

Castration fever: On trans, China, and psychoanalysis

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Abstract

This essay considers the evolution of the author's research over the last 15 years in which the treatment of castration as a historical problem holds promise for bridging disparate scholarly fields and paradigms. In particular, by tracing the shift in the author's intellectual focus from the science of sex change to the history of transcultural psychoanalysis, some insights are offered in regard to the intertwined politics of transness, Chineseness, and the unconscious. Though psychoanalysis may appear as a subject far removed from the eunuchs of ancient China, this essay highlights some of the methodological stakes that have saturated the historical study of both topics. These reflections can serve as a touchstone for thinking beyond disciplinary norms and conventions, especially in Chinese studies and the history of science.

KEYWORDS

castration, psychoanalysis, sexology, transcultural reasoning, transtopia

One of the most distinctive features of my work to date has been a focus on castration as a historical problem. For a scholar of China, castration presents itself as a sensible topic in light of the vital role that eunuchs—castrated male servants of emperors and their relatives—played in imperial China. It is true that the degree to which eunuchs exerted colossal control over the state vacillated over time. The Eastern Han (25–220), the Tang (618–907), and the Ming (1368–1644) are the most well-known dynasties in which eunuchs wielded an exceeding measure of political power, with each subsequent episode surpassing the previous (Tsai, 1996). Scholars have called these periods, respectively, the “first,” “second,” and “third Epoch of the Rise of Eunuchs.” One question emerging from my research haunts me to this day: Why are eunuchs always blamed for their destructive political power toward the end of a Han-centered Confucianist regime?

Moreover, despite the extinction of government-employed eunuchs, the obsession with Chinese castration continues to loom in academic and popular discussions today. In this essay, I take this *intercorporeal governance* between the past and the present seriously.¹ The connection between the Chinese polity, sexuality, and the power of their representations signals the enduring import of the question I posed above even though China has long outlived its dynastic past. Though it may seem irrelevant due to the disciplinary and methodological conventions of Sinology, psychoanalysis serves as an undervalued site for imagining new histories of China, gender, and medical science.

1 | IN THE BEGINNING: WHEN TRANS AND CHINA SEEMED NATURAL

When I was a graduate student, researching the history of eunuchs rarely raised an eyebrow among fellow Sinologists. After conveying my interest in the history of gender and sexuality, the topic of eunuchs was often brought up as a worthwhile direction. Yet I also remember vividly that my institutional affiliation—a U.S.-based university—provided me unanticipated leverage to draw non-China specialists to my work. At a conference that I organized in 2009, for example, an Asian American queer theorist expressed interest in my research because it resonated with the way racial castration has served as a powerful trope in understanding the (de)sexualization of Asian American men (Eng, 2001). Through castration, it seemed, both China and non-China experts were able to come to an understanding of power and the construction of cultural identities. Among other vectors of differentiation, psychoanalysis stood in between the two discourses. It had a substantial impact on queer Asian American critique, but no historian of China was interested in Freud or Lacan.

Even before I embarked on researching the history of Chinese castration, I was torn between two potential dissertation topics: the science of sex change and psychoanalysis. I was drawn to the first topic because of my own queer identity (and the cognate desire to know more about the history of queer experience); my interest in psychoanalysis can be traced to my undergraduate major in psychology (and the passion to learn more about the intellectual foundations of the human sciences). Neither topic had been examined by China historians in depth, so I assumed that I would be on my own regardless of what I decided to work on. I soon learned that it was nearly impossible for me to write about psychoanalysis in China from a history of science viewpoint, primarily due to the lack of sources (or so I thought).² The pioneering scholarship of Jingyuan Zhang (1992) demonstrated the literary incorporation of Freudian ideas among May Fourth writers. (This was later picked up by other scholars in comparative literature.) Some of the eugenicists whom I came to study, including Zhang Jingsheng (1888–1970) and Pan Guangdan (1899–1967), also translated Freud's writings. But it seemed obvious in the early stage of my research that none of these novelists and translators actually *practiced* analysis in the clinical context. I quickly convinced myself—too hastily, in retrospect—that I was not positioned to write a dissertation on Chinese psychoanalysis. So I gave up on the idea and wrote a dissertation that became the basis of *After Eunuchs: Science, Medicine, and the Transformation of Sex in Modern China* (Chiang, 2018).

As soon as I completed *After Eunuchs*, the topic of castration came back to haunt me. I had thought a great deal about eunuchs, their role in Chinese society, and especially the medical procedure that transformed their self-understanding and social status. I had also scrutinized much of the available primary sources on castration surgery in China. The afterlife of eunuchs' demise had yet to appear on my radar. In fact, the thesis of *After Eunuchs* precisely rests on the extinction of Chinese eunuchs in the 20th century. Not only did the last Qing emperor Puyi (1906–1967) terminate eunuch employment in the Forbidden City in 1923 (though he was still surrounded by some when he became the Kangde Emperor of Manchukuo, the puppet state of Japan, from 1934 to 1945), the last surviving Chinese eunuch Sun Yaoting (b. 1902) died in 1996. I interpreted the physical death of Chinese eunuchs to mean the ending of an era—how such bodily practices as castration and footbinding lost their cultural aura and prestige (Chiang, 2018; Ko, 2005).

It soon became clear, however, that the birth of an era is predicated on another's death. As I gave talks on *After Eunuchs* at different venues, keen audience members would come up to me and routinely asked about

contemporary representation. They pointed out, justifiably so, that in TV shows, films, and other new popular media, cultural producers *and* consumers remain fascinated by Chinese eunuchs. Far from being relics of the past, the bodies of Chinese eunuchs continue to command widespread interest. Given the extensive debates the topic of castration has stimulated in academic circles, it would be remiss of a historian to pass on the opportunity to comment on this wave of castration fever. Castration is often linked to martial arts prowess in films made by Hong Kong directors, as evident in Tsui Hark's *Swordsman 2* (1992) and *Flying Swords of Dragon Gate* (2011). Interestingly, resonating with the genealogy I traced from castration to transsexuality in *After Eunuchs*, many of these films channeled phallic elimination into the practice of gender transgression. Through the representation of gender liminal characters, artists and cultural critics, once again, came to terms with how power operates and the making of identities in China's past.

After reflecting on this subject matter further, mulling over the question of *why* its contemporary salience came to be featured foremost in Sinophone (Chinese-speaking) culture and immersing myself in some of these movies, I decided to write an essay on the cinematic "afterlife" of Chinese castration (Chiang, 2016).³ I argued that by distinguishing castrated subjects with extraordinary martial arts strength, filmic production enables a queer articulation of eunuchism in the Sinophone peripheries even as the practice of castration itself has long disappeared from the center of Han Chinese history and culture. The example of contemporary Sinophone castration became an important case study in my second book, *Transtopia in the Sinophone Pacific* (2021). I developed the vocabulary of *transtopia* to refer to different scales of gender transgression that are not always recognizable through the Western notion of transgender. Rethinking Chinese castration in this light enabled me to engage with a key text on which the racial castration discourse of Asian American studies hinges: *M. Butterfly* by David Henry Hwang (1989). The leap was much easier than I expected, made possible by the Cultural Revolution setting of the plot. However, in my analysis of the play and its film adaptation directed by David Cronenberg (1993), I still resisted a full-fledged psychoanalytic reading.

2 | CHINA'S PSYCHIC CASTRATION

It was not until I stumbled upon another historical variant of Chinese castration that brought me back to the topic of psychoanalysis. In the 1950s and 1960s, psychiatrists based in Asia encountered a growing number of patients of Chinese descent, mostly men, who expressed an overpowering belief that their sexual organs had retracted into their bodies and even disappeared altogether (Chiang, 2015). The anxiety of these patients was so astronomical that some considered their penis-shrinking fatal. (In traditional Chinese medicine, the male sexual organ is often understood as the seat of life force and vitality). This condition was loosely known as *koro* in the literature of Western medicine. In fact, European psychiatrists had reported on *koro* since the 1890s, mostly from colonial contexts (Crozier, 2011, p. 41). In 1932, the Dutch psychoanalyst Pieter van Wulfften-Palthe (1891–1976) witnessed a Chinese *koro* patient in Indonesia and famously stated that "We have here before us... a living example of Freud's castration complex" (Wulfften-Palthe, 1936, p. 535). Even though Wulfften-Palthe made this assertion against the backdrop of a colonial fascination with the psychology of the indigenous population in the Dutch East Indies, it was not until the 1950s and 1960s that native Asian psychiatrists popularized *koro* as a form of mental disorder.⁴ Their work marked psychiatry's transition from a colonial to a transcultural pretense.

A turn of events occurred in 1967 when a *koro* epidemic swept Singapore. On the day of November 3 alone, as many as 97 male *koro* patients rushed to the emergency unit of the Singapore General Hospital. Mental health experts from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore came to be embroiled in debates over the causes, symptomology, and treatment of *koro*. Based at the Department of Neurology and Psychiatry at the National Taiwan University Hospital in Taipei, Rin Hsien (1925–2016) focused on the psychosexual development of his patients to construe *koro* as a psychoanalytic diagnostic category. Gwee Ah Leng (1920–2006), who headed the *Koro* Study Team in

Singapore, argued instead that koro was “essentially a Chinese disease,” a condition resulting from prior exposure to Chinese culture (Chiang, 2015, p. 111). Gwee’s research team observed that predisposition to Chinese folklore ideas catalyzed the belief among their patients in having contracted koro.

Whereas Gwee interpreted koro patients as delusional in the sense that they had lost touch with reality, Pow-Meng Yap (1921–1971), Head of the Psychiatric Division in the Department of Medicine at Hong Kong University, claimed otherwise. To Yap, these patients’ perception of their bodily change fell within the normal range of the variation of penial physiology. Therefore, Yap proposed instead the notion of *culture-bound de-personalization syndrome* as the most adequate framework for understanding koro etiology. Unlike the Dutch colonial psychiatrist’s simplistic rendition of koro as a physical manifestation of Freudian castration anxiety, these East Asian experts reached into the repertoire of Chinese culture—including traditional medical concepts—to varying degrees to unpack the psychogenic mechanism with which koro patients understood and presented themselves. They rekindled by enriching the theory of the unconscious: koro did not so much solidify Freudian psychosexual theory than it did to confirm the need to understand how Chinese cultural systems shaped the mind and experience of its sufferers in a way not readily accessible to themselves.

As I began to do more research on the history of transcultural psychiatry and koro, something dawned on me. The difficulty with which to place this history within the larger remit of psychoanalytic history reminded me of the trouble I had in trying to convince Anglophone readers that my earlier research on Chinese sex change “fitted” the premise of transgender historiography. Many of the examples and case studies discussed in *After Eunuchs*—including eunuchs themselves—may seem “not trans enough” when viewed from the angle of how transgender is defined in the contemporary West. This alerted me to the ways in which the politics of transness dictates (and is determined by) the politics of historiography and, consequently, drove me to develop the concept of transtopia. Is it possible that the history of transcultural psychiatry in the Asia Pacific appears “not psychoanalytic enough” from the viewpoint of how the writing of psychoanalytic history is currently practiced in the contemporary West?⁵

3 | THE CONFUCIAN FREUD

Digging deeper into the literature, I found both reassuring and alarming messages. The reassuring impression I got from the scholarship that came out in the last decade or so is that we can no longer ignore the role that non-Western cultures have played in the origins and development of psychoanalysis. Many of Freud’s crucial concepts, including the “dark” frontiers of female sexuality, the unconscious, totem, primitive societies, and civilization, are rooted in the ideologies of European expansion.⁶ In the 1920s and 1930s, two psychoanalytic societies were established in Japan (Tokyo and Sendai) and one in India (Harding, 2009; Taketomo, 1990). Branches of academic psychology and Islamic theological–medical reasoning indebted to Freudian ideas were founded in the Arab world, especially in Egypt and Morocco (El Shakry, 2017; Pandolfo, 2018). In the Cold War era, ethnopsychanalysts reinvented their discipline by leaving their practice in Europe and conducting fieldwork in West Africa and the Southwest Pacific. Some of their leading figures such as Fritz Morgenthaler (1919–1984) became heroes of the New Left youth in the 1970s and 1980s (Herzog, 2017, pp. 179–211). Throughout the 20th century, psychoanalysis thrived in Eastern Europe, South Africa, and Latin America, including notable presence in Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico (Antic, 2016; Damousi & Plotkin, 2009; Gallo, 2010; Plotkin, 2001; Truscott & Hook, 2016).

Despite this encouraging note, I was surprised that China, the most populous country in the world, has been left out of this wave of historical revisionism. A decisive turning point in my research handed me the necessary pillar to construct a historical narrative of Chinese psychoanalysis: my discovery of the life and work of a native-born analyst, Bingham Dai (1899–1996). As full disclosure, it is likely that I have developed an attachment of sorts to Dai’s oeuvre—and what I would loosely refer to as “Dai analysis”—in the past few years. I am now convinced that

writing an intellectual biography of Dai would finally make it possible to rethink the history of psychoanalysis through its *mediation* and *interaction* with Chinese culture across the 20th century. Chancing upon Dai gave me exactly what I needed to return to a project I had abandoned about 15 years ago.

Dai became interested in psychodynamic therapy in the early 1930s right at the moment when neo-Freudian theorists turned their attention to sociocultural factors and interpersonal relations as the basis of investigation, replacing the classical Freudian emphasis on libido and psychosexual development. Educated in the Chinese classics as a student, Dai developed an early interest in human psychology, especially personality development and the formation of the self. The emphasis on social and kin relations shared by neo-Freudianism and Confucianism persuaded him of the value of undergoing analysis, which he eventually did with Harry Stack Sullivan (1892–1949), a key architect of neo-Freudian theory. In the second half of the 1930s, Dai supervised psychotherapy and implemented analytical techniques such as dream interpretation, free association, and transference at Peking Union Medical College in Beijing.⁷ Dai's early intellectual transformation sheds light on the question of why a foreign system of ideas such as psychoanalysis would gain traction in a culture where Freud never set foot.

Situating Dai's work since the 1930s in relation to the new cohort of transcultural psychiatrists who matured professionally in the post-WWII era, I came to envision a history of psychoanalytic medicine in which the Asia Pacific (and the experts based there) played a central, not marginal, role in recalibrating the tenor of mental health science. In fact, this genealogy sutures a new style of scientific inquiry that I call *transcultural reasoning* (Chiang, 2021a). Dai, Rin, Gwee, and Yap all came to question the universal applicability of Western biomedical concepts, seized thinking across geographical borders as the basis of scientific evidence, created new objects and parameters of knowledge, and insisted on learning from cognate disciplines in the social sciences, including anthropology and history, to refine the tenets of psychiatry. It would be a mistake to reduce the fruit of their intellectual labor to furthering a form of "psychiatric imperialism" serving only the interest of the West.⁸ Transcultural reasoning highlights how Chinese people, while often the object of Western scientific study, also used science to further their own status and authority. It calls into question the notion that "indigenous" non-Western ways of knowing have always been divorced from the making of psychiatric science in the West.

4 | THE FANTASY OF CONQUEST

This may seem like a long shot from answering the question with which I began: why do China scholars often blame eunuchs for their intrusion into politics every time after the Middle Kingdom had firmly established a Han-centric Confucianist state (e.g., in the Eastern Han, the late Tang, and the late Ming)? It behooves us, I have been suggesting, to take the psychic bearings of such a distaste toward eunuchs seriously, however it echoes between the past and the present. A vital clue to answering this question lies in the way gender serves as a useful category of historical analysis (Scott, 1986). Perhaps male Confucian elites have tended to assume an intrinsic masculine virtue in what they do and how they think. This is exemplified by the *wen* paradigm of Chinese masculinity that has been explored in depth by Kam Louie (2002). Historically, the failure narrative of a toppling Confucianist state can never be fully rationalized—or legitimated—by the masculinity of these cultural elites, so China scholars, past and present, can only explain this demise via the emasculating subjectivity of such politically threatening agents as eunuchs.

That is where my answer would probably have stopped as a graduate student doing research on Chinese castration. Coming to a study of psychoanalysis now, however, I would make the plea that even the very notion of what "China" or "Chinese" means needs to be questioned. I gave up on the idea of writing a history of psychoanalysis years ago because I did not have the language, conceptual tools, and, by extension, the courage to think beyond the convention of China studies. From *After Eunuchs* to transtopia and transcultural psychoanalysis, I constantly find myself in the position of having to look for sources—and sources of inspiration—elsewhere, that is,

to go beyond China. When I first started doing doctoral work, I considered Western psychiatric and psychoanalytic ideas so foreign to Chinese culture that, historically, they must have been more or less dismissed, or at least resisted by Chinese people. However, after mining the work of Dai and others, alongside years of collaboration with friends and colleagues, I came to realize that the key to a successful project on a seemingly obscure topic like psychoanalysis is *how* one executes the research.

Marginal topics and subjects can be difficult to work with, but they are not impossible. The research legwork of *After Eunuchs*, for instance, forced me to seek evidence in unlikely places. This entailed hunting for data not collected in conventional archives or organized repositories. (In case this is not obvious, there is no official archival holding dedicated to preserving documents about sexual practices and ideas in China.) Since marginal phenomena have been routinely neglected by mainstream concerns, working on these topics requires the researcher to take a more proactive approach to uncover the relevant source materials (Chiang, 2019). It was this proactive search that led me to the koro debates and Dai papers.

A more fluid understanding of science beyond a Western-centric definition will be a reigning idiom in historiography for years to come. The fact that the boundaries of scientific knowledge have always shifted across time and place demands a more dynamic, enriched source base to write its history. This is especially germane to a place like East Asia, where certain threads of humanist thinking (Confucianism thus returns as the repressed) bear striking resemblance to Western empirical knowledge (Elman, 2005). In fact, we need to account for the way historical actors often made those linkages on their own terms in highly politicized contexts (e.g., imperialism, semicolonialism, and nationalism). The way that castration has occupied a central place in the trajectory of my research bespeaks not only the discursive policing of disciplining and psychological boundaries, but also the porousness and artificial nature with which political borders operate in our fantasy.

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ENDNOTES

¹The concept of intercorporeal governance is substantiated further in Chiang (2021b, pp. 137–169).

²This is a position from which I have come to diverge. On the history and philosophy of psychoanalytic science, I am inspired by, among others, Forrester (2017); Mayer (2017).

³For a definitive study of Sinophone culture, see Shih (2007).

⁴On psychoanalytic influences in Dutch-occupied Java and other regions in the Indonesian archipelago, see Gouda (2009).

⁵For discussions of transcultural psychiatry in other parts of East Asia, see, for example, Kitanaka (2003); Suh (2013).

⁶See the essays in Anderson et al. (2011); Damousi and Plotkin (2012); ffytche and Pick (2016). In Eastern Europe, see Miller (1998); Antic (2017). On the British empire, see Linstrum (2016).

⁷On the history of the neuropsychiatric unit at Peking Union Medical College, see Baum (2018). On Peking Union Medical College itself, see Bullock (1980).

⁸For an example of this flawed and dated interpretation, see Crozier (2018).

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