

# Consolidation and Strengthening of Imperial Power in the Ming Dynasty from the Changwei System

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**Abstract.** In the process of confrontation between the emperor and his ministers, the emperor required a secret service organization that served him and was above the existing system. Such an organization would help him monitor his officials and enhance control over his subordinates. Besides, the ruler could also control the military and political affairs more closely through the Changwei, understand the public sentiment, prevent or forestall those activities with improper intentions. Ultimately, this would serve the purpose of maintaining his feudal rule. This emergence of secret service organizations in feudal society was, therefore, an inevitable development. The Changwei system was created to adapt to the feudal authoritarian political system, and its impact on the social, political, economic and judicial system at that time was significant. This is also a historical lesson for China, which is now building socialism with its own characteristics. The serious consequences caused by the destruction of the judicial system through Changwei serve as a reminder of the significance of today's laws, highlighting the importance of legal authority and stability. Moreover, the negative impact on the economic environment at that time underscores the wrong approach to economic development. In addition, the Changwei system's role also emphasizes the importance of building a clean and transparent political environment.

**Keywords:** Changwei system, power of emperor, spy agency, Ming Dynasty.

## 1. Introduction

During the Ming dynasty, centralized authoritarianism was strengthened, elevating feudal despotism and imperial power to new levels. Within this context, the Changwei system emerged as the product of the centralized authoritarian system. As a unique spy agency of the Ming Dynasty, and an extension and expansion of the imperial power beyond the bureaucratic system, the Changwei system existed to maintain the imperial power and its rule as well as to counter the feudal bureaucratic system. As an independent institution outside of the six departments, the Changwei enjoyed a number of privileges and greatly impacted the Ming's judicial system. It intensified the confrontation between imperial authority and the bureaucracy, further aggravating social conflicts.

Previous studies have mostly focused on the adverse effects of their terrible tactics and cruel struggles on the political, economic, and social environments. Examples include Wei Jianlin's "The Politics of the Eunuchs in the Ming Dynasty" and Wen Gongyi's "Eunuchs and the Palace in the Ming Dynasty," which recounted the darkness and brutality of Changwei from the eunuchs' point of view. The eunuchs controlled the Changwei institution under successive emperors and used it as a tool to manipulate power, mercilessly destroying the politics, justice, economy, and society of the Ming Dynasty. Both Wei and Wen define the Changwei institution as a dark, brutal and tyrannical secret service [1, 2], rather than conducting an in-depth study of the social background behind Changwei and its essential purposes. The Annals of Justice in the Ming Dynasty stated that "Ming did not die in the effect of stray bandits but died because of Changwei" [3].

This paper starts by examining the ultimate purpose of the Changwei system: to strengthen and consolidate the autocratic imperial power. It seeks to understand the historical background and responsibilities of the Changwei system, analyse its role and the inevitability of its emergence, and study how the purpose was achieved through extreme methods. In addition, the paper explores the positive and negative impacts of the Changwei system on the society and the officialdom at that time, as well as its influence on later generations. This comprehensive approach aims to provide an objective evaluation of the Changwei system. For example, Cui Hang argued in "Changwei System

and Ming Dynasty Supervisory System” that the Changwei system could flexibly use its supervisory power when the three legal departments were unable to fulfil their role of judicial supervision through normal procedures. This flexibility effectively restrained the administrative and judicial organs at all levels of the Ming Dynasty [4].

## 2. The History and Establishment of Changwei

### 2.1. Historical Background

Changwei refers to the scouting organization of the inner court of the Ming Dynasty. Chang refers to the Dongchang, Xichang, and Neihangchang; Wei refers to the Jinyi guard. Collectively, they are known as Changwei. The Dongchang Department was established in the eighteenth year of Yongle (1420). The Xichang Department was established in the thirteenth year (1477). The Neihangchang Department was set up in the early years of Zhengde in the Rongfu old barn. The Jinyi guards were originally part of the inner court’s military, established in the fifteenth year of Hongwu (1382). The Jinyi guard’s predecessor can be traced back to 1364, with the establishment of the Division of arch guards, responsible for ceremonial displays. The Jinyi guard also had another predecessor organization called the Yiluan Division. *Ming Taizu Shilum* mentioned that “in June of the third year of Hongwu, the pro military captains and Yiluans” [5], with their functions primarily focused on security work.

In December 1420, Zhu Di, the third emperor of the Ming Dynasty, decided to establish a new office called Dongchang to suppress political opposition. He appointed his trusted eunuchs to lead this office. Zhu Di had unlawfully overthrown the Jianwen Emperor’s regime by force, and ascending the throne in Nanjing and renaming the dynasty as Yongle. However, the legitimacy of the Yongle regime was disputed in society at that time. There were rumors that Emperor Jianwen was still alive, and many ministers in the court were not very supportive of the new regime. Moreover, Zhu Di did not trust many of the ministers. Contrary to his father’s rule that eunuchs should not intervene in political affairs, Zhu Di reused eunuchs and established the Dongchang. The Dongchang was also tasked with monitoring the Jinyi guards and held higher power than the Jinyi guards.

In the thirteenth year of Chenghua (1477), Ming Xianzong sought to strengthen the spy system and established Xichang in addition to the Dongchang. These along with the Jinyi guards, were collectively called Changwei. Eunuch Wang Zhi was appointed as the governor, with more power than Dongchang. Their activities extended from the capital all over the country. However, due to opposition, this move was forced to be withdrawn.

In the first year of Zhengde (1506), Xichang was reopened, led by the eunuch Gu Daiyong. Liu Jin, the eunuch from Silijian, had a contradiction with the leaders of the Dongchang and Xichang. He established another Neihangchang in the old warehouse of the Rongfu of the capital, operating independently. Neihangchang had a broader scope of detection than the three special agencies of the Jinyi guards, Dongchang and Xichang. It monitored not only subjects but also the Jinyi guards, Dongchang and Xichang. Neihangchang held greater authority than Dongchang and Xichang, and its punishment was particularly harsh.

After Liu Jin’s downfall in the fifth year of Zhengde, both Neihangchang and Xichang were abolished together. Although Neihangchang existed for only five years, it mutilated a lot of loyal people. As described in the *Annals of Justice in the Ming Dynasty*, “Wang Zhi and others claimed to hold the emperor’s secret orders, to be able to specialize in the right to torture hand kill, the brutalization of the good people” [3].

### 2.2. Staffing Structure and Criminal Investigation Agencies

In the fifteenth year of the Hongwu reign, Zhu Yuanzhang reformed the Praetorian Guard and established twelve military guards, the most important of which was the Jinyi guard. The Jinyi guards were responsible for criminal investigations, including the North and South Zhenfusi, which dealt with cases decided by the emperor, and had their own prisons, allowing them to make arrests,

interrogate, and execute people on their own without having to go through the general judiciary. North and South Zhenfusi controlled the five guards, lieutenants, and force in the implementation of the mission to arrest thieves and traitors, known as the “Diqi”.

The head of the Dongchang was called the Dongchang sealing eunuch, also known as the official or governor, and was the second most important person among the eunuchs after the sealing eunuch of the Palace of Justice. Dongchang’s officials were in charge of the punishment of a thousand households, the criminal hundred households each member, by The Jinyi guards thousand households, a hundred households to serve, known as the posting of the criminal officer. In addition, there were more than 40 officers, including the head officer, the leading officer, and the secretary, who were allotted by the Jinyi guards.

### 2.3. The Purpose of Its Establishment

The Jinyi guards scouted all the officials and citizens, while the Dongchang scouted the officials and citizens as well as the Jinyi guards; the Xichang sometimes also monitored the Dongchang, and the Neihangchang monitored the officials, citizens, and the Changwei guards, while the emperor directly led and supervised all the scouting organs. This constituted a comprehensive scouting secret service system.

At the beginning of the Ming Dynasty, Zhu Yuanzhang, the first emperor of the Ming Dynasty, had already reformed the existing judicial institutions. The Ministry of Justice, the Duzhaoyuan, and the Dalisi were directly under the control of the emperor. The emergence of Changwei was to further consolidate the authoritarian centralization of the Ming Dynasty. It was a reflection of the concentration of imperial power in the central government and a product of the feudal monarchical society.

The ultimate purpose of combining the Dongchang and the Jinyi guards was to fulfill the needs of the Ming emperors for political struggle. In the thirteenth year of Hongwu, during the Hu Weiyong incident, Zhu Yuanzhang abolished the position of the prime minister of the Zhongshu Province. Afterwards, Zhu Di’s seizure of power similarly led to the deaths often of thousands of officials. This shows that the Ming emperors tended to use harsh laws and massacres, rather than self-certified legitimacy, to carry out political struggles. Therefore, the formation of a special team of secret agents was particularly important.

The Ming rulers clearly recognized the limitations of the traditional judiciary when it came to major cases, especially those involving important court officials. The traditional judiciary, as a tool for the rulers to maintain their feudal dictatorship, was unable to treat court officials and commoners equally. Because of the excessive freedom, the judiciary did not have high prestige. Meanwhile, due to the large size of the feudal bureaucracy, it could not be used as a tool for the rulers to maintain their feudal dictatorship. The judiciary was too disorganized because of the large size of the feudal bureaucracy. Therefore, they needed a special organization directly under the emperor’s control to detect, arrest, imprison, and interrogate individuals. This organization should have strong executive and deterrent power to ensure the ultimate goal of consolidating the emperor’s power.

Moreover, because the Ming monarchs established an extreme monarchical dictatorship, the contradiction between the imperial power and the feudal bureaucracy gradually increased. The emperor could not trust the civil and military officials in the imperial court. Zhu Yuanzhang also deeply realized the harm of abusing his close relatives. To consolidate his imperial power, he ordered that eunuchs should not intervene in political affairs, as stated in an ancestral motto in the History of Ming Dynasty: “Eunuchs are not allowed to intervene in political affairs, and those who do so are killed” [6]. He also established the Jinyi guards. However, Zhu Di, in contrast to this ancestral teaching, appointed eunuchs as Changwei commander, allowing them to interfere in politics. Huang Zongxi, a thinker at the end of the Ming Dynasty, commented on this: “The eunuchs of the Han, Tang and Song dynasties took advantage of the incompetence of their monarchs to gain some influence. In contrast, the eunuchs of the Ming Dynasty were deeply entrenched in the power structure and entangled in a way that roughly maintained the power balance” [7].

The emergence of Changwei was inevitable under the feudal autocratic system. The rulers needed such institutions to help them suppress the opposing forces and even the feudal bureaucrats led by the ministerial power. The abolition of the prime minister by Zhu Yuanzhang is a very good example. After that, the political and military affairs of the whole country were all in the hands of the emperor, who, in order to utilize all his power to deal with the political affairs, had to entrust them to his close associates, such as eunuchs.

The conflict between imperial power and the feudal bureaucracy had a long history, and there were several reasons. Firstly, the feudal bureaucracy was prone to corruption, and the monarchs feared that such corruption would stir up civil unrest and further affect their rule. Secondly, in ancient China's feudal authoritarian social system, monarchs often used the first-born son to inherit the throne. However, many of these successors lacked the ability for sole rule. Consequently, emperors needed the ability to manage a huge feudal bureaucracy. The Ming emperors, in terms of the balance of power, were the most knowledgeable leaders in ancient Chinese feudal history. They appointed cronies and eunuchs on a large scale to fight against the civil bureaucracy, but in turn utilizing the civil bureaucracy to suppress the eunuchs and cronies, preventing them from gaining too much power.

In the process of confrontation between the emperor and his ministers, the emperor required a secret service organization that served him and was above the existing system. Such an organization would help him monitor his officials and enhance control over his subordinates. Besides, the ruler could also control the military and political affairs more closely through the Changwei, understand the public sentiment, prevent or forestall those activities with improper intentions. Ultimately, this would serve the purpose of maintaining his feudal rule. This emergence of secret service organizations in feudal society was, therefore, an inevitable development.

### 3. Consolidation and Strengthening of Imperial Power by Changwei System

#### 3.1. The Changwei System as a Method of Reinforcing Imperial Power

At the beginning of the establishment of Changwei, its primary objective was to collect all kinds of information, especially military intelligence, to protect national security. Before the Changwei System became entirely corrupt, it undertook the roles of domestic and foreign intelligence collection and made a great achievement for the protection of national security. *The Beijing Historical Records of the Ming Shilu* recorded: "Even if thieves and traitors are hidden in remote or obscure locations, Changwei is tasked with their secret apprehension and constant surveillance", summarizing the judicial function of the Changwei [8].

The Jinyi guards also had the power to cane someone as a symbol of the emperor's authority. This practice served as a way for the emperor to punish his ministers for disobeying him in the courtroom. For example, in the eighteenth year of the Chinghua era, Li Shan, the southern imperial historian, and others asked for relief because of the poor harvest. The emperor extracted typos from their pleas and ordered the Jinyi guards to take them to the Women Gate of Nanjing, where they each received twenty strokes of the cane, with eunuchs on guard supervising the execution." [9].

The function of the Dongchang was to "search for those who have conspired to rebel, to mislead the public, and to engage in treacherous and evil behavior [6]." Rebellious rebels were mainly political opponents, while the "evil words" mainly refers to religious activities like those of the Ming religion and White Lotus religion, which were prevalent during the Ming Dynasty. At the same time, they monitored government officials, celebrities, scholars and other political forces, and had the right to report the results of their monitoring directly to the emperor. The Jinyi guards were far less powerful than the Dongchang because they had to write and report information to the emperor [6]. This shows that the Dongchang power was still above the Jinyi guard, and its relationship to the emperor was also closer. The scale of the Dongchang was much larger than the Jinyi guard, extending its power as far as the Korean Peninsula.

Compared to the Dongchang, the Xichang had similar functions. However, the number of cases it handled, its speed, and the number of people involved far exceeded that of the Dongchang and the

Jinyi guards. The scope of investigation limited by the Xichang was not only Beijing, but all over the country. Anyone could become the target of the Xichang's surveillance and victimization. Even the royal families were not immune to the Xichang's investigations. According to *The History of the Ming Dynasty*: Lian who is a chancellor once drank wine with a guest, and the emperor secretly sent a spy to check it out. The next day, the emperor asked Lian if he had been drinking yesterday. Who was the guest in the seat? What did he eat? Lian answered with facts. The emperor smiled and said, "Indeed, you do not deceive me [6]." This shows the Changwei's maintenance and consolidation of imperial power and its various methods.

### **3.2. Impact of the Changwei System on Imperial Power**

The Changwei System had both positive and negative effects on imperial power. First, the existence of the Changwei System ensured stability and absolute control of imperial power. By controlling the army, officials, and wealth, the emperor was able to effectively maintain his dominance and ensure that his orders were carried out.

On other hand, the existence of the Changwei System could lead to power abuse and despotism. By controlling the supervisory bodies and enacting special laws, the emperor might lead to oppression and deprivation of other authorities and the people. The Dongchang and Xichang of the Ming Dynasty, while ensuring the consolidation of imperial power, also oppressed and persecuted many court officials and people, causing social unrest and, to a certain extent, subverting imperial power.

## **4. Impact of the Changwei System on the Socio-Economic and Political Environment**

The impact of the Changwei system on the socio-economic and political environment is complex and includes both positive and negative aspects. Positive impacts mainly include the strengthening of the Changwei system to ensure social stability and order. By controlling the ruling class, the Changwei system could minimize internal and external conflicts, thereby promoting the development and prosperity of the country and facilitating the steady economic growth.

The prevalence of the factory guard system was a concrete manifestation of eunuch interference in the Ming Dynasty. However, compared to the Han and Tang dynasties, where eunuchs and relatives firmly held the emperor in their hands and "holding the emperor hostage to order the vassals", the rulers of the Ming Dynasty always held the power in emperors their own hands. Even during the period of Wu Zong, when eunuchs had the greatest power, they were unable to escape from the emperor's name in deciding on matters of national importance.

The rulers of the Ming Dynasty advocated the rule of law, the establishment of the trial system, and the "Shenmingting" system of direct prosecution. At the same time, they continued to organize the previous code of law. The Changwei system was a challenge to the traditional feudal judicial system and the construction of the feudal institutional system, the maintenance of public order, the promotion of justice and fairness and supervision of the power of the original idea, objectively promoting the progress of the feudal rule of law.

The negative impact mainly refers to the fact that the strengthening of the Changwei system led to corruption and social injustice. Officials and bureaucratic groups, by establishing a close relationship with the emperor, abused their power and received privileged treatment. For example, the Dongchang and Xichang of the Ming Dynasty led to increased problems of bureaucratic corruption and embezzlement through their surveillance of local officials, affecting social justice and governance. The system of Changwei institutions did not have an ancient system as a standard, and there was no well-established monitoring system.

On the one hand, the rulers could flexibly use the factory guards to consolidate their rule, on the other hand, the Changwei system was also very obvious to the Ming judicial institutions and regime destruction. For example, Wang Yan argues that "the Changwei System blocked the path of the ministers' direct advice. It also undermined the road to national prosperity and destroyed the normal

order of rule in the Ming Dynasty” [10]. Huang Shanlin also mentions that “judicial imbalance under the Changwei intervention eventually led to serious political and social problems. The Ming Dynasty went from downfall to overthrow” [11]. This shows that the Changwei System had a great impact on the political and judicial environment of the Ming Dynasty. Moreover, Changwei created panic in society, broke the original social order, and caused a great impact on the labor production activities. These all hindered the economic development.

The Changwei system played an important role in the consolidation and strengthening of imperial power. Through the supervision of officials, intelligence, maintenance of order, the imperial power has been maintained and strengthened. However, the Changwei system also had some negative effects, such as power abuse, social injustice and corruption. These effects also had far-reaching impacts in later generations, shaping the trajectory of Chinese history.

## 5. Conclusion

The Changwei system was a product of a highly centralized political system, which brought many impacts on the ancient Chinese feudal dynasties as well as later generations. On the one hand, as the emperor’s close friends and a special secret service agency, the Changwei system was notorious for its cruelty and illegality and the use of severe punishment and cruel laws. It created social panic, made everyone feel at risk, and intensified social conflicts. At the same time, it also deepened the confrontation between imperial power and the feudal bureaucracy, resulting in mutual distrust. Changwei abused their power, rampaged and destroyed the political environment of the Ming Dynasty.

The excessive power of the Changwei also laid the foundation for eunuchs to interfere with the government, which made the Ming Dynasty weakened and ultimately collapsed. Moreover, the establishment of the Changwei elevated the centralized monarchy to a new height, and the emperor further consolidated the imperial power through the destruction of the traditional judicial system. The emperor conducted political struggles through Changwei to suppress dissenters and stabilize his rule. Before the Changwei were completely corrupted, their subordinate intelligence agencies made great achievements in the Ming Dynasty’s foreign wars.

Thus, the Changwei system was created to adapt to the feudal authoritarian political system, and its impact on the social, political, economic and judicial system at that time was significant. This is also a historical lesson for China, which is now building socialism with its own characteristics. The serious consequences caused by the destruction of the judicial system through Changwei serve as a reminder of the significance of today’s laws, highlighting the importance of legal authority and stability. Moreover, the negative impact on the economic environment at that time underscores the wrong approach to economic development. In addition, the Changwei system’s role also emphasizes the importance of building a clean and transparent political environment.

As a product of the bygone era, China, currently in the process of constructing a new era of socialism, should heed this lesson to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past. Simultaneously, it should strengthen its governance, firmly anchoring its commitment to a people-centered approach.

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