

## THE EUROPEANS DISCOVERY OF XINA

### POMPEU FABRA UNIVERSITY BARCELONA

#### THE CHINA THAT EUROPEANS DISCOVERED: THE MING DYNASTY

##### WOMEN IN PALACES

One thing that Hongwu could never control was his own family. He had 26 sons and 16 daughters. Trying to avoid fights among them, he decided that none of them, except the heir apparent, was to live in the capital. Once they were fifteen years old, they were sent to live a princely and luxurious life in the provinces, where their political power was nil. They all lived in palaces with a great number of eunuchs attending them: all the Europeans arriving in China in the 16th century will mention these princes and their palaces.

But this luxurious provincial life brought with it problems. As their numbers rocketed, the imperial family became a burden for the state. They grew from 58 members in 1368 to 80,000 by 1604. There were too many princes and too many eunuchs, and all of them utterly useless: the Chinese state often has problems with its princelings.

One tricky question is why were there so many women in these palaces? If we have a look at the Ming version of the *Qinming Shanghe tu*, we'll see no women strolling around the streets and just a few number of them looking out the windows.

But when we approach the palaces and its leisure quarters, women are the chief characters.

Dozens of women lived in the rich merchant's houses, and in the provincial palaces they could be counted in hundreds, and in thousands or even tens of thousands in the imperial ones.

Marco Polo had already noticed that and had provided a sexy interpretation of their soaring numbers.

He describes in striking detail, and with a voyeur's delight, the process of annual selection of hundreds of beautiful virgins, and the way in which every night the young beauties were delivered, in packs of six, to the imperial bed.

But the limited numbers of imperial sons conceived by these princes and emperors runs counter this image of an inexhaustible imperial sexuality.

The fact is that the overwhelming majority of these ladies lived their palace days untouched: they were there to provide a touch of refinement and luxury to the alpha male's quarters.

A 16th century Chinese scroll, painted by Qiu Ying, captured the life inside these provincial palaces.

As can be seen in the fragment at the bottom, all these palaces had their own surrounding, that isolated them from the city's busy streets.

Inside the palace, we enter directly in the harem quarters.

At the right, a couple of women gaze at the outside world, while a small child eagerly climbs the fence.

Children were used as marriage counterparts and spend all their infancy inside these walls.

Another couple of women peer out from the window at two beautiful peacocks: life in these harems was both dangerous and extremely boring.

At the centre of the well tended courtyard, another couple of women admire a fanciful rock, and a window behind them opens to a pile of books: women who had interests could attain a high level of literacy, because good libraries were quite usual in those palaces.

At the far left of this segment a couple of women are reading a book together.

At the center, a large group of women are rehearsing with a great variety of instruments: their first commitment to the palace life was not sex but entertainment.

Groups of women are playing at different games, either in the courtyard or inside the pavilion.

In the upper segment a large group of women gather around a painter who is working on the portrait of the principal wife, under the vigilant and suspicious look of two eunuchs.

At the end of the scroll, another couple of eunuchs check out the walls that surround the compound. As the number of palace women increased, so did the number of those entrusted with their care.

The act of castration was as dangerous as it was painful, but for those who recovered, being one of the eunuchs was a position with a future.

Their initial function was to take care of the women of the harem, but they could also serve as imperial agents outside the palace walls.

Although Hongwu issued a series of rules limiting the number and functions of the eunuchs, these limits and restrictions soon vanished, and the eunuchs infiltrated all the institutions, and often set up their own parallel institutions that duplicated the official ones.

Eunuchs came to dominate the late Ming court, when they are estimated to have numbered 80.000, and their power grew with their numbers.

Their main task was to provide the courts with luxury, beauty and safety, but eunuchs were also a threat to the scholars-officials' role of handling the imperial government.

In time, some of them became heavily involved in the palatial intrigues, often siding with the Buddhist establishment and against the scholars in charge of civil affairs.

Scholars payed them back for posterity giving a black profile of them, but it's worth remembering that only a few of the million eunuchs estimated for the whole Ming dynasty rose to power and influence.

And that among this minority many were of real value as generals, diplomats and administrators.

The act of castration was as dangerous as it was painful, but for those who recovered, being one of the eunuchs was a position with a future. Their initial function was to take care of the women of the harem, but they could also serve as imperial agents outside the palace walls. Although Hongwu issued a series of rules limiting the number and functions of the eunuchs, these limits and restrictions soon vanished, and the eunuchs infiltrated all the institutions, and often set up their own parallel institutions that duplicated the official ones.

Eunuchs came to dominate the late Ming court, when they are estimated to have numbered 80.000, and their power grew with their numbers. Their main task was to provide the courts with luxury, beauty and safety, eunuchs were also a threat to the scholars-officials' role of handling the imperial government. In time, some of them became heavily involved in the palatial intrigues, often siding with the Buddhist establishment and against the scholars in charge of civil affairs. Scholars payed them back for posterity giving a black profile of them, but it's worth remembering that only a few of the million eunuchs estimated for the whole Ming dynasty rose to power and influence. And that among this minority many were of real value as generals, diplomats and administrators.