

The Ming Dynasty's Model of Central Rule, A New Perspective for Reviewing Ancient Chinese Imperial Power

Daqi (Reinhardt) Fang

Student of Hangzhou Yungu School, Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province, China

Reinhardt114514@outlook.com

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Abstract

The imperial power (*huangquan*, 皇权) in ancient China has been a topic of concern to Sinologists around the world, and the debate about imperial power in China has continued. In this article, the author uses the Ming Dynasty, known as "the representative dynasty of absolute imperial power in ancient China " as a research sample, to review the form of Ming Dynasty's imperial power. In addition, pointed out that the imperial power of the Ming Dynasty maintained the triangular balance of the emperor-cabinet-eunuch to make the emperor hold power.

Keywords: Ming Dynasty, Imperial Power, Emperor-Cabinet-Eunuch Relations

Introduction

Generally, the development of the central political system of the Ming Dynasty reflects an unchanging situation, that is, the political system of any dynasty has the characteristics of "inheritance and evolution". A Taiwan Sinologist pointed out that "all systems have their own reasons for their rise and development."¹ The author believes that more attention should be paid to evolution.

Obviously, the political evolution of the central government of any dynasty has a common feature - from the inside out, from the top to the bottom. As far as the Ming

Dynasty is concerned, In the Ming Dynasty, a political system with a triangular structure of emperor, cabinet, and eunuch emerged. By maintaining the balance of the latter two, the emperor brought China's imperial power to a new height².

The structure of the central political system in the Ming Dynasty has always been a topic worthy of study because the Ming Dynasty created the political system and bureaucratic structure of the entire middle and late period of ancient China (from the 14th century to the 20th century). As far as the political structure of the central government of the Ming Dynasty is concerned, it is a typical triangular power structure. At its apex, imperial power maintained the balance of power between the "cabinet (*neige*, 内阁)" and the "eunuch (*huanguan*, 宦官)". The author proposes that the imperial power relies on its own sources of legitimacy to maintain balance and hold the final decision-making power. The author will discuss why such a central government system made ancient China an "imperial power system" below.

Central Political Power System in the Ming Dynasty

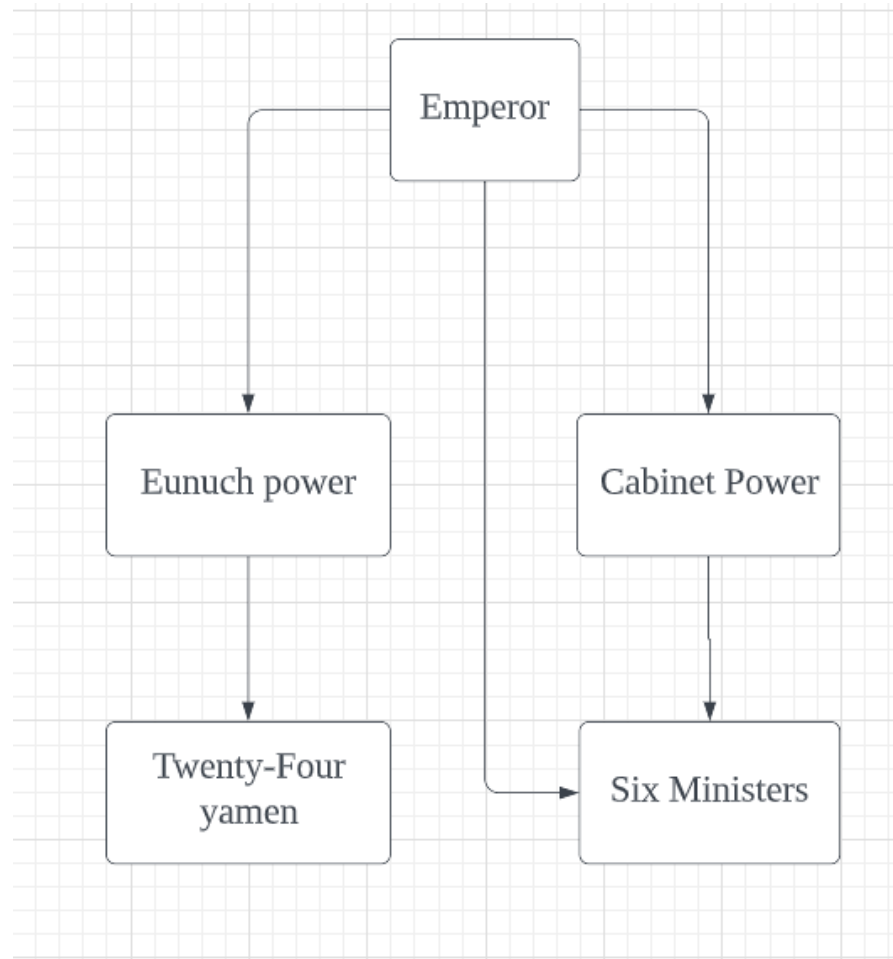
The characteristic of the central power structure of the Ming Dynasty is that it has "two dimensions inside and outside", forming a dual-track power system of the inner court eunuch system and the outer court cabinet system in the central power structure of the Ming Dynasty, and make imperial power is secured³.

On the one hand, with the separation of the Ming cabinet and Hanlin Academy (*hanlinyuan*, 翰林院), the cabinet became the emperor's most important secretarial group, and at the same time became the central organ for handling state affairs. On the other hand, the eunuchs gradually got rid of their narrow duties of watering and cleaning. As the etiquette inspector (*dongchang*, 东厂) gradually surpassed the internal inspector and became the chief magistrate of twenty-four departments within the government, the internal inspector became the central institution for the internal court to handle state affairs.

If comparative studies the political systems of the Pre-Ming Dynasty and the Ming Dynasty, it is not difficult to find that the two have similarities and have some differences. In terms of commonalities, whether it is the Pre-Ming Dynasty or the Ming Dynasty, the imperial power⁴ is always the head of state. In terms of differences, the Ming Dynasty achieved imperial power through the separation of powers. The emperor achieved the goal of controlling the political situation by maintaining checks and balances between the cabinet and the eunuchs. In this regard, some analysts believe that the Ming Dynasty's governance model is more reasonable⁵, although this requires an emperor who is diligent in state governance affairs.

Therefore, the author draws a figure of the structure between imperial power and bureaucracy in the Ming Dynasty (See Figure 1), and this relationship diagram has been throughout ancient China in the middle and late era.

Figure 1: The Structure of the Political System in the Ming Dynasty



Both are derivatives of imperial power, auxiliary forces and beneficiaries of imperial power. The relationship between the autocratic monarchy and the cabinet and eunuchs in the Ming Dynasty was based on the monarch. The cabinet and eunuchs were two opposing and unified vassals attached to the imperial power.

As can be seen from Figure 1, the emperor is at the apex of power, and the eunuchs and cabinet are under the imperial power. At the same time, the emperor can use one party to suppress the other party at any time. Although there were many ministers who relied on the imperial power to make authority in the Ming Dynasty, it was precisely because they were always under the imperial power that even if there were powerful cabinet members or eunuchs, it was easy for the emperor to get rid of them and purge them. The high-ranking bureaucracy that was purged by the emperor, such as Yan Song, Liu Jin, and Wei Zhongxian, are all evident proof.

Emperor-Cabinet-Eunuch Triangle Relations

The history of the Ming Dynasty shows that the triangular relationship of imperial power-cabinet-eunuch was stable. In addition, the imperial power has always been in the highest position in this triangular relationship (even if the emperor has not been in court for a long time, such as the Emperor *Jiajing* or the Emperor *Wanli*), which ultimately ensured the normal operation of the political situation in the Ming Dynasty. Moreover, the emperor did not have to deal with any specific affairs in person (these things were done by the cabinet or eunuchs), and he could also manage or intervene in the affairs of any department at any time⁶.

From this point of view, the emperor is the core, and the cabinet and ritual system are the two fulcrums. The central political system of the Ming Dynasty was based on imperial power, with the ritual system and the cabinet as branches and checks and balances with each other, and finally made it possible to maintain the normal operation of the Ming Dynasty.

The relationship between imperial power, cabinet power, and eunuch power has three forms: First, the emperor is the center of gravity, which was generally the case during the Emperor Hongwu (i.e, Zhu Yuanzhang) and Emperor Yongyue eras. Second, it emphasizes the emperor's empowerment (*fuquan*, 赋权), that is, the power the emperor conferred on the cabinet, such as Yan Song during the Jiajing period. Third, the emperor trusted eunuchs, such as Liu Jin and Wei Zhongxian.

Although if the emperor is attached to either side (cabinet or eunuch), a dominant faction will inevitably form, leading to the dictatorship of cabinet ministers or eunuchs and bringing the country into crisis⁷. But the emperor can be the final arbiter and has the highest legitimacy. Therefore, these so-called "authoritative bureaucrats" only use imperial power as a weapon to purge political enemies or hostile factions. For example, when the emperor strictly controlled the eunuchs, the power and role of the cabinet would be relatively prominent, and then it would become the dominant party in the implementation of state administration. When the emperor's attention was not in political, he might have been more of a liaison through his proxies among the eunuchs, and even more often had the internal supervisor act on his behalf. This is a manifestation of the use of imperial power, not a weakening of imperial power.

Conclusion

In summary, the emperor of the Ming Dynasty was the core of the political structure of the central government of the Ming Dynasty and also had the highest ruling power. Unlike the previous central dynasties, the Ming emperors introduced the power of eunuchs to check and balance the cabinet and relied on their own authority to maintain the balance of power between the cabinet and the eunuchs. In addition, all the bureaucrats of the Ming Dynasty used the imperial power to "secure their seats", but they did not threaten the emperor's power, because they knew that the source of their power was the imperial power, and if the emperor no longer had a good impression of these bureaucrats, then their power was gone.

Therefore, in this article, the author takes the Ming Dynasty in the middle and late stages of ancient China as an example to study whether the imperial power was valid in ancient China. The conclusion shows that ancient China was definitely an imperial power state, and the imperial power became stronger after the Ming Dynasty.

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