# THE RISE OF THE EUNUCHS DURING THE T'ANG DYNASTY

## Part II[1]

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By the year 697 Lai Tsun-Ch'en (來俊臣) was dead, and the system of delation came to an end, and with the reappointment of Ti Jen-Chieh (狄仁傑) to the office of chief minister the government promised to enter a new and more tranquil phase. Jen-Chieh attempted to persuade the Empress to settle the various frontier wars by the most easily effected compromises and to concentrate upon domestic problems, in particular the succession to the throne. Of the two claimants from the house of Li (李), Lun Prince of Yü (豫王輪), who had been given the title of Imperial Successor (Huang Ssu 皇嗣) in 690, now lived a prisoner in the Eastern Palace, while his elder brother the former emperor Chung Tsung (中宗) now Prince of Lu-Ling (盧陵王) lived a closely confined exile in Fang Ling (房陵) at the mercy of the local prefect, whose very approach reduced him to an almost suicidal terror. In a seemingly far stronger position were the Empress' two nephews, Wu Ch'eng-Ssu (武承嗣) and Wu San-Ssu (武三思), both of whom enjoyed the Imperial favour and wielded considerable political influence. For some months the Empress vacillated between the importunities of Wu Ch'eng-Ssu, and the more subtle persuasions of Ti Jen-Chieh, and then in 698 at last agreed to the recall of the Prince of Lu Ling. Her final decision, however, was precipitated by pressure from outside. The formidable Turkish Khan Mo-Ch'o (默啜) demanded for the hand of his daughter an Imperial Prince. The arrival of Wu Ch'eng-Ssu's son Yen-Hsiu (延秀) threw him into an outburst of fury. "What had he to do with a member of the house of Wu", he cried, "who had no claim to be the son of an Emperor?" and in a highly insolent letter he announced his intention of marching over the borders as the saviour of the house of Li. The arrival of his army, to which little effective resistance was offered, secured immediate results. The Imperial Successor begged to make way for his brother, the Prince of Lu Ling was established as Heir Apparent, and Wu Ch'eng-Ssu, foiled of his ambition, died, it is said, of mortification. The Heir Apparent was immediately ordered to counter the threat of Mo

[1] See *Asia Major*, New Series, Vol. I, pp. 53–72. The MS. of this second part of the paper included notes only down to p. 49. No further notes have been added by the Editors.





Ch'o by recruiting troops in Ho Pei (河北). Hitherto the response had been negligible, but so potent was the name of Li that some 50,000 rallied to his standard within a few days. The Empress deemed it advisable that he should relinquish his duties to Ti Jen-Chieh; but by this time Mo-Ch'o had done his work, and was withdrawing his forces. He now returned, ravaging the country as he went, and ineffectually pursued by Jen-Chieh, from an expedition which did much to increase his prestige among the neighbouring tribes and his contempt for the Middle Kingdom.

The same time marked the rise of two new court favourites. Chang I-Chih (張易之) and his brother Ch'ang-Tsung (昌宗), originally singing boys and distinguished only for their personal beauty, now became the inseparable companions of the Empress, who not content with giving them appointments in the Palace Guard, in 698 created for their benefit a new Directorate, the K'ung-Hao Chien (控鶴監). In the following year I-Chih was appointed director, and Ch'ang-Tsung and several of their friends to membership of their inner circle as Nei Kung Feng (內供奉), or Officers with Privileged Access to the Inner Palace, through whose agency more and more official business came to be transacted. In 700 Wu San-Ssu retired from the political scene. He realised that the health of the Empress was failing, and that with her death the favourites would fall. Meantime he was content to render his homage, but from a safe distance. Other members of the court were not so shrewd, and when Ti Jen-Chieh, the only minister ever to enjoy the Empress' complete trust, died at the end of the same year, and the brothers now seemed all powerful, sides were conclusively joined.

For the next four years every attempt was made to remove the brothers. They were accused of bribery, of forcing citizens to sell them land, and finally of treason. In 704 this last charge seemed definitely to have been established against Ch'ang-Tsung. He was arraigned before the Censor's Tribunal, the Empress had agreed to the trial, but at the last moment a eunuch was sent with the order for his release. By the beginning of the next year the Empress, greatly weakened by illness, would admit no one but the two brothers to her side. The veteran chief minister Chang Chien-Chih (張柬之) with four of his colleagues now planned the assassination of the brothers and the removal of the Empress. The Heir Apparent was summoned, the aid of a section of the Palace Guard enlisted, and the plan worked smoothly. But in their fury against the two brothers, the conspirators had overlooked two other persons; one was the Private Secretary to the Empress Shang-Kuan Wan-Erh (上官婉兒), the other Wu San-Ssu.

Chung Tsung now restored to the throne after more than twenty years had spent the greater part of his life in the company of women and servants, and was entirely dominated by his wife, the lady Wei (韋氏), and by his younger daughter the An-Lo Princess (安樂公主). Chang Chien-Chih and his followers were therefore dismayed to find that in official business

they again had to reckon with an Empress, also supported by a Buddhist Priest, the Turk Hui-Fan (慧範), yet obstinately refused to consider the warnings given to them of the danger of permitting the existence of Wu San-Ssu, who at once made the most of his opportunities. Shang-Kuan Wan-Erh, the granddaughter of Shang-Kuan I (上官儀) had on the execution of her father and grandfather been brought up as a slave in the Inner Palace, where she had achieved a remarkable literary education. Her knowledge of history, and talent for the writing of verse had roused the admiration of the Empress Wu, who had admitted her increasingly to her confidence and in the last ten years of her reign even allowed her to decide upon many of the memorials submitted by her ministers. After the enforced abdication of the Empress Wu, Wan-Erh put her administrative experience at the disposal of the Empress Wei, and was at once given sole charge of the Imperial Edicts. Wu San-Ssu now selected her as his instrument. Having procured her favours, he arranged first for the marriage of his son to the An-Lo Princess, then for his introduction to the Empress: and within a few months of the restoration Chang Chien-Chih and his colleagues were simply executing San-Ssu's orders. Inevitably neither side could remain content with such a situation. After the unavailing protests of Chang Chieh-Chih, a large official deputation, headed by Ching Hui (敬暉) demanded the dismissal of the Wu family, and was ignored. To this San-Ssu, on the advice of a renegade official, Ts'ui Shih (崔湜) replied with more subtlety. At his request, Chang Chien-Chih, Chung Hui and their three principal supporters received the titles of Prince and at the same time were relieved of their administrative duties. Two of the new Princes retired at once to the provinces, whither the other three were forced to follow at the beginning of the next year. Even here they were pursued by the slanderous accusations of San-Ssu and his agents; and after further degradations the five restorers of the house of Li suffered the extreme penalty for the offence of treason.

Meantime San-Ssu and Shang-Kuan Wan-Erh, now raised to an honourable position in the Imperial Harem, were doing their utmost to continue the administration of the Empress Wu. Wu partisans were recalled, the period of military service in the militia was reduced, and the system of supernumerary appointments greatly extended. From these the class that derived the most benefit was the eunuchs; for, after all the established positions were filled, supernumerary appointments were found for almost a thousand persons.[1] No doubt the majority of these no longer

[1] See Chiu T'ang Shu, Chung Tsung Pen Chi, Shen Lung Erl Nien San Yüeh. (中宗本紀,神龍二年三月), Vol. I, p. 70; and T'ung Chien, Vol. III, p. 275.
A section of a letter addressed by a minor provincial official to the newly returned chief minister Wei Yüan-Chung (魏元中), and complaining of the appointment of these eunuchs, is quoted in the T'ang Hui Yao, Vol. II, p. 1132. See also Chiu T'ang Shu, Li To-Tso (李多祚) Chuan, section 109, Vol. II, p. 1007.



served in the Inner Palace. For by now Shang-Kuan Wan-Erh, the Emperor's sister the T'ai-P'ing Princess (太平公主), and his two daughters the Ch'ang-Ning (長寧) and An-Lo Princesses were all established in their own palaces, with their own official retinues, from which they dispensed for a consideration favours to a horde of officials, each desiring preferment for himself and the elimination of his opponents. The An-Lo Princess was especially notorious for her open sale of justice and of official advancement. She issued her own edicts, and concealing their content, took them to her father to sign. In one case only was the signature refused. For on the advice of San-Ssu she requested that the Heir Apparent be set aside in her favour. But though the request was disallowed, she suffered no rebuke. San-Ssu having replaced the "five Princes" with his own adherents and withdrawn after his prudent fashion from official life, saw in the Heir Apparent the only obstacle in the way of his ambition of restoring the house of Wu. His son was now the principal member of the Heir Apparent's household, and he through his usual channels made every effort to secure the succession for his daughter-in-law. Fears for his safety drove the Heir Apparent to violent action. In 707 with the help of certain officers of the Palace Guard, and under the authority of a forged edict, he had San-Ssu and his son assassinated, and with his troops marched upon the palace in search of Shang-Kuan Wan-Erh.[1] She with the Emperor, the Empress, and the An-Lo Princess fled to the upper chamber of a pavilion, before which the rebels, faced with resistance from loyal guards, were called to a temporary halt. The prompt action of the eunuch Yang Ssu-Hsü (楊思勗), who cut down the leading rebel officer, destroyed their already weakened morale, and in answer to an appeal from the Emperor, they turned upon their leaders and slew them. The Heir Apparent himself escaped with a few followers, at whose hands he soon met his death, while Yang Ssu-Hsü was rewarded by a high honorific title and promotion to the office of Nei Ch'ang Shih (內常侍) as Deputy Chief of the Nei Shih Sheng.

Since the accession of Kao Tsung (高宗) the financial position of the Empire had steadily deteriorated. It is true that the population had in the last fifty years risen rapidly, from 3,800,000 households in 652, to 6,150,000 in 705, but so had the number of fugitives from the land, or at least from the tax-collector. The expenditure incurred by the maintenance of an ever-growing number of officials, by constant frontier campaigns, and by extravagant schemes of building had to be met from a slowly diminishing revenue, while the recent debasement of the copper currency had caused a confusion with which the officials seemed powerless to deal. As yet,

[1] The most detailed account of this incident is to be found in the T'ung Chien, Vol. III, pp. 2478–9. See also Chiu T'ang Shu, Chieh Min T'ai Tzu Ch'ung Tsun (節愍太子重俊) Chuan, section 86, Vol. I, p. 853.

however, the position had not proved to be seriously embarrassing, for by drawing upon the stocks of grain in the Emergency and Price-controlled Granaries the officials of the Revenue Board had been able to satisfy the demands made upon them. Now they were beginning to find that even these resources, so far from being inexhaustible, were almost depleted. Yet Chung Tsung, from whom considerable economies should have been expected, sat and signed away the Imperial revenue with complete irresponsibility. The granting of a Shih Feng (實封)[1] or feoff producing revenue meant in fact the diversion of the major part of taxes paid by a stated number of households from the state to the beneficiary. In other times the granting of feoffs was naturally rare; their recipients were either members of the Imperial Family, or persons who had rendered outstanding service, and their total number lay between twenty and thirty. But in 705 alone the Emperor assigned to a few individuals the revenue of nearly forty thousand households, and as his generosity continued, criticisms soon began to flow in. In 708 the Imperial Commissioner for the Ho Nan region (河南) reported that more than one hundred and forty persons absorbed the revenue of fifty-four prefectures; that the T'ai-P'ing and An-Lo Princesses selected the households containing the largest number of adult males and living on the richest land; and that the hardships imposed upon these households by their personal tax gatherers were so great as to accelerate markedly the flight from the land. A few months later a former head of the Treasury, Wei Ssu-Li (韋嗣立) estimated that more than 600,000 persons were paying taxes to feoff holders, and that of the cloth-tax more went to private persons than to the Treasury. The expenditure on Buddhist temples and monasteries, great in the time of the Empress Wu, was now colossal. From 706 onwards the Emperor received and ignored a steady stream of complaints. The Buddhists, their opponents asserted, enjoyed more than seven-tenths of the resources of the Empire, a million cash were flung away upon a single building, and the people were groaning under the enforced duties of transporting quantities of wood and stone for new and unwanted temples. In 707 the Emperor despatched a number of envoys (it is not stated that they were eunuchs) to the rivers Chiang and Huai (江淮) to ransom

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[1] Persons holding a Shih Feng of a stated number of households were said to be in possession of these actual households (得眞戶). This meant that holders of Shih Feng were empowered to collect the taxes—at this time the cloth tax, and two-thirds of the grain tax, the other third going to the state—from their households, each of which should consist of a minimum of three adult males, through their own agents. It was at this time suggested that all such taxes should be collected by the regular officials, and that the holders of Shih Feng should receive their incomes from the Treasury; but this suggestion was not adopted. See T'ang Hui Yao edict of Ching-Lung Erl Nien Chiu Yüeh, Vol. III, p. 1642–4.

See also des Rotours, *Traité des Fonctionnaires*, Vol. I, p. 50.



the fish,[1] which provided the riverside inhabitants with their livelihood. The minister Li I (李乂) in vain protested against such misplaced charity, and the ransoming of living creatures soon became one of the main perquisites of the eunuchs.

Freed from the restraining influence of Wu San-Ssu, the Imperial ladies vied with one another in lavish expenditure, and in the sale of offices and admission to the Buddhist priesthood to pay for their extravagances. They were also careful to insert their own partisans into influential positions and to protect their interests. In 707 the eunuch Hsieh Ssu-Chien[2] (薛思簡), a creature of the An-Lo Princess, through whom he had gained the unheard-of position of Grand General of the Guard of Surveillance of Gates of the Left (左監門衛大將軍) was charged by the censors with abuse of office, and his execution demanded. The suit was promptly stopped by orders of the Chief Censor Tou Ts'ung-I (竇從一).[3] For the days had gone when a eunuch could be slighted with impunity, and it was said that any beardless man arraigned before the Chief Censor was sure of an

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[1] See Chiu T'ang Shu, Li I Chuan, section 101, Vol. II, p. 953; and T'ung Chien, Vol. III, pp. 2480–1. The fish were to be bought from local stocks of government goods. No more is heard of this practice until the reign of Hsüan Tsung, when the ransoming of living creatures is mentioned as a type of mission upon which eunuchs were commonly employed, and from which they drew an honorarium of never less than one thousand strings of cash. See Chiu T'ang Shu, Kao Li-Shih Chuan, section 184, Vol. II, p. 1488.

[2] The name Hsieh Ssu-Chien is uncertain. The same eunuch appears variously as Hsieh Chien (薛簡), (see T'ung Chien and T'se Fu Yüan Kuei, *op. cit.*, and Hsin T'ang Shu, Chung Tsung Shu Jen Wei Shih (中宗庶人韋氏) Chuan, section 76) as Hsieh Ssu-Chien (see T'ung Chien, Vol. III, p. 2491) and Hsieh Ch'ung-Chien (崇簡), (see Chiu T'ang Shu, Chung Tsung Shu Jen Wei Shih Chuan), section 51, Vol. I, p. 640. Of the three variants the last, which is properly the name of the second son of the T'ai-P'ing princess, is inadmissible.

[3] See T'ung Chien, Vol. III, p. 2460, and Ts'e Fu Yüan Kuei, section 515, pp. 11a/b. The T'ang Hui-Yao, section 61, p. 1070, gives the following version of this incident. "In this year (707) Wei Ch'uan-Kung (魏傳弓), a Censor of the Outer Court of Enquiries, accused Fu Hsin-I (輔信義), a deputy chief of the Nei Shih Sheng, of abuse of office." "The deputy chief Fu," said Tou Huai-Cheng (竇懷貞), "is deeply in the confidence of the An-Lo Princess. His influence is very great, and his words can make or mar. How can you bring this accusation?" "The collapse of royal discipline and the decline of the way of Chün-Tzu (君子) are entirely due to the usurpations of these creatures", replied Chuan-Kung. "If I could get him put to death one day, I should not in the least mind undergoing execution the next." This version is repeated in the biographies of Tou Huai-Cheng in the Chiu T'ang Shu, section 183, Vol. II, p. 1477, and in the Hsin T'ang Shu, section 109. According to his biographers Tou Huai-Cheng changed his name to Ts'ung-I to avoid the taboo name, Hsüan-Cheng (玄貞), of the father of the Empress Wei. He also stood deeply in awe of powerful eunuchs "and whenever he investigated a case in which a beardless man was involved, would pervert justice in order to meet him".

acquittal. Nor was it to be expected that the men who purchased official preferment from the Princesses, many of them wealthy and illiterate merchants, would discharge their duties with any marked sense of responsibility. Venality and incompetence brought the bureaucracy into ever-increasing disrepute. The Selection examination degenerated into a farce. Official vacancies were sold three times over; on one occasion the father of the examiner Ts'ui Shih accepted bribes from all the candidates. Provincial officials, against whom the door of promotion was closed, received their orders from the servants of the great feoff-holders, and all the time supernumerary appointments conferred by the "black-ink decrees" of the Imperial ladies were showered forth until the capital swarmed with their recipients. These with the Censors and the Chief Ministers were derided by the populace under the designation San Wu Tso Ch'u (三無坐處), "the Three without a place to sit on".

Indeed by 709 all semblance of order seemed to have vanished. An open feud raged between the An-Lo and T'ai P'ing Princesses; the Empress Wei's personal guard far outnumbered that of the Emperor, and the leading chief minister Tsung Ch'u-K'o (宗楚客) was her nominee. To add to the disaffection of the populace, a shortage in the Metropolitan Area increased the price of grain, and in spite of ministerial entreaties Chung Tsung, urged by his Empress, refused to move the court to the Eastern Capital. To supply the quantity of grain necessary for its maintenance, the people's ploughing oxen were commandeered, and the heavy work of transport in mid-winter killed eight or nine out of every ten. Accusations inevitably followed. The treasonable intentions of the Empress and Tsung Ch'u K'o were denounced to the Emperor, whose suspicions were at last aroused. But before he could institute enquiries, he was removed by poison administered by his wife and his younger daughter. To prevent an immediate uprising the Emperor's death was at first carefully concealed. Fifty thousand troops were garrisoned in the capital, and the eunuch Hsieh Ssu Chien despatched with a small force to keep watch on the third son of Chung Tsung, the prince Ch'ung-Fu (重福), who had on the Empress' orders been exiled some three years before. The activities of the Prince Li Lung-Chi (李隆基), who through the agency of two personal slaves, Li Shou-Te (李守德) and the Corean Wang Mao-Chung (王毛仲) was suborning certain of the palace guards, apparently passed unnoticed. The succession was now being planned by the T'ai-P'ing Princess and Shang-Kuan Wan-Erh, who proposed that the youngest of Chung Tsung's sons, the Prince Ch'ung-Mau (重茂), still a mere child, should be placed upon the throne, the regency to be in the hands of the Empress Wei, assisted by her brother-in-law, the future Jui Tsung, now known as Tan Prince of Hsiang (相王旦). Despite the protest of Tsung Ch'u-K'o these proposals were adopted. Tsung Ch'u-K'o, however, plotted secretly with the Empress



the removal of the young Emperor, the T'ai-P'ing Princess and the Prince of Hsiang, and this was revealed to Li Lung Chi by one of the Empress' adherents, who urged him to lose no time in forestalling it. The resulting coup d'état of the early months of 710 was completely successful. The Wei family and their adherents were exterminated, not even the life of Shang-Kuan Wan-Erh, who produced documentary proof of her innocence, was spared, and through the mediation of the T'ai P'ing Princess the younger emperor renounced his throne in favour of the reluctant Prince of Hsiang, with his second son Li Lung Chi as Heir Apparent.

With the accession of Jui Tsung it might well have seemed that a new era had begun. The direction of affairs was in the capable hands of Sung Ching (宋璟) and Yao Yüan-Chih (姚元之), who at once set to work to restore order within the bureaucracy. At their request the supernumerary and irregularly appointed officials were dismissed, and they personally directed the Selection Examinations for both civil and military officers. As an example of the change of temper, a certain eunuch, Yen Hsing-Kuei[1] (閻興貴), described as a P'in Kuan (品官), requested some favour of the sub-prefect of Ch'ang-An Hsien (長安縣令), Li Chao-Yin(李朝隱), who had him thrown into prison. On hearing of this, the Emperor not merely summoned Chao-Yin and thanked him in person, but at a special public ceremony, and in an address in which he deplored the tendency of eunuchs to usurp power in an indulgent age, extolled the services of Chao-Yin and rewarded him with promotion and a gift of silk.[2] Yet there were still grave dangers, which those who spoke optimistically of a return to the

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[1] See Chiu T'ang Shu, Chung Tsung Shu Jen Wei Shih Chuan, section 51, p. 640, and T'ung Chien, Vol. III, p. 2491.

[2] "When Chao-Yin had been promoted to be sub-prefect of Ch'ang-An (長安令), a certain eunuch Lü (閭) Hsing-Kuei came to the sub-prefecture to ask a favour, whereupon Chao-Yin had him thrown out. When the news reached Jui Tsung, he exclaimed with pleasure, summoned Chao-Yin to court and thanked him, saying, "If as head of a sub-prefecture of the capital, you can do so well, what more have I to worry me?" He then issued a decree which ran " . . . The sub-prefect of Ch'ang-An Hsien, Li Chao-Yin is of unflinching character and perfect integrity, widely known for his excellent administration, and much praised for his ability. Recently when a P'in Kuan entered the sub-prefecture, and committed an offence against the regulations, he was able to rebuke him in accordance with the rules and arraign him in accordance with his offence. Now in reading the records of the past, it has been my constant regret to observe how the race of eunuchs often acquire influence and in kind and indulgent eras inevitably usurp power. It is upon this man that I rely to assist me in my desire to correct the errors of the past and to search for law and order . . ." Chiu T'ang Shu, Li Chao-Yin Chuan, section 100, Vol. II, p. 949. See also T'ung Chien, Vol. III, p. 2498.

In the Ssu Pu Pei Yao edition of the T'ung Chien the name of the eunuch is also given as Lü, but in the *Zoku Kokuyaku Kambun Taisei* edition as Yen.

glories of the Cheng-Kuan (貞觀) period blindly ignored. A common fear of the Empress Wei had momentarily united the Heir Apparent and his aunt the T'ai-P'ing Princess. The princess exerted a strong influence over her brother, and no longer scrupled to get rid of her nephew now that he had served his purpose. She had a large following, increased by a number of the Empress Wei's adherents who had escaped the recent massacre; she filled the Eastern Palace with her spies, and through her agents began to excite the Emperor's suspicions against his Heir. At the beginning of 711, Sung Ching and Yao Yuan-Chih requested that the Princess and the Heir Apparent's brothers be removed from the capital and the Heir Apparent be appointed to supervise the government. But no sooner had the order been given than the Heir Apparent through fear of reprisals accused the two ministers of attempting to create differences between his relatives and himself, and both were exiled. With the recall of the Princess, their good work was speedily undone. The chief posts were occupied by her nominees, the supernumerary officials were reinstated, even the Turkish priest Hui-Fan reappeared as a court favourite. "When Yao and Sung were in power" ran the popular saying, "justice prevailed over injustice, with the T'ai-P'ing Princess in power, injustice prevails over justice". At last in the eighth month of 712, Jui Tsung abdicated in favour of his son, who thus succeeded to an empire still under female domination. But though he had no doubt of the ultimate intentions of his aunt, he was not yet prepared to take any steps, and again permitted the exile of ministers who openly warned him against her. At the beginning of 713 five out of the seven chief ministers were partisans of the princess, and with them and Hui-Fan she was planning the Emperor's removal. He was kept informed by his confidential agent Wang Chü (王琚) and it was not until the seventh month, when he was warned that the matter was urgent and received the signal from the former chief minister Chang Yüeh (張說), that he gave his orders to Wang Mao-Chung and other faithful servitors, including the eunuch Kao Li-Shih (高力士). These did their work thoroughly, and with the T'ai P'ing Princess died the last vestige of the influence of the Empress Wu.

Hitherto eunuchs have appeared only as isolated figures, dependent for their authority upon their patrons. Though in the reign of Chung Tsung they increased both in numbers and in authority, they were still dispersed through the households of rival members of the Emperor's and more particularly the Empress' families, and there are no indications that the Nei-Shih Sheng had begun to change from a corps of domestic servants into a political organisation. This change required a eunuch who should possess the confidence of the Emperor himself and with it exceptional tact, determination, and organizing ability. On the accession of Hsüan Tsung, such a eunuch appeared in the person of Kao Li-Shih. Li-Shih was born of a Kuang-tung family of the name of Feng (馮), and presented to the Empress Wu in 698. He was adopted by a eunuch Kao Yen-Fu (高延福) and his wife, whose family name he assumed, and, on expulsion from the palace for some minor misdemeanour, passed first into the service of Wu San-Ssu, then into that of Li Lung-Chi, to whom he seems to have become confidential secretary. In 712 he occupied the position of Secretary of the Nei-Shih Sheng (Nei Chi-Shih 內給事) and was already acting as intermediary between the Emperor and Chang Yüeh. The part which he played in the liquidation of the T'ai-P'ing Princess and her followers was conspicuous, and for his services he was rewarded with the titles of General of the Guard for Surveillance of Gates of the Right (Yu Chien Men Wei Chiang Chün 右監門衛將軍) and Chargé d'Affaires of the Nei Shih Sheng (Chih Nei Shih Sheng Shih 知內侍省事). The ambition of Li-Shih was to surround the Emperor with a eunuch secretariat, through whose agency all transactions between him and his ministers should be conducted, and in this project Hsüan Tsung, who preferred to reserve his personal decision for the highest affairs of state, seemed content to concur. At the end of 713 Yao Yüan-Chih was recalled to the office of Chief Minister and his rival Chang Yüeh disappeared into provincial exile. One of Yuan-Chih's earliest requests was that secretaries and lower officials be appointed by seniority. To this the Emperor paid no attention, and even when the words were reiterated, gave no reply. When Yuan-Chih in apprehension left the court and the others were dismissed, Li-Shih ventured to reproach his master. "Your majesty has but newly assumed the direction of affairs", he said, "and to any request by a chief minister, you should directly grant or withhold your permission. Why do you refuse completely to consider it?" "We have entrusted our government to Yuan-Chih", replied the Emperor, "and on matters of importance we will certainly listen to his requests, and discuss them with him. But secretaries are of too low a rank for him to trouble us with such details." When Li-Shih conveyed the Imperial wishes to the ministers in the Chung-Shu Sheng, he reported the Emperor's words to Yuan-Chih, and so relieved his anxiety.



This incident shows that Li-Shih enjoyed from the beginning of Hsüan Tsung's reign the unquestioned right to attend even the highest state councils and had the privilege of reporting the Imperial decisions to the chief ministers after the council was ended. It was not long before he and his colleagues became the arbiters of official promotion and decided minor matters of policy upon their own initiative. But before Li-Shih could extend to these colleagues the privileges he possessed himself, there were still many things to be done. For their authority the majority of eunuchs depended upon the supernumerary appointments conferred by Chung Tsung and his wife and daughters. Yao Yuan-Chih in his previous tenure of the chief ministership had abolished these appointments, and since they had been almost immediately restored, would certainly attempt

to do so again. In the fifth month of 714 the edict forbidding the conferment of supernumerary appointments was duly issued, but an exception was made in favour of the Nei-Shih Sheng. It was also important that the eunuchs should retain some military authority. Li-Shih himself held a military command, but he was not a soldier by temperament, and was already too much occupied. This duty, therefore, was entrusted to his elder colleague Yang Ssu-Hsü, who in the coup-d'état that removed the Empress Wei had increased a reputation founded in the palace revolt of 707. Upon Ssu-Hsü, who already held the position of Deputy Chief of the Nei Shih Sheng (Nei Ch'ang Shih 內常侍), was conferred also the title of General of the Guard of Surveillance of Gates of the Right, an office which his brutal courage and rigid enforcement of discipline well qualified him to fill.

The loss of the works of Yao Yüan-Chih and of his successor Sung Ching makes it impossible to determine the part played by eunuchs in the direction of affairs during the next half-dozen years. But the bitter antipathy towards Buddhism of the one and the rigid conservatism of the other can hardly have made for cordial relations. The growing influence of Wang Mao-Chung, now a grand general, and director of the horse pastures and stables both in the capital and the provinces filled Li-Shih and Ssu-Hsü with apprehension. But in 720 the attempt of Sung Chung to recall debased currency excited such resentment that he was removed to an honourable retirement, and after the death of Yao Yüan-Chih in the following year, Li-Shih's former friend Chang Yüeh was recalled to the office of chief minister. The policy of both Yao Yüan-Chih and Sung Ching, markedly different as they were in temperament, had been essentially reactionary. The aim of the one was to return to the spirit, of the other to the forms of government of the Cheng-Kuan period. But though Yüan-Chih had done his utmost to remedy the worst abuses of Chung Tsung, though he had reduced the Buddhists to isolated communities unable to build new monasteries or even to repair without official permit those that they retained, though he had restocked the Emergency Granaries, and done his best to inculcate in the Emperor the need for frugality, though Ching had restored the constitutional rights of the Kung Feng Kuan and attempted, though without success, a solution of the currency problem, neither fully appreciated that the methods of T'ai Tsung were no longer applicable to the enormously expanded empire of the period K'ai-Yüan (開元). The idea of a bureaucracy, each competent member of which was capable of being moved to any post at any time, was workable only in a comparatively small state and under the supervision of a man of exceptional vigour and ability. There now began to arise the demand for specialists, each of whom should be retained in his office long enough to become minutely acquainted with its peculiar problems, and endowed with sufficient responsibility to be able to discharge his duties without the cumbersome delay of constant



applications to higher authority. As the first need of the empire was a sufficient annual revenue, these specialists naturally first appeared in the Treasury Departments.

The first of these specialists had already appeared in the person of Yang Ch'ung-Li (楊崇禮), a Vice-President of the Imperial Treasury (T'ai Fu Shao Ch'ing 太府少卿). To Ch'ung-Li fell the task of checking and disposing of the vast quantities of money and goods paid yearly into the Treasury, a duty which he continued to perform with undiminished assiduity for some twenty years. But as no effective methods had ever been taken against the tax-evaders, especially the large number who squatted upon unregistered land, the amount of these annual returns was already causing anxiety: and Ch'ung-Li required a colleague who would conduct a thorough investigation into the methods of tax collection. At the beginning of 721, the Censor Yü-Wen Jung (宇文融) requested permission to examine the cases of the squatters. Jung, who was alleged to have owed his promotion to Kao Li-Shih, enjoyed the patronage of the chief minister Yüan Ch'ien-Yao (源乾曜), and his request was allowed. At once an edict was issued compelling all squatters on pain of banishment to the frontier either to register with the local officials or to return to the places of their origins within a period of a hundred days. Jung and his assistants then ranged through the Empire to enforce this decree. Each adult male on registration was forced to pay a sum of fifteen hundred cash and granted tax exemption for six years. In all more than 800,000 households were added to the official register and land in proportion. There can be little doubt that, though Jung was mainly concerned to make the existing legislation work in a reasonably equitable way, he was not slow to exploit the personal advantages gained as the author of a system which brought immediately a very large sum of money into the Treasury, and would ensure a considerable increase in the revenue for the future. To the provincial officials Jung's immediate subordinates, the local Commissioners for the Promotion of Agriculture (Ch'üan-Nung Shih 勸農使), were now far more formidable figures than the remote Grand Imperial Secretariat; it was to these Commissioners that they submitted their first reports, and it is to be feared that excess of zeal or desire for rapid promotion led some of them to exaggerate their figures and to include previously registered households among the number of newly registered squatters. The emergence of the expert had indeed placed the central authorities in a humiliating position. The Grand Imperial Secretariat was reduced to accepting official reports through the agency of Jung's commissioners, the Department of Affairs of State was forced to ratify whatever proposals were made to it by Jung, and its dependant, the Revenue Board, was faced with the loss of many of its duties and still more of its authority. The Board Officials now represented Jung as a dangerous innovator, and dwelt upon the hardships

caused by his reforms, in answer to which Jung made a tour of the Empire, and in each place dilated upon the Imperial generosity to the assembled peasantry, who, he claimed, received his words with tears of gratitude. The result was that when a full enquiry was ordered into Jung's methods in 724, the only complaint came from a chief secretary of the Revenue Board, who could adduce no new argument and was exiled for his pains. Within a few months Jung had stepped into his now vacant office, and at once proposed to divert a portion of the newly forthcoming money to the stocking of "Price-controlled Granaries", and devised other means for the protection of the Agricultural Class.

The success of Yü-Wen Jung had aroused in no man more bitterness than in the chief minister, Chang Yüeh, who saw that if the three state councils were not to become the instruments of upstart officials armed with extraordinary powers, their members must be better informed, and their operation made more speedy and flexible. The chief source of delay was probably in the Grand Imperial Secretariat, which with a surprisingly small and irregularly appointed staff had the huge task of drafting all Imperial decrees. In the past neither T'ai Tsung nor Kao Tsung had hesitated to consult upon the matter of their decrees eminent scholars loosely attached either to the Secretariat or to the Imperial Chancellery, and this precedent was followed upon his accession by Hsüan Tsung. In 717 there was established in the Ch'ien Yüan Tien (乾元殿) at Lo-Yang a special library for the collection and classification of books in danger of being lost. This library, whose staff was soon increased and held offices in both capitals, developed by 725 into the Chi Hsien Tien Shu Yüan (集賢殿書院), or "Library of the Palace where the Sages Assemble". Under the presidency of Chang Yüeh himself and linked to the Emperor by a eunuch with the title of Ya Yüan Chung Shih (押院中使), Imperial Commissioner employed as Keeper of the Library, and responsible for all communications between it and Hsüan Tsung, the Chi Hsien Yüan held large and ill-defined advisory powers, and was able to relieve the minor officials of the Imperial Secretariat of much urgent business. Originally the Cheng Shih T'ang (政事堂) or Grand Hall of Affairs of State, in which the chief minister and heads of the three state departments met for their deliberations, had been in the offices of the Imperial Chancellery. In 683 it was moved to those of the Imperial Secretariat, which thenceforward took precedence over the other two. Chang Yüeh in 723 had its name altered to that of the Hall of the Grand Imperial Secretariat and Imperial Chancellery, as a means of putting an end to any rivalry between the two departments, and behind it established five panels from which the ministers could draw expert advice on specialised subjects. Indeed Yüeh was clearly determined to forge from the three state departments an instrument which should discharge under his direction the offices of government with efficiency and



unquestioning obedience. Not only was a vice president of the Imperial Secretarat, who had refused to regard his duties to be limited to the signing of any document put before him, dismissed to the provinces in 724, but at the Feng and Shan (封禪) sacrifices celebrated at the end of 725, the whole empire was left in no doubt that the members of the three departments were to be regarded as an official corps d'élite. To these only was extended the rare privilege of participating in the ceremonies upon the T'ai Shan (泰山), and upon them extraordinary promotions and gifts were bestowed when the sacrifices were concluded. To the resentment of the rest of the official world Yüeh remained obstinately indifferent.

The time of the annual Selection Examination was now imminent. In recent years this examination had been admirably conducted under the presidency of one Wang Ch'iu (王丘), who in 724 had with a number of other eminent officials been transferred to a prefecture in Shan-Tung, to alleviate the distress caused by a prolonged drought. In a secret memorial Jung now complained that since the departure of Ch'iu the examination had been mismanaged, and proposed that instead of the normal three examiners from the Board of Officials, ten special examiners, including himself, should be appointed to conduct the examination in the presence of the Emperor himself, and that the Board of Officials should be entirely excluded. In spite of protests the Emperor agreed to this change, but for this year only. At the beginning of 726, Yüeh suffered another and more serious rebuff. His nominee for the appointment of Chief Censor was rejected, and a protégé of Jung, Ts'ui Yin-Fu (崔隱甫), was appointed in his place. This man already bore a personal grudge against Yüeh, who had previously rejected his claim to civil office on the grounds of illiteracy. Yüeh's position was now precarious. Not only was his conduct of his office open to reproach, for he was avaricious and as notorious for his taking of bribes as for his intolerance of opposition, but also Jung, whom he had attempted to thwart in every way, enjoyed in addition to his great personal influence the support of the Censorate, now commanded by his adherents Ts'ui Yin-Fu and Li Lin-Fu (李林甫). Yet even to the warnings of his devoted supporter Chang Chiu-Ling (張九齡), Yüeh remained obstinately deaf. "What", he retorted, "can those rats do to me?"

The rats, however, were by no means impotent. Within a couple of months Yüeh found himself impeached by Jung, Yin-Fu, and Lin-Fu for having introduced sorcerers and taken bribes, and was summoned to appear before the Censorate for examination. The charges, needless to say, were abundantly proved when the Emperor sent Kao Li-Shih to visit Yüeh. Li-Shih brought back a pitiable story. Yüeh, he said, was sitting on a rush mat, eating from a common clay pot, and with his hair dishevelled and his face begrimed, was awaiting in extreme trepidation the passing of his sentence. Seeing that the Emperor was moved to compassion, Li-Shih

pressed home his advantage, and reminded him of Yüeh's former services. The Emperor was content to relieve Yüeh of his position of Chung-Shu Ling (中書令), President of the Grand Imperial Secretariat. His other offices he retained as before. Such is the official account of the impeachment of Chang Yüeh. But though Li-Shih is represented as having undertaken his mission at the command of the Emperor, there can be little doubt that this was a voluntary action of his own choosing. The eunuchs, in fact, had now an influence sufficient to enable them to defy even the highest civil authorities, and used this influence to reduce the power of these civil authorities by playing off one faction against another. It is almost certain that but for Li-Shih's support Jung could never have obtained his present position, and that Li-Shih deliberately used Jung as a counter-weight to the Chief Ministers, particularly to Chang Yüeh, but that he had no intention of allowing Jung to drive Yüeh out of the field, and that therefore at the critical moment he intervened upon Yüeh's behalf.

The light sentence passed upon Yüeh satisfied no one. His enemies, fearful that he would be recalled to high office, continued to bring against him charges to which he and his supporters replied with equal vigour. At the beginning of 727 the Emperor wearied of this party strife and dismissed the principal members of both factions. Yüeh was relieved of his official appointments and retired to the work of writing history. Jung was dismissed from the capital to the office of prefect of Wei Chou (魏州) in Ho Pei (河北). But the services of neither were wasted for long. In the following year Yüeh returned to the Chi-Hsien Yüan and through the agency of Yin Feng-Hsiang submitted to the Emperor his opinion on state affairs of high importance; while for Jung the new office of Commissioner of Waterways for Ho Nan and Ho Pei was created, which he discharged while doing duty as prefect of Pien Chou (汴州) with more profit, it was later alleged, to himself than to the state. After some eighteen months, the failure of the two chief ministers to reach any agreement brought about their dismissal and the appointment of Jung and P'ei Kuang-T'ing (裴光庭). Jung, who had boasted that if he could remain in office but a few months he would solve all the governmental problems, at first fulfilled all expectations by the excellence of his appointments. The elderly Sung Ching was recalled to the capital as vice-president of the Department of Affairs of State, and P'ei Yao-Ch'ing (裴耀卿), a prefectural governor of exceptional ability who had specialized in the study of economic problems, was appointed a vice-president of the Revenue Board. But Jung had made too many enemies at the capital; his attempt to get rid of a successful military commander recoiled upon his own head and within a hundred days of his appointment he was dismissed to the provinces. The immediate effect of Jung's dismissal was a substantial drop in the revenue. The Emperor at once summoned P'ei Kuang-T'ing and asked what plans he had for making good his



deficiency. Kuang-T'ing had nothing to reply and to save his face had charges of peculation brought against Jung, who was said to have embezzled large sums of public money during his tenure of office in Pien Chou. For these offences Jung was banished to the south and died on the way to his place of exile. The official judgment upon Jung has been exceedingly harsh. He is represented as the first of a long line of officials who by ruthless taxation secured their own positions and contributed to the downfall of the court by pandering to its luxury. In fact Jung did no more than render workable a system of taxation which years of neglect and maladministration had brought near to ruin; and the hardships caused by his reforms to a few were far outmatched by the benefits conferred upon the mass of the people. This point is well made by the compiler of the T'ung Tien, who asserts that as a direct result of Jung's measures the price of grain fell in the capital to thirteen cash per peck and in the north-east to five cash per peck, that thereafter no essential commodities were highly priced, and that travellers found greater ease and security than ever before. Unfortunately Jung had shown what political power could be acquired by an able financier, and his path was soon to be followed by others less scrupulous than himself.

The eunuchs, who had made no attempt to intercede on behalf of Jung, were at this time occupied in a private feud. Kao Li-Shih's only rival to Imperial favour was the Corean Wang Mao-Chung, and the earlier antagonism between the two men has been already noticed. In his official career Mao-Chung had specialized in the breeding of livestock, and his elevation in 713 to the two high offices of President of the Court of Imperial Carriages (T'ai P'u Ch'ing 太僕卿) and Imperial Commissioner charged with the Direction of Horse Pastures and Stables in the Capital and Provinces (Nei Wai Hsien Chiu Shih 內外閑廄使) gave him complete control of the provision of horses both for Imperial and Military use. He discharged his duties with such ability that in twelve years he had almost doubled the number of horses under his control. The spectacular parade which he organised at the time of the Feng and Shan sacrifices in 725 earned him the reward of the highest honorary title and of a special eulogy written at the Imperial order by Chang Yüeh. But though Mao-Chung's position was great, though he had gained ascendancy over his old associates who now held high commands both in the Northern Armies and in the Imperial Guards, and though he stood in such favour that his daily presence at court was demanded, he would not rest content until the soldiers were as much under his control as the horses he provided for their use. To this end he arranged in 728 a marriage between his daughter and the son of the senior officer of the Northern Armies, Ko Fu-Shun (葛福順), who bore the title of General of the Lung Wu armies (龍武將軍). The imprudence of this match was promptly pointed out to the Emperor by a Vice-President of the Board of Officials, whose subsequent indiscretion, however, rendered

his protest ineffective. Not only were the higher command of the Northern Armies prepared to take their orders from Mao-Chung, but even senior officers of the Palace Guards, including the section controlled by the eunuchs, openly adhered to his party. Not content with this, Mao-Chung requested in 729 the office of President of the War Board, and when this was refused, made no attempt to conceal his indignation. About the same time he sent a demand for arms to the Directorate of Weapons of War (Chün-Ch'i Chien 軍器監) newly established in the Northern Capital of T'ai Yüan Fu (太原府). As this demand was not accompanied by the authority of an Imperial decree, the vice-prefect Yen T'ing-Chih (嚴挺之) suspected some treasonable intent, and sent a secret report to the Emperor. But though its only immediate effect was the transference of T'ing-Chih to another prefecture, the rift between Mao-Chung and the Emperor had been opened and the eunuchs who had long been obliged to tolerate Mao-Chung's insults, now awaited their opportunity. In the following year a son was born to Mao-Chung, and Li-Shih was sent by the Emperor to confer upon the infant an office of the fifth grade. On his return the Emperor asked whether Mao-Chung had been gratified. "All he replied", answered the eunuch, "was 'Why shouldn't the child be of the third grade?' ", and seeing the Emperor's indignation, he pressed home his advantage. "Unless quick action is taken against these slaves," he added, "there will be trouble". The Emperor remembering Ting Chih's report was afraid that any action might precipitate a revolt, and for the moment held his hand. But at the beginning of 730 Mao-Chung and his adherents were dismissed and banished, and the order for Mao-Chung's execution soon followed. The elimination of Mao-Chung placed the eunuchs, and especially Li-Shih, in an even stronger position. "With Li-Shih in control", the Emperor is reported to have said, "I can sleep in peace", and from this time Li Shih moved from his private residence to apartments in the Palace.