seemed more appropriate to keep the despotic monarch's secrecy, dignity, and sacredness. There were, of course, many Chinese eunuchs, like Sima Qian (145–86 BC), involved in composing the *Shiji* (Records of the Grand Scribe). Most of these eunuchs were prisoners whose punishment was castration. There was a gradual increase, though, in the number of self-castrated eunuchs, so as to be exempt from corvée or to attain greater wealth and power.

Surgical castration was extremely dangerous. Somewhere between one-fifth and one-half of all candidates died during or shortly after surgery. Nevertheless, the voluntary castrati who overcame the dangers and difficulties stubbornly clung to wealth and power. During the recruitment of palace eunuchs in 1621, the second year of the Ming emperor Tianqi (r. 1621–28), about twenty thousand candidates flooded the gates of the Forbidden City.<sup>37</sup> In a sense, there was a connection between the emperor, who was a solitary being despite his limitless power, and the eunuchs, who were also alienated from society.

Since the reign of the Yongle emperor, eunuchs were responsible for the network of espionage under the emperor's direct control and for secretly administering the firearms belonging to the military. The large-scale appointment of (inner) eunuchs during the Ming period was partly due to the emperor's distrust of (outer) bureaucratic officials. Shih-shan Henry Tsai writes, "The Ming eunuchs were not just household servants hewing wood and drawing water. They actually made up a 'third administrative hierarchy,' participating in all of the most essential matters of the dynasty."<sup>38</sup> In China the eunuch system was used by the distrustful leaders to hold the bureaucrats in check.

For the eunuchs who served the king as tools, acquiring royal confidence was imperative if they were to gain a high position. Thus, some cunning eunuchs paved their career paths by successfully separating the emperor from politics. In the farewell speech of the Tang eunuch Zi-liang Chou, who wielded considerable power while serving six successive emperors, the key to success was in blinding the emperors through a life of debauchery.<sup>39</sup> There was no quota for eunuchs. Their numbers increased or decreased according to their emperor's mandate. The more debauched the emperor's sexual life, the greater the number of eunuchs. The founder of the Song dynasty (r. 960-975) limited the number of eunuchs to fifty by imperial order, but by the end of the dynasty (960-1279) their number had increased to 180. In the early Ming period, the number of eunuchs is estimated to have been less than one hundred, but their number had reached seventy thousand in Beijing. If we add to this figure those eunuchs owned by (feudal) princes in Nanjing and in other provinces, the number would have been over one hundred thousand, a situation the Qing emperor Kangxi (1661-1722) deplored: "in the Ming period the number of court ladies reached ninety thousand, and that of eunuchs, one hundred thousand. Some of them died of starvation." The Qing emperor Shunzhi (r. 1644-61), who died of smallpox, left a will abolishing the eunuch system. However, like a phoenix, the eunuch system soon revived, and the number of eunuchs reached 2,866. However, in 1911, when the last emperor, Xuantong (r. 1909-11), abdicated the throne, they numbered only eight hundred.<sup>40</sup>

At the end of the Koryo period, the eunuch system was institutionalized in Korea under Chinese influence before and after the fourteenth century. Unlike China, Korea did not have "shadow cabinets" like the Dong Chang and Xi-Chang, which were composed of eunuchs and exercised virtually unlimited power. As a result, Korean eunuchs seem to have been far less destructive than their Chinese counterparts. Nonetheless, their rank was disproportionately high, even in the case of inferior eunuchs engaged in what we now consider menial tasks. Laundrymen, for example, eunuchs of the ninth rank, were equal to the high-ranking inspectors of the Office of the Inspector-General. And even a eunuch in charge of lighting lamps enjoyed an equal rank with accounting inspectors or the chief teachers of Confucianism.

In the premodern political system of both China and Korea, where nepotism and favoritism prevailed, those in closest proximity to the supreme leader possessed the most power. The eunuchs not only kept a vigilant eye on the emperor's bedroom but were the only ones to whom the emperor could lay bare his heart. In compensation for their absolute loyalty, the ruler ranked

TABLE 8.1  
Rank and functions of Korean eunuchs

<i>Rank</i>	<i>Functions</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Notes</i>
1	Preparation of royal meals, banquets, king's ancestor-memorial services, etc.	2	Eunuchs from first to fourth rank were
2	Responsible for wine and liquor	1	charged with the
3	Responsible for charge of tea	1	preliminary royal
4	Chinese medicine	1	meal testing to guard against poisoning.
5	Transmission of royal orders, acting as intermediaries between king and subjects	2	
6	Custody of royal seal and sealing, records on royal-family history (birth, marriage, death, royal harem, concubines, etc.), all kinds of ceremonies. Also responsible for list of books for royal family's reading and its administration	3	
7	Choice and administration of royal clothing, ornaments, other articles (folding screens, chairs, flags for national ceremony, cushions, etc.)	4	
8	Court finances, accounting	4	
9	Laundrying, handling, storing of royal clothing	4	
10	Custody of court lighting system	4	
11	Administration of fuel, underfloor heating system (hypocaust)	4	
12	Building and repairs at court	6	
13	Cleaning, extermination of vermin (mosquitoes, flies, fleas, etc.)	6	
14	Operation, guarding of royal gate	5	
15	Night watch, protection, fire prevention	6	
16	Gardening	5	
		<i>Total:</i> 58 persons	

them above all other retainers and subjects. The eunuchs, entrenched with the royal family through their unusual fidelity and devotion, were a necessary evil under a despotic monarchy.

But were premodern China, Korea, or Japan really despotic? The label of Oriental despotism results from applying a Western concept of despotism as repressed individualism. Some Western philosophers have supported a view of China as a despotic state by documenting a lack of individual freedom in China, where accomplishments are attributed to parents, ancestors, and ultimately the emperor; where corporal punishment was common; or where subjects were judged guilty by association. Nonetheless, China—truly



the mecca of the eunuch system—viewed from the inside is a traditional but not a despotic culture. The relative absence of individualism is not necessarily perceived as repressive by the Chinese. Under the *Gemeinschaft* (community) characterized by traditional practices and a personal sense of belonging, the relationship between master and servant transcends our contemporary thinking. During the reign of the tyrant Yonsan, there was a loyal old eunuch called Cheo-sun Kim (d. 1505) who attended four different kings. He knew well young Yonsan's violent temper, but at the risk of his life remonstrated several times against the lascivious king's misconduct. In a fit of rage, the prince shot an arrow through his eunuch's heart. However, Kim continued to rail tenaciously, grabbing the arrow lodged in his chest. In a fit of anger Yonsan cut off Kim's legs, and finally his tongue, claiming he was tired of listening to his ardent remonstrations. The prince gave his dead body to a tiger, then ordered the demolition of the grave of Kim's parents, and the removal of the Chinese character Cheo in all personal and geographical names.

## NOTES

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