Bodily Changes: Castration as Cultural and Social Practice in the Space of the Forbidden City

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Abstract
This article examines the Chinese imperial body as “simultaneously part of nature and part of culture” and considers the interactions between the cultural body and physical body in sociological terms. The examination elaborates on the physical body as the manifestation of the demands of society mediated by cultural meanings. Bodily changes, such as castration, which Peng Liu argue is a trade between the physical body and cultural body in meeting the demands of Imperial Chinese society, affect the cultural embodiment of the body. This article examines the bodily actions of head eunuchs and how they interact with the emperor in the space of the Forbidden City during Imperial China. Eunuchs have undertaken an invasive physical operation to not only survive but thrive in imperial society. This reflects the constraints, struggles, and disciplining of the physically castrated and culturally embodied being.

Keywords
bodily modification, bodily movement, China, cultural analysis, fictocriticism

Introduction
Human bodies are equipped with cultural and social capabilities that allow them to survive without further biological change (Elias, 1991, as cited in Shilling, 1993, p. 152). Despite the possibility of further biological change from a bioscience perspective (which is not the focus of this article), some biological/physical innovations have always existed in human societies. Body studies has been developed extensively since the 1980s with a focus on body and embodiment, and it has spread into diverse disciplines in both humanities and science. Correlated current issues, such as bodily changes, which “disrupt the way the body ‘normally’ functions as a silent backdrop for intentional actions” (Ravn, 2017, p. 58), have been discussed in cases like transplantations (Shildrick, 2008), cosmetic surgery (Featherstone, 2010), and amputations (Sobchack, 2010). The flourishing of body studies “displace[s] the view that a body can be studied in isolation, abstracted from its very real conditions of existence and living” (Blackman, 2012, p. 2). As a potential contribution to the complexity and richness of the studies regarding bodily changes, I am interested in investigating a particular type of body and its actions as contextualized in Imperial China, namely, the eunuch, and I will consider how castration became a means to survive and even thrive in Chinese society, especially in the imperial court.

Following current understandings about the body and cultural embodiment in contemporary body studies, this article is not premised on dualistic thought regarding body/culture, nor does it focus on discussing the physical versus cultural body. By presenting the case of a Chinese imperial body that has undergone bodily modification for social security, this article is situated as part of a broader theoretical debate in which the idea of comparing the physical and cultural body can reinforce the situational complexities/positionalities and the notion of body as an ever-changing entity. I mainly focus on bodily modification in Imperial China with reference to scholars such as Shilling (1993, 2008) and Turner (1996). I also acknowledge works by Synnott (1993), Featherstone et al. (1991), Strathern (1996), Csordas (1994), and many others, as the body has been examined in a multitude of ways in sociological thinking and research. However, some sociological works mainly treat the body as an abstract object for theoretical investigation. My research adopts a different approach instead and focuses on the situational relationship between the body and heritage space (Liu, 2014, 2018, 2020; Liu & Lan, 2020). The research in this article is realized by using the rather unconventional writing of fictocriticism in

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Castration has appeared in places as diverse as Ancient Egypt, Persia, Algeria, and Feudal Europe, and it is therefore no stranger to human history. Studies on eunuchs in the historical context is a large field of scholarship, including Tougher’s latest monograph on Roman eunuchs (Tougher, 2020) and his investigations on emotion and eunuchs in relation to gender issues in the Byzantine Empire (Tougher, 2015, 2017, 2019), Ayalon’s (1999) analysis of power relations involving eunuchs in the Islamic harem, and Marmon’s (1995) take on eunuchs mediating the moral and physical space in premodern Islamic society. In China, eunuchs first appeared during the Shang dynasty around 1600 B.C. and this phenomenon ended during the Qing dynasty in 1921 (the last eunuch died in 1996). In this particular context, the eunuchs were castrated males who serviced emperors and the royal family in Imperial China; their genitals were completely removed to prevent adulterous conduct. While Chiang (2012, 2017, 2018) has published extensively on castration in the Chinese context in terms of cultural studies and queer studies, this article focuses on the sensations of this particular imperial body manifested through the interactions with its counterpart, namely, the emperor’s body. Deliberately undertaking castration goes against Confucianism; however, it might provide a short path for “marking social status and seeking success” (Holiday & Elving-Hwang, 2012, p. 59) in the imperial society. Scholars who study the general history of Chinese imperial society have also touched on the issue of eunuchs, such as McMahon (2013, 2014, 2020), Dale (2019), and Kutchef (2018). Such historical studies emphasize factual evidence. By contrast, the fictocritical investigation in this article into the eunuch and his bodily actions in the Forbidden City, which is an imaginative account that is nonetheless based on historical facts, reflects the constraints, struggles, and disciplining of the physically castrated and possibly culturally disorientated being.

As humanity’s “first instrument and technical object” (Mauss, 2005, p. 75), our physical body has potential for change. Clark (1998) points out that the physical body is “the product of biological evolution and as such often fail[s] to function in the ways we . . . [as culturally embodied beings living in a society] might expect” (p. 259). The phenomenon of manipulating the physical body to fulfill one’s social and political purpose existed in Chinese imperial society, as encapsulated in the figure of the eunuch. In a parallel discussion, Irish playwright Brendan Behan comments on the eunuch in a harem with implication on sexual ability: “they know how it’s done, they’ve seen it done everyday, but they are unable to do it themselves” (as cited in Brown, 1995, p. 681). The sexual incapability and the changes in the physical appearance of the eunuch are indeed evident, yet his political and cultural position has been overlooked by scholars. Castration not only resulted in the body’s sexual inability but also affected its social acceptance and cultural embodiment in this hierarchical society—particularly the head eunuchs. They knew how the imperial system worked; they had seen the emperor operating the system every day but were unable to do it themselves.

Writing Method

This article uses fictocriticism to describe fictive scenarios where Chinese court eunuchs interact with their physical and cultural environment as embodied beings in ways that are contrasted with the corporeal practices of the emperor. Fictocriticism, which is practiced extensively by Taussig, employs elements of fiction to sharpen the sensory, somatic aspects of social experiences. In this article, the fictive scenes take place in the Forbidden City during the Ming and Qing dynasties. To begin with, I acknowledge that castration is not reversible and the loss is permanent. I am particularly interested in investigating how the body of the head eunuch positions itself in perceiving the world at a particular historical moment after a lifelong and tough journey in political struggle. These moments reflect the cultural and political sensitivities—or “sensory imagination” (Ingold, 2011, p. 316)—of the incomplete body in the social context or, in Chiang’s (2012) words, the demasculinized “third sex” (p. 23). To do so, the article focuses on the interaction between the head eunuch and the body of emperor during selected historical moments. The investigation is carried out by means of fictocriticism which delineates a sense of being with the body in terms of its physical entity and cultural embodiment that reflects the castrated body as “the interlocking of biological and social factors” (Elias, 1991, as cited in Shilling, 1993, p. 152). Restoring body gestures and actions through the use of fictocriticism is constitutive of “an analytics” (Foucault, 1981, p. 82)—or in Deacon’s (2002) words: “instead of attempting to say what power is, we must attempt to show how it operates in concrete” (p. 1). Specifically, I aim to contextualize this understanding in terms of the interaction between the two types of bodies—“by what means is it exercised” and “[w]hat happens when individuals exert . . . power over others?” (Foucault, 1982, p. 217). The fictive writing in interrogating bodily actions is aimed at restoring a sense of aliveness through detailing the interactions of the bodies engaging with each other, reflecting the body as “simultaneously part of nature and part of culture” (Turner, 1996, p. 197), and at the same time inscribing the space with cultural meanings. This style of writing allows the subtleties of the interaction to be scrutinized to examine the social and cultural (in)capacity of the body of the incomplete.
Unlike ethnographers who conduct anthropological fieldwork to allow them to “access other people’s ways of perceiving by joining with them in the same currents of practical activity” (Ingold, 2011, p. 314), writing fictocriticism as thought experiments is my way to “join” the ways of those imperial bodies perceiving the world, as neither the body of the eunuch nor its socially contextualized practical activities of the day can be authentically re-exercised in contemporary time. Moreover, as philosopher and historian David Hume (1754–1761) points out, “the task of the historian, as distinct from the chronicler” (p. 1), is to “trace the history of the human mind” (as cited in Stromberg, 1975, p. 1). This article tries to understand and apply this thinking, to better know how the eunuchs thought or perceived the world in former times through examining how they act. Every concrete action by the body of the eunuch is driven by its thoughts and logic that reflect its cultural and social embodiment which this research tries to unveil. This article is an attempt to “talk about the body, talk from the body, [and] talk of the body” (Farnell, 1994, p. 935) in one narrative text.

Setting Up the Imperial Sociocultural Scene

The Sociological Body of the Eunuch

According to Shilling, sociological studies on the body have two main theoretical approaches since the 1980s. Drawing on Foucault, some approaches “identify the governmental management of the body as setting key parameters to the overarching external environment in which social action occurs” (Shilling, 2008, p. 2), while other approaches “identify the body as central to the internal environment of social action . . . [with a focus on the] ‘body’s own experience of its embodiment’ in various social contexts . . .” (p. 2), drawing on resources from phenomenology by philosophers such as Merleau-Ponty. As the body is reconciled from a dualistic point of view, seen either a biological phenomenon in naturalistic terms or an infinitely malleable form in social constructionist terms, theorists identify the body as “simultaneously part of nature and part of culture” (Turner, 1996, p. 197), “simultaneously a social and biological entity which is in a constant state of becoming” (Shilling, 1993, p. 27). The interrelationship between physical body and cultural body has been studied by theorists to reflect our physical body as a historically inherited and culturally embodied being (Douglas, 2005; Mauss, 2005; Shilling, 1993; Turner, 1996) in which the body’s cultural embodiment is “a highly complex and indeterminate state” (Shildrick, 2010, p. 13).

Castration goes against Confucianism, which, as China’s national ideology, privileges the body as that which is given by parents, so much so that hair on the head was not even supposed to be cut. People who were brought up and educated under the ideology undertook castration in exchange for a social opportunity—working in the Forbidden City. The relationship and interaction between the cultural body and physical body in the case of the eunuch is complex. According to Douglas (2005), “the social body constrains the way the physical body is perceived” (p. 78). That is to say, the excruciating pain of removing the genitals as well as the lifelong torment of looking after the physical body becomes unbearable insofar that the cultural body mediates the trauma. “The physical experience of the body, always modified by the social categories through which it is known, sustains a particular view of society” (Douglas, 2005, p. 78). These two bodies, one reinforcing the other, determine the cultural/political journey of the eunuch in the Forbidden City. Regardless of the slim chances of surviving from the physical operation as well as the unpredictable political career ahead, the eunuch occupies a unique position in Chinese imperial hierarchy. It reflects the body as the instrument or technical object that can be modified, or compromised, in meeting the demands of the social and political desires of the day.

The Space of the Forbidden City

The Forbidden City is an inhabited place insofar as “it is furnished with objects” (Ingold, 2007, p. 19). The space is cluttered with furniture, corridors, buildings, gardens, and so forth, which makes possible the “everyday activities . . . carried on there” (Ingold, 2010, p. 124). At the same time, however, the culturally laden space of the Forbidden City “cannot be understood without attention to active persons moving” (Farnell, 2000, p. 399). In other words, “an exploration of how space is produced necessarily also requests an analytical awareness of how potentialities of the body and the spatiality of movement unfold as space is taking shape” (Ravn, 2017, p. 58). Human actions/reactions realized within makes the space “simultaneously physical, conceptual, moral, and ethical” (D. Williams, 1995, p. 52). Body gestures and actions formed within the space as everyday activities provide a platform to examine the body’s physical entity and cultural embodiment. The investigation of the space of the Forbidden City as affective and ever-changing in relation to the body within has been considered elsewhere and will not be repeated here (Liu, 2018, 2020; Liu & Lan, 2021). The Forbidden City in imperial times functioned as a part of the social system. The layout of the Forbidden City, as a physical installation, activated and protected the imperial code of ethics. Its layout is that of an ordinary quadrangle courtyard albeit one built on a massive and luxurious scale. The Forbidden City was constructed in the center of Beijing, reflecting the idea to “build the palace in the centre of the capital” (Lv Shi Chun Qiu, 241 B.C., as cited in Zhou, 2006, p. 19) as “being in the centre”—or “centring,” according to Zito (1994, p. 105)—which represents the highest regard in terms of Li, a Confucian ethical concept that is explained in the next section. Every building in the Forbidden City is
differentiated by mass, scale, dimension, format, color, and decoration according to the use of the buildings. For instance, the buildings for emperors are always massive, meticulous, highly decorated, and facing south, while the other buildings are small, ordinary, flat, and variable in size according to their function. As prescribed by Li, the Forbidden City is composed of tens of thousands of semi-open or enclosed spaces formed between buildings in variable scales which require the bodies wandering in the space to interact appropriately according to their social positions.

Confucianism

According to Berthrong (2011, p. 132), Confucianism was developed from the Chinese ancient philosopher Confucius as an ethical and philosophical system which flourished since the Han dynasty (202 B.C.–220 A.D.). Legalism was popular during the War (Warring) States period in China, but after its official abandonment during the Han dynasty, Confucianism was highly praised by the ruling class and became the official and national ideology. Apart from Buddhism and Taoism, which came into people’s spiritual life for a period of time after the Han dynasty declined, such as during the Sui and Tang dynasties, almost every Chinese emperor used Confucianism as their ruling tools/doctrines to systemize social orders, behaviors, and values in combination with harsh punishment. Qin (2014) pointed out the reality of Imperial China as Confucian on the outside, but Legalist within. This combined ruling strategy has been favored by the ruling class ever since. In other words, a part of Confucian values was purposely used to sugarcoat the harsh Legalist reality that underlay the imperial system. In comparison with Legalism’s focus on the dark side of humanity, which has been criticized by contemporary scholars for not being sustainable and responsible for its own abandonment by the ruling class after the Han reunification of China, Confucian concepts construct a stable/fixed hierarchy by positively defining and detailing everyone’s role in the society.

The essence of Confucianism concerns this world and the family, rather than God or the afterlife, which indicates “human beings are teachable, improvable and perfectible through personal and communal endeavor especially self-cultivation and self-creation” (Epps, 2012, p. 62). One of the Confucian ethical concepts is Li, which is called “Confucian humanism” (Fingarette, 1972, p. 2) by Western modern philosophers. “People cannot live without ‘Li’; things cannot be done without ‘Li’; country cannot be governed without ‘Li’” (Xun Zi: Xiu Shen, Date N/A, as cited in Zhao, 2006, p. 97).

It is a system of norms and propriety that determines how a person should properly act in everyday life—It privileges “abstract quality as a rational standard of value for individuals” (Zito, 1994, p. 104). Li is seen as the social rules “people use to assess the correctness of their actions” (Wittgenstein, 1953, as cited in Mühleusler & Harré, 1990, p. 7). This particular concept was adopted by the ruling class to consolidate the imperial social hierarchy, putting people into fixed social characters, such as the idea that the “son should not be disobedient to the father regardless, and common people should not be disobedient to emperor regardless” (Huang, 2011, p. 84). Acknowledging that the strong and centralized power resulted in “regimes of control” (Turner, 1996, pp. 161–162) which were needed in Imperial China due to its massive territory and the constant growth in population, these Confucian values politicized the people not only for the sake of ensuring “social control and ideological domination but were essential to the [royal family/stage’s own self identity]” (Anagnost, 1994, p. 131). In this vast society, Li provided reference for everyone in every situation to consult on a daily basis to establish common value in the society which continued for generations.

However, by emphasizing Li in both moral rituals and architectural manifestations, the people were “stitched into [their] subject positions” (Anagnost, 1994, p. 131) and their lives were structured through the regulation and the rituals of Li, which resulted in nationwide depersonalization and dependency. Anagnost also points out that the framing of the Chinese body in the imperial period in terms of “people as one . . . conceals the internal fragmentation and diversity not only of ‘the people,’ but also within the party organization [the royal family] itself” (p. 131). This ideological framing further results in diminished individual value and creativities as well as self-confidence and thoughts, and heavy dependence on the positions in charge—that is to say, the head of the family at all levels, namely, Father, Local Official, Emperor—and an inanimate society is formed.

Bodily Movement and Gestures as Cultural/Social Expression

According to Mauss (1979), differences in body gestures and actions are the result of social education. A part of the education on using “appropriate language” in terms of Li comprised programming the body (brain) through oral/abstract language (oral indoctrination), which is communicative and efficient, but, on the contrary, may cause misunderstandings between individuals. As Zito (1994) points out, the “monarchy [i.e., the emperor class] drew its power from its categories significant in everyday life, embodying such morally charged imperatives as filiality through use of a shared repertoire of gesture, architecture and language” (p. 105). Therefore, to ensure the concept of Li is firmly and deeply embodied in every body, the ritual of gesture, introduced as a consolidation of the oral indoctrination, came into daily life to amplify the effect of the ideology through active and concrete bodily language, which serves as a direct form of visualized interaction.
Body gestures, actions, and reactions must be read in a series as a bodily movement, a contextualized social scenario that occupies a period of time and space. According to Farnell (1994), the way in which social theorists like Armstrong, Hudson, and Turner refer to the body as “a static object” is problematic. When the body is regarded as static, or when only a particular action has been singled out for attention, this weakens the sense of being with the body and elides the interaction of the body with other bodies and the space, which in turn discourages considerations of the interrelationship between the physical body and the cultural body. Detailed actions in series—or, in Farnell’s (1994) terms, “using physical actions in the agentive production of meaning” (p. 931)—are vital to understanding the body.

Actions and reactions, including facial expressions, strictly restricted the interaction between bodies in the Forbidden City, thus constructing an intensely codified society. However, by simply concealing their inner thoughts and following Li regardless, like a robot, did not always guarantee subjects a stable life or career—and it was far from depicting the whole picture of life in the Forbidden City. As Shilling (1993) claims,

Actions at any time could decide a person’s place in society and success in this status competition demanded a finely honed set of impression management skills. People had to “meticulously weigh the gestures and expressions of everyone else,” carefully fathoming “the intention and meaning of each of their utterances.” (p. 157)

The only way to survive living in that space—be it as an official coping with promotion or demotion, or as a concubine favored by the emperor—was to obtain a strong sense of “impression management skills,” high emotional intelligence, and, perhaps most of all, a mighty and healthy heart. Appropriate actions were required from everyone, including the emperors whose bodies were under the affect of Li as well.

Being With the Body in Writing Fiction

It is clear and commonly known that the Forbidden City’s role as the nation’s political and operational headquarters had been symbolically constructed, centered on the single male, the emperor, while all the male servants who lived in the palace were castrated. The exploration of the cultural and physical meanings of the sharp contrast between these two kinds of bodies is carried out in fictive writing.

The space is perceived differently by the bodies of emperors and eunuchs with reference to their varying statuses as power being, cultural being, and physical being, whereby these “three elements [are] indissolubly mixed together” (Mauss, 1979, p. 102). Those bodies seemingly represent the top and bottom of the hierarchy: the emperor’s sacred body that represents connection and communications between the human world and the heaven, and the incomplete bodies of the eunuchs who serve only as labor in this special space. The body of emperors and the body of eunuchs demonstrate their own body techniques to accommodate the specificity of the social space in Imperial China. Body techniques, or in Mauss’s (1979) term “the habitus” (p. 101), are “forms of embodied pre-reflective understanding, knowledge or reason . . . [that] distinguish and differentiate social groups” (Crossley, 2005, pp. 7–8). It is a “learned and incorporated skill” (Ravn, 2017, p. 59), whereby the body first “act[s] to the skill qua thematized goal” and then acts “from” the skill (Leder, 1990, p. 32, emphasis in original) toward further goals. As S. J. Williams and Bendelow (1998, p. 49) note, every society has its own habits; body techniques required in one society are different in other societies. These two types of bodies, who lived in the space of the Forbidden City in imperial time under the dominance of Confucianism, elaborate a strong engagement with the space and a paradoxical relationship with each other. The space determined their social positions and their individualities were overlooked. Instead, their physical bodies were heavily regulated by the space and behaved accordingly, and their cultural bodies were reshaped into an appropriate and fixed state within the hierarchy. Everything and everyone played their roles strictly in accordance with Li, at least on the surface, except in special circumstances. During events such as making announcements to the nation, or special ceremonies, these bodies were momentarily free from their fixed social positions, and allowed to experience the space through a different perspective, physically as well as culturally.

Narrating the Body of the Emperor

The body of the emperor as a powerful being was explicit in the Tai He building especially when ceremonies were held. The Tai He building is one of the major buildings in the Forbidden City located on a central axis, measuring 35.05 meters in height, 64 meters in length, and 37.21 meters in width (Figure 1). Some of the important ceremonies and festivals were held at the square in front of this building while the emperor sat inside, looking out over the space he was hosting. A stage measuring 7 square meters and approximately 2 meters in height, with stairs down both sides and the front, was set up in the middle of the building. The emperor sat on a golden chair with carved dragon patterns placed in the middle of the stage with a partition (or screen) half enclosed from behind.

The emperor always chose to approach the center stage from the stairs on the left side where he would lead the body to the chair in the middle. As the body of emperor walked into the Tai He building from the back door, tens of thousands of people would normally be already waiting at the square. The body of the emperor walked in a particular rhythm, which he learnt from his father and cannot be simply described as being either slow or fast. It was a walking pace intended to
make the multitude hold their breath while waiting with their heads down. The longer they waited (albeit in moderation) in extreme solemn silence, the more fear they sensed in the air and the more anxious they felt. This rhythm was therefore not only constitutive of the engagement between the body of emperor and the space, but it was also a process whereby the rhythm of the bodily movement transformed the unfathomable power of the body of emperor into the air for everyone else to breathe in as fear. This deliberate pace was a purposeful bodily movement designed to stifle any questioning of the emperor’s absolute power—and even then, this is presuming that an individual would even dare to question this power in his or her mind.

While walking toward the chair through the building, the emperor’s body was always supported by a (eunuch) servant’s hands even though the physical condition of the emperor’s body was fine, with the power of the body appearing as if fully recharged from the walking. There was always a eunuch standing or walking next to the body of emperor to voice any messages after carefully observing the emperor’s bodily movement. As a result, the emperor could host the event by just assuming various bodily gestures while sitting. Every movement of the body, no matter how tiny, had its intentionality which cannot be misread. As a good gesture reader, an accomplished eunuch would be able to see not only the gesture of the physical body but also the message of the cultural body.

By extending one’s hands while sitting on a chair, an ordinary body can physically reach or control the objects within approximately a meter or more in diameter. However, the body sitting on the golden chair could simply wave its hand to demote any official in the hall, execute anyone in the square, and even change the layout of the city. This body, as befits its high social position, could outdo its physicality and make an impact beyond its physical entity. Given all the potentialities this body can actualize in terms of its power, it must interact with/in the space, and with other bodies in the space, in its own unique way.

The cultural body of the emperor is manifested in its display of power. This body was born in the world just like any other person. The life experience of this body, gained under the existing regulation of the Forbidden City, trained an ordinary body into the emperor and turned an average body into a bearer of absolute power. In this sense, the emperors were produced purposely in and by the Forbidden City as a stereotype in terms of its cultural requirement. In the process of producing a “qualified” emperor since earliest childhood, the body of the emperor needed to be always under the influence of Li, which was omnipresent in every aspect in the Forbidden City. The individuality of the body was ignored and restrained to be a “qualified” emperor. Moreover, the body of the emperor, by taking the role as the head in the feudal society, needed to behave firmly according to expectations. As Shilling (1993) notes,

To keep one’s place in the intense competition for importance at court, to avoid being exposed to scorn, contempt, loss of prestige . . . [o]ne must wear certain materials and certain shoes. One must move in certain ways characteristic of people belonging to court society. Even smiling is shaped by court custom. (p. 158)

The body became the bearer of absolute power endowed by the concept of Li, yet that same body was restrained by it at the same time.

Although the walk to the chair was only a few meters, and only a few bodily movements were needed while sitting on the chair, it would take a huge effort for the physical body of the emperor to complete these actions in terms of confronting and controlling the atmosphere. The mannered series of physical interactions helped the body to situate itself in the space, balancing its uncertain mind and calming its nerves, while walking onto the stage step by step. When the body was sitting down and facing the rest of the world, its cultural body succeeded its physical body and, at the same time, music came out to break the silence—the event started (Figure 2).

Narrating the Body of the Head Eunuch

Despite being in the same atmosphere, another type of body had a different experience and may have even perceived the scene in an opposite way. Working as servants, this type of body only existed in the imperial period and was known as the eunuch. The body of the eunuch, which was a male with an incomplete physical body, was interrogating the space as well. They were the lowest ranked people in society, as most of them were from extremely poor families, and they were always illiterate upon arriving at the Forbidden City. One of
the main sources for conscripting eunuchs was from desperate parents who were struggling to make a living. They sold their children at a very low price to the senior eunuchs who regularly came out from the Forbidden City to recruit new servants for the royal family. Senior eunuchs castrated the children, renamed them, and kept them aside as apprentices before they were qualified to serve the royal family in the Forbidden City. During the years of apprenticeship, they learnt and memorized all the rules and regulations by following senior eunuchs, either through observation, or punishments if they made mistakes.

An alternative source of eunuchs, due to the harsh living conditions in some cases, were adult males, who castrated themselves, and then handed themselves in to officials to seek positions in the Forbidden City as eunuchs, as a means for survival. The number of self-castrated adults seeking jobs in the Forbidden City far exceeded demand in some years, such as 1475 A.D. during the Ming dynasty. In that year, they caused some disturbances as they gathered around the Forbidden City after being rejected from jobs. These bodies were punished by the imperial government and were described, based on their “self-castration” behavior, as “rebelling against deities and violating social values, self-extinction” (Ming Xian Zong Shi Lu, Date N/A, as cited in Wen, 2010, p. 3). In response, the imperial government of the day issued a ban on adult self-castration, but this did not work. Given that the emperors had wives and concubines living in the Forbidden City, plus a vast number of female servants, every male servant who was more capable in physical work than female servants needed to be castrated before serving in the Forbidden City to prevent adulterous conduct. The number of eunuch servants in the Forbidden City reached its peak of 3,300 in 1757 during the Qing dynasty. This type of body experienced the space of the Forbidden City in terms of cultural oppression as a second-class servant and physical abuse as a castrated man (Figures 3–5).

Every year, when festivals or ceremonies were held at the square of Tai He building, the head eunuch, as the representative of this type of body in the Forbidden City, became illustrative of its singularities as a physical being, cultural being, and power being. In regard to physical being, this body is allowed to stand on the same stage with the emperor, approximately 2 meters to the left-hand side. His head looks downward slightly a few meters ahead while his back hunched a bit with both arms crossing the chest. This
incomplete body was previously regarded as a “walking stick” to support the emperor walking through the building all the way to the chair, and it is the one a few steps in front who voices the emperor’s messages when required during the event. For the rest of the time, this incomplete body had to be part of the background, minimizing the sense of its own existence to others. The incomplete body stood slightly behind the emperor. During the events, which normally started early in the morning and lasted the whole day, the incomplete physical body would have no rest but had to serve hearty meals to the emperor all day continually while itself not being allowed to drink any water, not to mention eating any food. Just standing for a whole day was tiring enough; however, the body of the eunuch had to pose in specific positions to observe the emperor without using any obvious bodily movement to attract unnecessary attention. Appropriately voicing the emperor’s intention or message to the crowd might earn him a present; on the contrary, misreading the intention would result in harsh punishment at the end of the day, which would make his physical body suffer even more. The body of the eunuch needed to maintain a state of high alertness every minute all day long to deal with any circumstance, which quickly exhausted the physical body.

The body of the eunuch, in terms of cultural being, is rather complex. The body improved its living condition dramatically—from worrying about the bare necessities of life in a poor village, to the moment of dressing itself expensively and standing on the stage with the emperor to look out on the crowd. The body had transformed itself to experience the best possible things in this culture. Although the body presented itself next to the emperor, slightly behind, to see what the emperor sees, to feel what the emperor feels, to experience what the emperor experiences, nonetheless this body remained at the bottom of the social hierarchy. This incomplete body did not see, feel, or experience the space like the emperor, as it was not the body of the emperor. However, the incomplete body ironically had the privilege to stand on the stage with the emperor to look out on the space, seeing all chief officials queuing in front of the building and tens of thousands of honor guards performing at the square. The images of the memory of a poor childhood reappearing in his head to contrast with the magnificent visual impact created by the scene in front of him must have caused him to feel overwhelmed. Moving from the bottom to the top, he must have surely acquired a better understanding about being at different places in the hierarchy.

One of the details revealed in studies on Chinese history may provide a glimpse into the cultural being of eunuchs, particularly in the case of rich senior eunuchs: They would spend massive amounts of money to buy back the castrated penis to make them feel better in terms of Li, which shows that the cultural body of the eunuch was strongly constrained by this ideology. After the castration, the penises were kept in mixing bags with lime/kalk (an ancient way of preservation) by an official or business organization. To prevent theft, all the penises were separately kept in little bags and hung on the wall without any information except a number, which the eunuchs had no way of identifying, and so they had no choice but to pay. Some eunuchs would buy back their penises after becoming rich, and they were buried together after they died (the penis was stitched back to the body). The body has to be kept as a whole following the Confucian ideology. Most eunuchs, however, who could not afford to buy back their penises, had to be buried with a bronze penis.

Given the richness of bodily experiences in physical and cultural terms, the power being of the body of eunuch is even more intriguing. Eunuchs, including even the head eunuch, did not have any official title and were banned from involvement in any official decisions. Offenders would be tortured to death. It was always a sensitive issue in imperial times as there were precedents of the downfall of dynasties associated with the eunuchs’ power. On the contrary, after serving the emperor closely for decades and becoming “trusted, loyal and devoted,” the head eunuch could somehow always find a way to influence the emperor through the interaction between physical bodies and thoughts exchanged between cultural bodies.

For the head eunuch, the emperor might not just be an immortal symbol with absolute power but rather a human being, an ordinary body that did what everyone else did, such as sleep, walk, and possess emotions and feelings. After serving for a long time, the head eunuch came to know the emperor best and became “trustworthy.” The role of the head eunuch was, in part, to be a messenger who would pass messages from the emperor down to the officials. This incomplete body therefore occupied a special position in the hierarchy, working as mediator between the emperor and the
rest of the world. Moreover, on certain occasions, such as when stepping forward to voice the announcement from the emperor during events, this incomplete body became an even more sophisticated and powerful being than the emperor. In these moments, regardless of the content of the announcement, the incomplete body understood that it was his own high-pitched voice that literally and loudly went into every official’s ear, and made a biological and psychological impact on tens of thousands of bodies at the square. In these moments, it was the incomplete body, the voice of the body that hijacked the cultural body of the emperor and became the symbol of absolute power for everyone to worship.

After these “glorious” moments, the event was over, and the incomplete body ended up in its cold, bleak, one-room house, with no one around, hearing nothing but its own voice echoing in its head, recalling the events over and over again, feeling nothing but its ever-unforgettable pain agonizing over its castrated physical body. Kristeva’s (1982) words in describing “abjection” aptly encapsulate the experiences of the castrated body: “Throughout [the] night without images but buffeted by black sounds; amidst a throng of forsaken bodies beset with no longing but to last against all odds and for nothing . . .” (p. 207; Figures 6 and 7).

Conclusion

This article uses the idea of the physical “versus” cultural body to restore and amplify the sense of situational complexities of being with the body of the head eunuch in the space of the Forbidden City, as realized in the fictive writing. Born and raised in a cultural context, our physical bodies can be trained, shaped, and reshaped to fit into society one way or the other. Through the fictive scenarios as thought experiments, these bodies are positioned as the typical product of Confucianism and the imperial code so much so that their thoughts and actions align with the regulation and expectation of the space. The possible experience of constraint, struggle, and disciplining of the body under the ideology reflects where the body stands in the hierarchy.

Despite the negative picture of the eunuch painted in the last part of the fictive scenario which serves its goal to create a sentiment of being with the body situated in the historical architectural space, the argument is attentive to the autonomy, delimited though, of the body of the eunuch who is equipped with high social skills that demonstrates an equally complex interaction between its cultural body and physical body in the space of the Forbidden City. The complexity of the interaction as well as the critical social acceptance toward the body might contribute to a negative image of this body. Consequently, the cultural body can be overwhelmed and prone to withdrawal, as “estrangement from the world is expected when one is already estranged from one’s body” (Lewis, 2000, p. 68). However, the eunuch, regardless of whether the castration was chosen deliberately or not, is engaged and embedded in the hierarchical system where they could still nonetheless develop particular social practices and self-contained sustainable sub-communities. For example, when the eunuchs became too old to work, they were evicted from the Forbidden City with a bit money to allow them to die and be buried somewhere else. Approximately 25 kilometers northwest of the Forbidden City is a place called Zhong Guan Cun (the eunuchs’ village), where the evicted older eunuchs would live gregarious lives helping one another. These elder eunuchs had no children or relatives.
who could bury them after death and visit their graves annually as dictated by Li, so they had to help each other, whereby the still-living would bury and visit the dead with the expectation that others would do the same for them. Others planned for living out their final years in an alternative place like the “bead house” in Buddhist or Daoist temples. They needed to choose one in advance, and make regular donations over the decades while working in the Forbidden City, to keep a bed for their final years living at the temple.

There is much complex critical discourse concerning bodily changes in this contemporary moment, and it is hoped that the body of the eunuch in history as examined in this article might provide an additional lens to see as well as demonstrate the significance of the interlocking of biological and social factors. It was the daily labor needs of the royal family that allowed the existence of the eunuchs. In other words, castration was constitutive of social demands upon the body that could only be met through bodily change, against its imperial ideology, which resulted in a trade between the physical body and the cultural body. The cultural body of the eunuch is capable of perceiving needs beyond biological surviving. The physical body of the eunuch, then, subsequently asserts its cultural body to trade on the interlocking of biological and social factors of human society. This body gains its own bodily awareness through the unique bodily experience in the space of the Forbidden City, as a historically inherited and culturalized being. This body can also become wealthy and influential to a degree, after years surviving in the space of the Forbidden City. A huge price is paid physically, culturally, and psychologically by the body of the eunuch to survive, whereby any gains acquired by the body in the space are considered payoff for being castrated.

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Notes

1. The national ideology of the day.
2. By avoiding generalizations about all eunuchs and emperors in the Ming and Qing dynasties as well as not examining particular eunuchs in history, the article instead considers eunuchs as a category of people in relation to the Chinese imperial court and uses head eunuchs as the highest ranked in the category as the case study.

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