

# Introduction

This book is a study of eunuchs and those who managed them. Set in the early and mid Qing dynasty (roughly 1644–1800), it takes as its main characters four emperors who reigned in the aftermath of a period of extraordinary eunuch power, as well as some of the eunuchs of high and low station who served in and around the Chinese capital, Beijing. During the preceding dynasty, the Ming (1368–1644), eunuchs had stepped outside of their conventional roles as palace servants, usurping political and even military power. So despised were Ming eunuchs, and so great was the damage they caused to Ming state and society, that their excesses could not but serve as an admonition to later rulers against the dangers of eunuchs. The Qing rulers studied here—three of whom are considered among the most important and successful of Chinese emperors—lived with the potent legacy of Ming eunuchs and developed strategies that sought to prevent that menace from ever reappearing. Their approaches varied widely, and so this book is organized by reign periods, tracing the shifts in policy that took place over time. This is also a study of how Qing eunuchs responded to those changing policies, at some times eking out new opportunities that would bring them a modicum of prosperity, at others becoming important, wealthy, and even powerful. This story is, finally, about the unintended consequences of the gap that developed between the rhetoric and the reality of eunuch management. The informal policies introduced by Qianlong (r. 1736–1795), the last emperor to be examined in this study, largely contradicted his stated policies and ushered in a new era of eunuch power and prosperity, the effects of which continued to be felt until the end of the Qing dynasty.

Eunuchs had harmed dynasties before the Ming; in fact, the corruption of these men is blamed for the decline and fall of some of China's greatest dynasties. The

Ming, however, was most infamous among all dynasties for the power of its eunuchs, the most notorious of whom was Wei Zhongxian (1568–1627). In the 1620s, he became more powerful than the emperor himself. Able to make or break any official at will, he ordered officials who opposed him tortured and killed. Not content to wield control over government, he also made himself an object of worship, ordering the establishment of temples devoted to him throughout the realm.<sup>1</sup>

Certainly not all eunuchs were as evil as their conventional portrayals—and some were even known for being virtuous.<sup>2</sup> My concern here is neither to confirm the evil of some eunuchs nor to establish their reputations as misunderstood victims. Nor is it to assess the history of Ming eunuchs, which I leave to historians of that period. Instead, it is to show how widely accepted views of Ming eunuchs, and eunuchs generally, impacted, and at times even haunted, Qing rulers and their policy decisions. It is also to show how eunuchs during the early to mid Qing dynasty lived with, and at times managed to use to their advantage, the stereotyped views that others had of them.

#### EUNUCH CLICHÉS AND THE LOGIC OF THE DYNASTIC CYCLE

Society's fears about eunuchs stemmed from concern about the damage they could cause to ruling institutions, which could lead to dynastic decline and collapse. According to this traditional and clichéd view of the dynastic cycle, dynasties began with an energetic leader attacking and supplanting the previous dynasty's ruler. This new leader became emperor of a new dynasty, reinvigorated governing institutions, solidified his hold over the bureaucracy, and placed severe restrictions on eunuchs, limiting this corps of workers (which could number into the thousands) largely to menial roles such as sweeping and cleaning the palace. When the emperor's son assumed the throne, he maintained most of his father's vigilance, but the luxuries of palace life distracted him from his duties. The slow decline in dynastic vigor continued generation by generation until, toward the end, lazy and coddled sons lost interest in rule. Once that happened, they became vulnerable to the influence of high-ranking eunuchs.<sup>3</sup>

At these moments, the well-positioned eunuchs were depicted as deploying flattery, their most renowned skill, to win over the emperor. Eunuchs used their knowledge of the ruler's personality, gleaned from daily interactions, to surmise what he wanted to hear, which they then artfully told him. So close is the association between eunuchs and flattery that Mencius himself used the adjective "eunuch-like" to describe flatterers.<sup>4</sup> Part of this flattery involved finding small ways to demonstrate their complete loyalty and trustworthiness.<sup>5</sup> In addition to flattery, eunuchs, who had been biding their time, waiting for an emperor who

would be susceptible to their ways, found means to distract him from ruling—whether by arranging games at court, procuring lovers for him, diverting him from Confucian education, or engaging him in elaborate hobbies.<sup>6</sup> Having distracted the emperor, the eunuchs were able to step into the power vacuum. Slowly, they colluded with corrupt officials to take power from honest officials, or wormed their way into military commands. Ultimately, their power began to challenge that of the emperor himself. Once this happened, they promoted their selfish interests in money and power until the very foundations of the dynasty were weakened. Only the coming of a new emperor to the throne, one not susceptible to flattery, could break the eunuchs' hold on power. Such is the master narrative of the rise of eunuch power, as it existed across Chinese history. It was, and remains, an inseparable component of the more general narrative of the decline and fall of dynasties themselves.

Assumptions about gender underlay the repetitive logic of eunuch power. Eunuchs were portrayed as playing essentially the same role throughout history because they were assumed to share the same gendered qualities. The slow decline in dynastic vigor was associated with the effeminacy of the dynasty's last rulers, and with the rise of *yin*, or feminine, energy, at court.<sup>7</sup> Eunuchs themselves, as beings in which yin energy predominated, exercised a contaminating influence on the *yang*, or masculine, energy that was necessary for effective rule. These concepts were designed into the very physical structure of the palace; yin was associated with inner areas and yang with outer areas. As the emperor was distracted from the tasks of ruling the realm ("outer affairs," *waishi*), he was drawn further into the inner precincts of the palace, seldom meeting with officials, and spending his time with women and eunuchs—the yin presence in the palace. This tilting of power toward the inner palace also made it possible for women and eunuchs to collude, while weak men, also yin in nature, stood by. Eunuchs' encroachments into "outer affairs" were presented as a contamination of yang government by yin forces. When they dominated the military, it became ineffectual; when they dominated civil affairs, the result was corruption. Reflecting on the matter, Ouyang Xiu, the great eleventh-century official and essayist, declared that the danger posed by eunuchs was even greater than that posed by women, warning rulers: "Never forget this, and never stop fearing it!"<sup>8</sup> But there was no better-known statement of this view than in a poem, in the ancient *Book of Songs*, that expressed the essential similarity and interdependence of women and eunuchs:

A wise man builds up a city,  
But a wise woman overthrows it.  
Admirable may be the wise woman,  
But she is [no better than] an owl.  
A woman with a long tongue,  
Is [like] a stepping-stone to disorder.

[Disorder] does not come down from heaven;  
 It is produced by the woman.  
 Those from whom come no lessons, no instruction,  
 Are women and eunuchs.<sup>9</sup>

A tradition of commentaries on the poem made its meaning clear. Women and eunuchs shared similar natures. Both could do harm to the state, but in aiding one another they could be even more dangerous. Their rightful place was in the yin world of inner affairs, not in government.<sup>10</sup>

The supposed proclivities of eunuchs—perennial cruelty, a perverse love for destroying dynastic institutions—were all attributed to their natures. As men whose yin qualities came about as a result of a mutilation that rendered them “disabled men” (*feiren*), they stewed on their resentment and jealousy. Once circumstances permitted, they took their revenge on sanctimonious officials and on a society that had brought about their shameful loss. This simple depiction of the character of the eunuch, and the dynamics by which he acquired power, remained remarkably consistent across history.

#### A TALE OF TWO EUNUCHS: A HISTORICAL CONUNDRUM

This portrayal of eunuch empowerment fit perfectly with the story of Wei Zhongxian, evil eunuch of the Ming dynasty. He colluded with Madame Ke, the wet nurse of the teenage emperor, to distract him with woodworking and other pursuits until Wei and the wet nurse could usurp power. The portrayal also fits well, however, with the infamous eunuch of the late Qing dynasty, Li Lianying (1848–1911). He served the Empress Dowager Cixi (1835–1908), but having flattered his way into her confidence, he came to wield so much power that, the sources tell us, no edict could be proposed in the Grand Council unless one of the senior grand counselors said: “Chief eunuch Li also approves of this action, so we know it is the correct one.”<sup>11</sup> The perceived similarities between eunuchs Wei and Li were, it is said, not lost on the young Guangxu emperor (r. 1875–1908). One morning he was studying with his tutor Weng Tonghe, and read the passage “Only women and small men are difficult to cultivate.” Guangxu shed a tear, realizing that for him the passage was a clear reference to the empress dowager and Li Lianying. Weng responded ominously that when the last Ming emperor read the same passage, he would have thought it a reference to Wei Zhongxian and the wet nurse Madame Ke—therefore an ominous sign of dynastic collapse.<sup>12</sup> Different circumstances aside, both eunuchs were credited with great skill in flattery, and with appetites for corruption, intrigue, pettiness, and cruelty.<sup>13</sup>

It is the strange similarities between the stories of Li Lianying and Wei Zhongxian that are perhaps most arresting: the way that history repeats itself in unusual

detail. In accounts of Wei Zhongxian, the famous moment in which his usurpation of power becomes complete occurs when he orders that officials address him by the name “Nine Thousand Years.” Since “Ten Thousand Years” is the epithet for the emperor, a eunuch being called by the name Nine Thousand Years suggests that he is, in essence, nine-tenths of the emperor. One important person at the Qing court noted ominously: “Some outer-court officials have begun to call Li Lianying by the name Nine Thousand Years. If eunuchs are come to this, then we’re not far from the late Ming and Wei Zhongxian.”<sup>14</sup>

If the end of this morality tale is so remarkably similar to the Ming pattern, so too is its beginning. Stories of Ming eunuch power usually commence with the depiction of the first Ming emperor ordering that a wooden sign be erected over the gates of the palace warning eunuchs on pain of death not to become involved in government.<sup>15</sup> So strict was this emperor, where eunuchs were concerned, that, we are told, on hearing an elderly eunuch casually mention something about government matters, he ordered him sent back to his village. True to the logic of dynastic cycle, subsequent Ming rulers failed to heed the warnings emblazoned on this sign, and by the end of the dynasty the warning had gone dangerously ignored. In the case of the Qing, the Shunzhi emperor (r. 1644–1661), first Qing emperor to sit on the throne in Beijing, ordered the prominent placement of a similar warning that eunuchs stay out of government.<sup>16</sup> Though less famous than its Ming predecessor, this placard would likewise preside over a resurgence of eunuch power, one that, in the eyes of many late-Qing and Republican writers, more than superficially resembled that of the Ming.

This book then has a puzzle at its core: Was it possible that Chinese rulers, taught to use history as a guide to governance and carefully warned about the dangers of eunuchs, still managed to fall for the same old tricks, time and again? How could the Ming and then the Qing dynasties each begin with prominent cautions against eunuchs becoming involved in government, but then end with just that involvement? This book proposes that the answer can be found only by searching beyond the highly stylized views of eunuchs and the emperors who managed them. It supposes that beneath the clichéd representation of the relationship between eunuch and emperor lies another, more complex reality, and one that differed greatly from case to case. Getting beyond clichés, however, is not easy, as we shall see.

#### THE CHALLENGE OF THE SOURCES

Chinese eunuchs are difficult to study, because the sources on this group were largely compiled by the Confucian historians who despised them. These Confucians viewed eunuchs at best as menial servants, and at worst as a constant threat to good government. The use of eunuchs was something between “dirty little secret”

and “necessary evil” in the Chinese empire. Emperors were to be Confucian monarchs, obliged to “govern all-under-heaven with filial piety [*yi xiao zhi tianxia*].”<sup>17</sup> Yet in the palace itself they abided and even quietly supported an institution that ran directly counter to the core values of Confucianism. According to the *Classic of Filial Piety* (*Xiao jing*), the body, even the hair and the skin, are gifts from one’s parents, and one should not injure them. How much more, then, would total emasculation—the removal of testes and penis, as was done in the case of Chinese eunuchs—be considered a harm to the body and an insult to one’s parents? Mencius said that of all the crimes one could commit, none was more heinous than not having offspring.<sup>18</sup> What, then, of a system in which men forever ended their ability to procreate, most of them before they had reproduced? Because it violated fundamental Confucian and even Chinese values, the system existed quietly, designed to guarantee the purity of the imperial line by ensuring that any child born in the palace was the emperor’s. Because the system operated largely beneath the surface, there are very few sources either authored by eunuchs or that tell history from their point of view. Furthermore, in moments when eunuchs became powerful, they managed to keep most of their activities out of official court records, so those activities are recounted only in questionable rumor-filled narratives of court life that are hard to accept as fully accurate, and in the aforementioned writings of anti-eunuch Confucians. Sources such as these only confirm the master narrative of eunuch power that existed since time immemorial.

Even when it comes to the much more recent Qing period, and Li Lianying, the most famous of eunuchs, it is difficult to learn anything definitive about him or eunuch power at the time. There are miscellanies aplenty—random notes, gossip, and the like, published for narrow circulation—but they are often of dubious historical value. The archives in Beijing contain very little concrete information on Li Lianying or even mention of him. One reason for this, as mentioned above, is that powerful eunuchs could keep their activities out of official sources. Another reason is that, unlike officials, eunuchs worked in the palace itself, so communication between them and the sovereign tended to be oral. Even fundamental details about Li Lianying’s life are hard to substantiate. Scholars long debated which county he was from, and they continue to debate even so basic a question as how his name was written.<sup>19</sup> His death is as hotly debated as his life. Some argue that he was murdered—either by factions within the court or by fellow eunuchs—while others maintain that he died from illness. More mundane details, like the year of his death, are also contested: the *Washington Post* announced his death more than a decade prematurely.<sup>20</sup>

If it is this difficult to sort out basic facts such as these about Li Lianying’s life and death, it is accordingly more difficult to figure out his role in politics and at the Qing court. Was he, as some miscellanies argue, the guiding force behind Cixi’s decision to support the Boxers during the Boxer Rebellion?<sup>21</sup> Was he so naive

about international affairs that he proposed paying the Boxers on a per capita basis for every foreigner they killed?<sup>22</sup> Is it true that he was so presumptuous in his relationship with the Empress Dowager Cixi that when talking to her he used the informal version of “we” (*zamen*) to discuss what actions they should take?<sup>23</sup>

Li Lianying’s story, like those of other all-powerful eunuchs at the end of dynasties, is wrapped in the master narrative of eunuch power. That narrative is pervasive enough to fill in the details when the facts are unknown—and with eunuchs they are so often unknown. Extreme accounts of Li Lianying’s misdoings, then, become believable precisely because they fit with popular expectations of the ways in which powerful eunuchs act. There is no evidence, for example, that he tortured his enemies, but that did not stop people from writing that one of his nicknames was “Combs Li,” after the torture device used to squeeze the fingers of the accused; apparently, the story goes, he used them on his enemies.<sup>24</sup> When sources compared Wei Zhongxian with Li Lianying, rather than finding the peculiarities of each, they measured both against the narrative used to describe all “notorious” eunuchs.<sup>25</sup>

Thus far we have spoken of a tiny fraction of eunuchs—those who achieved fame and power. If it is so difficult to learn about famous eunuchs, how much more difficult is it to learn about the lives of the thousands of other eunuchs who worked in Beijing? Most eunuchs arose from obscurity and lived in obscurity, excluded from the genealogies that could tell us about their family background. They tended to come from the same cluster of counties located to the south of Beijing, but gazetteers and other local history sources rarely if ever brag about them as native sons. They changed their names, often more than once, and their new names were almost always chosen from a startlingly small number of easily recognizable eunuch names, making them hard to differentiate. The small number of eunuch names, and the regularity with which eunuchs changed their names, made it nearly impossible to track a eunuch through palace records. Furthermore, as the following chapters suggest, there was little attempt to record eunuchs in personnel records in any case until the Qianlong period. As we will also see, however, eunuchs’ fluid, common names could be a tremendous source of empowerment for them.

One reason I chose to explore the management of eunuchs in the first 150 years of the Qing—what has been characterized as a calm period in which eunuchs were carefully and effectively managed—is that the sources are richer for this time than for any other in Chinese history. Many of these sources are archival, and thus present an everyday account of eunuchs and their management rather than an idealized and clichéd view. Among the largely impersonal bureaucratic documents in Beijing’s First Historical Archives’ Imperial Household Department collection, between reports on the amount of firewood used in one palace and the amount of wax used in another, sits a fascinating genre of documents: the case reports of crimes and transgressions committed by eunuchs in the palace. These reports, which I draw on extensively for this study, include investigations, confessions,

coroner's reports, and dispositions. These documents can be formulaic and unreliable, but when studied carefully, they offer genuine insight into the lives of Qing eunuchs.

Another reason for studying eunuchs in this period is that it encompassed the reigns of three of China's most important emperors: Kangxi, Yongzheng, and Qianlong. Together ruling for an astounding 137 years, these three men are widely agreed to be among the best emperors in Chinese history. A gifted military leader, Kangxi completed the conquest of China and returned vast swathes of the south to the empire. He also won many Han elites to his side, and soothed passions inflamed over the conquest. Yongzheng, his son, reigned for just thirteen years, but in that time managed to transform and rationalize many aspects of Chinese government, including the system of taxation, bureaucratic communications, and inner-court government. Qianlong led China in an age of great prosperity, expanding the empire to its largest extent in history and becoming a great patron of culture and the arts. How better to test assumptions about dynastic decline and its associations with eunuch power than to examine eunuch management during the most robust period of Qing rule? Yet the governments of these three men have never been closely examined from the standpoint of their management of their eunuchs. Historians have generally acquiesced in a dynastic-cycle model, agreeing that household management was fully vigorous in this age. Yin forces, in the form of women and eunuchs, were kept in check, within the inner palace. Only in later periods were eunuchs thought to have become important and influential. Getting at the reality of eunuch government in the reigns of these three great emperors, however, can tell us much about them as rulers. Indeed, their rulerships look quite different when viewed through the lens of their household management.

BEYOND A HISTORY OF OUR DYNASTY'S PALACES:  
THE GAP BETWEEN RHETORIC AND REALITY

Ming eunuchs cast a long shadow over Qing rule. Even by the time of the Qianlong emperor, as Alexander Woodside has noted, many court officials still found the Qing emperors worth supporting because they had solved the eunuch problem. As Woodside also noted, the palace history that Qianlong ordered his future grand secretary Yu Minzhong to compile in the 1760s celebrated the Qing achievement in finally controlling eunuchs, which was "the great unresolved problem of court politics."<sup>26</sup> As Qianlong would note in its preface, the book would also serve as a warning to future Qing emperors—to his sons and grandsons—about the evils of eunuchs. As a sort of victory lap for the Qianlong emperor, the book lauds the accomplishments of his father, grandfather, great-grandfather, and of course himself—rulers who not only managed eunuchs carefully, but did so according to a meticulously elaborated set of principles that had been set out almost from



antiquity, and discussed by scholars who lived in the decades that followed the Ming collapse. Well aware of the master narrative, they worked hard to avoid falling into the same trap as Ming emperors. The book Qianlong commissioned, entitled *A History of Our Dynasty's Palaces* (*Guochao gong shi*), has been the single most important source of information on the Qing imperial household, forming an important source for previous studies of eunuchs published both within and outside of China. This is with good reason, for the work reprints imperial edicts that are found nowhere else. Many were orders that emperors issued to their chief eunuchs, with careful instructions to disseminate their contents to their subordinate, supervisory eunuchs, who in turn were to pass the information on to the rank and file. If other such edicts, or archival versions of those edicts, still exist, they are not open to researchers.<sup>27</sup> The published edicts themselves also contain tantalizing bits of information about ordinary life in the palace. Often, for example, the emperor not only announces a new rule, but also reveals the specific incident that engendered it. *A History of Our Dynasty's Palaces* is a flawed source, however, precisely because of the purpose for which it was created: to craft a vision of Qianlong and his predecessors as having been uniformly tough on eunuchs. Though it is a collection of edicts and other documents by different emperors written at different times, the consistency of the viewpoint throughout is remarkable, with regard both to imperial management style and to eunuch character. As such, the text, though essential, is also misleading. It obscures significant differences between emperors, and thus, rather than allowing us to get beyond stereotypes about emperors and the eunuchs they managed, it only confirms them. It also minimizes the real role of eunuchs in the early and high Qing. Historians have relied on *A History of Our Dynasty's Palaces* to prove that Kangxi, Yongzheng, and Qianlong were equally and consistently tough on eunuchs.<sup>28</sup> This has made it easy to confirm old clichés that eunuch power returned to the Qing under the influence of the empress dowager, or perhaps when weak (yin) late-Qing emperors ruled.

In this book, we look beyond *A History of Our Dynasty's Palaces* and other normative texts that tell us what the palace was supposed to be like, and examine the much messier, and at times contradictory, world of everyday palace management.<sup>29</sup> In doing so, we find that the quiet period of post-Ming governance over eunuchs was not as quiet as it has been portrayed. This study also reveals the important variations in each early- and mid-Qing emperors' policies, contrary to their uniform representation in *A History of Our Dynasty's Palaces*.

It is easy enough to label the gap between imperial rhetoric and reality, where eunuchs were concerned, as a species of hypocrisy. Qing emperors inveighed against the dangers of eunuchs, but then quietly permitted them freedoms and responsibilities that were at times eerily reminiscent of those given to powerful Ming eunuchs. How do we understand this behavior? The answer is different for each emperor, and is therefore detailed in the pages that follow.

But common themes emerge.

First, the gap between imperial rhetoric and reality is a striking, and perhaps extreme, example of what we understand to be the performative aspects of imperial rulership. Beginning with the work of historians such as Pamela Kyle Crossley and Evelyn Rawski, we have come to understand that the emperorship was more than the voice of a single individual. It was, in Crossley's words, "an ensemble of instruments playing the dynamic role, or the ascribed dynamic role, in the governing process."<sup>30</sup> The skillful emperor—a category that would include at least three of the emperors described here—was nothing if not just that, and used to full advantage the many means of communication at his disposal, creating not a single consistent voice, but one that was appropriate to audience and purpose. Qianlong was the master here, but we observe other emperors doing it as well.

Second, the gap between imperial rhetoric and reality, where eunuchs were concerned, was the product of the very real need they filled. This institution, which survived in one form or another for thousands of years, was constantly viewed as a danger to the realm, yet persist it did. The stated reason for its persistence was the maintenance of the integrity of the imperial line. If a child was born in the palace, there had to be certainty that the emperor was the father. Yet as this book demonstrates, this simple rationale breaks down under scrutiny. There were many eunuchs who had no duties whatsoever with respect to imperial womenfolk, and who played other roles, large and small, in the emperor's world.

Tempting as it might be to locate a specific role in the bureaucracy that explains the persistence and importance of eunuchs, the truth was that the institution persisted not because eunuchs filled a single empty space in the bureaucracy, but because of their flexibility, their ability to perform a large range of duties and services. Kangxi and Qianlong, grandfather and grandson, both spoke harshly against eunuchs, but both gave them important positions and privileges—albeit different positions, and different privileges. What may have united these two men was a shared sense that eunuchs were, collectively, a danger to the realm, but that individual eunuchs, the men they got to know and trust personally, were different from the norm. As Matthew Sommer suggested to me, eunuchs were not unlike the county-level clerks and runners so carefully studied by Bradley Reed; though "regularly vilified as corrupt and self-serving," writes Reed, they were essential to the functioning of county government.<sup>31</sup>

#### THE QUESTION OF EUNUCH BIOLOGY

In order to understand the role in history of this special category of men who served the emperor, it is necessary to examine the validity of the stereotypes and assumptions about the homogeneity of eunuchs that persisted across the centuries. What can biology tell us about whether eunuchs carried similar traits and

characteristics? Given what we know to be the effect of hormones on the body, can we locate a biological source of eunuch similarities and difference?

Did biology dictate eunuch appearance or even personality? The answer would at first seem obvious. The removal of both penis and testes and the creation of a smooth scar made eunuchs' bodies starkly different from those of other men. Beyond an absence of genitals, which was hidden by clothing, there were dramatic hormonal differences. Testosterone and other androgenic hormones are produced at three sites in the human body: the testes, the ovaries, and the adrenal glands. Eunuchs, having neither testes nor ovaries, thus produced only the very small amount of this hormone that came from the adrenal glands. In addition, there is strong evidence that women, though they produce one-tenth the testosterone that men produce, are far more sensitive to its effects.<sup>32</sup> Eunuchs had far less testosterone than either men or women, yet had the sensitivity toward it of men's bodies. This condition suggests that they would suffer profound biological consequences from castration and be readily distinguishable from other men. The evidence for such differences beyond their lack of genitals, however, is surprisingly elusive.<sup>33</sup>

The most nuanced and Qing-specific evidence I have found for the physical differences between eunuchs and other men are in the imperial household cases that deal with instances of eunuchs who fled from the palace and then attempted to pass as non-eunuchs on the outside. The reality, with some caveats, is that a startlingly large number of eunuchs were able to come and go from the palace, hiding for long periods of time on the outside as non-eunuchs and going incognito among ordinary people. There were also many instances in which uncastrated men pretended to be eunuchs, and no one was the wiser until their lower bodies were inspected.<sup>34</sup> The range and complexity of these cases suggest the many roles that biology could play and show that there was no one eunuch physical type. Even when it came to what one might think of as an obvious difference—facial hair—the distinction was not absolute. Not all uncastrated men grew or could grow facial hair, and not all eunuchs had hairless faces. The eunuch Shi Xi, for example, seemed to be stating a well-known truth when he explained, after he ran away in 1801, that because he was castrated in middle age he still had a beard, and no one could tell that he was a eunuch.<sup>35</sup> Even in the case of those castrated as youths, their beardlessness often went unnoticed not only because not all men could or chose to grow beards, but because many runaway eunuchs disguised themselves as monks (who shaved their heads and faces completely).<sup>36</sup> Sources are clear on the fact that, beardless or not, many eunuchs were able to pass as non-eunuchs while on the outside, sometimes for years.

The somewhat elusive evidence about the physical effects of castration notwithstanding, there were several areas in which biology tended to play a conspicuous role in the eunuch's differentiation from other men. If castration was done well before puberty, the eunuch would develop very long arms and legs. This is because

one function of testosterone is to signal the long bones in the body to stop growing—a process termed “closure of the epiphysis.”<sup>37</sup> By the Qing this fact seems to have been understood, and castration of the fully prepubescent was avoided. Eunuchs who committed crimes and were forced to confess usually recorded the ages at which they were castrated; age at castration also appears in the biographies of eunuchs at Enji Zhuang cemetery (a burial ground for eunuchs established by the Yongzheng emperor, and discussed in subsequent chapters). Taken together, the record suggests an ideal age of castration as during the course of puberty but before its end. This informal policy likely kept eunuchs from growing too tall and lanky, although it’s quite possible that those whose bodies developed in this way were moved into positions as eunuch guards in the palace.<sup>38</sup>

In many cases, age at castration did seem to influence a eunuch’s appearance, but that effect would become most apparent with the passage of time. Those castrated prior to adulthood tended to look younger longer. As the years went by, however, these eunuchs tended to stand out when the lack of testosterone brought about changes to their faces. The cases of eunuch runaways contain many examples of eunuchs who spent years on the outside but then returned only when they thought physical changes associated with aging would make their castrated state obvious.<sup>39</sup>

Archival evidence demonstrates that plenty of men became eunuchs in later life, and that some even became eunuchs when they were already grandfathers.<sup>40</sup> There was, however, a marked preference both for young eunuchs, and for eunuchs who had not reproduced before castration. Eunuchs who had biological families were at a distinct disadvantage in their careers, and were generally confined to more menial jobs at the outer reaches of the palace world. Among the biographies of successful eunuchs that appear in the Enji Zhuang cemetery, none that I have found describe a eunuch castrated in adulthood. Childless eunuchs had the advantage of no family ties to create divided loyalty. Another factor is suggested in a remark by Hešen, the corrupt Qianlong-era official who was chief minister of the Imperial Household Department. He said that those castrated before full puberty were also easier to control, and put the cutoff at sixteen *sui* (roughly age seventeen).<sup>41</sup>

There also seems to have been an aesthetic preference for young eunuchs. This is mentioned in a well-known and often-cited article by a Westerner in China, George Stent, who noted the physical attractiveness of young eunuchs, in dramatic contrast with older ones. He also wrote that boy eunuchs were considered completely pure, and were especially prized by female members of the household for duties that were “impossible to describe.”<sup>42</sup> This was likely a reference to the boy eunuchs dubbed “earrings,” who were used by the female members of the imperial household for sexual gratification.<sup>43</sup> Since these boys were considered pure, such actions were not labeled lascivious. Certainly the most direct evidence for the preference for young eunuchs is the fact that eunuchs would often admit, under

interrogation, that they had lied about their ages, claiming to be teenagers when they were well into their twenties.

Regardless of age at castration, it is clear from the archival record that aging was the eunuch's worst enemy. As the images in figures 1 through 4 reveal, although young eunuchs usually looked no different from other men, with the passage of time differences became apparent. Age also brought the onset of physical ailments, chief among them being osteoporosis, which manifested itself in the form of leg pain.<sup>44</sup> On lists of disabled eunuchs, leg problems indeed seem to be the only widespread ailment.<sup>45</sup> Less quick on their feet, old eunuchs grew undesirable to those they served in the palace, and their careers could suffer downward trends. Just as young eunuchs were considered appealing, so too were old eunuchs viewed with disdain, particularly as the eighteenth century progressed. Qianlong began a policy of moving older eunuchs from the palace and into the princely households, while forcing the princes to supply the palace with young eunuchs. Disdain for aged eunuchs is also evident from the often-reported fact that their voices tended to grow squeaky, making them unpleasant to listen to. As will be discussed in chapter 9, antipathy toward aged eunuchs put career pressure on young eunuchs, who needed to establish themselves financially, or as indispensable, as early as possible in their careers—often during their twenties. George Stent likewise noted the popular dislike for aged eunuchs, writing about the repulsiveness of their voice and appearance.<sup>46</sup>

Clues as to whether there was a biological impact on the eunuch's personality are particularly elusive. Given the association of testosterone with aggression, it might be tempting to see eunuchs as more docile than other people, along the lines Hešen suggested. In this book, for example, we occasionally meet eunuchs whose approach to the world appears particularly nonaggressive. Was this because their lack of testosterone made them more easygoing and even docile? This view might fit with the work of writers we meet in chapter 1, who wrote that castration made eunuchs yin in nature. The problem with this analysis, however, is that a yin nature was used to explain every aspect (and foible) of eunuch personality. Submissiveness, aggression, femininity, bullying: whatever a eunuch did was explained by what castration had done to his personality. It explained everything, and therefore nothing.

Young eunuchs may not generally have been easily distinguishable from the general populace. Important for this story, however, is the fact that most people seemed to think they would know a eunuch when they saw or heard one. In often-contradictory terms, they described the features that betrayed a eunuch. What it meant to be a eunuch, however, was often in the eye of the beholder. Members of the police force charged with finding runaway eunuchs knew that the way to locate the missing man was by chasing down his connections, not by physical appearances. Furthermore, when eunuchs ran to the south, it was their northern accents rather than their physical appearance that gave them away.<sup>47</sup> Biology played a role in a eunuch's identity, but it did not determine his destiny.