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Kangxi Emperor

The Great Consolidator — Statecraft, Cultural Renewal, and a Lasting Empire

by Robert Miller

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Chapter One

The Boy on the Dragon Throne

龙椅上的少年

A Birth in the Conquered City

On the eighteenth day of the third lunar month in the eleventh year of the Shunzhi reign—4 May 1654 by the Western calendar—a son was born in the Palace of Great Benevolence (Jingren Gong), one of the six eastern palaces behind the great ceremonial halls of the Forbidden City. He was the third son of the Shunzhi Emperor, the young Manchu sovereign who had been placed on the throne of China as a child of five, ten years before. The baby was given the personal name Xuanye. Nothing about his birth suggested that he would one day rule longer than any emperor in Chinese history.

His mother was a young consort of the Tong clan, a girl of perhaps fifteen. Her family came from Liaodong, the borderland east of the Great Wall where Chinese farmers, Manchu hunters, and Mongol herders had mingled for generations. The Tongs were of Han Chinese descent but had joined the Manchu cause early, and they had been enrolled in the Han Chinese divisions of the Eight Banners—the hereditary military and social organization that formed the backbone of the new dynasty. Her father, Tong Tulai, had served as a general in the conquest. In time the family would be reclassified as Manchu, an honor that reflected both its service and the position it gained as the family of an emperor's mother. Lady Tong would not live to see that day. She died in 1663, when her son was nine, and was later honored with the posthumous title Empress Xiaokangzhang. The boy who became Kangxi carried in his own ancestry the mixed world of the northeastern frontier: Manchu on his father's side, Han Chinese bannerman on his mother's, and, through his father's mother, the great Mongol house of the Borjigit, descendants of Chinggis Khan.

That grandmother would become the most important person in his early life. She was born a Mongol princess of the Khorchin, a tribe long allied by marriage with the Manchu ruling house, and she had been married at twelve to Hong Taiji, the second Manchu khan and the founder of the Qing name. When Hong Taiji died suddenly in 1643, her own son Fulin, a boy of five, was chosen as his successor in a compromise among powerful princes. That boy became the Shunzhi Emperor. She had spent her life among the most dangerous rivalries of the Manchu court, and she had learned patience, discretion, and the art of acting through others. History knows her as Grand Empress Dowager Xiaozhuang. To the boy Xuanye she was simply the woman who raised him, taught him, protected him, and, more than once, decided his fate.

To understand the world into which Xuanye was born, one must go back ten years, to the spring of 1644, when the Ming dynasty, which had ruled China for nearly three centuries, collapsed in a matter of weeks.

The Fall of the Ming

The Ming had been decaying for a generation. Its last emperors faced a treasury drained by wars against the Manchus in the northeast and by the costs of a bloated imperial clan. Its officials fought each other in bitter factional struggles. Its armies went unpaid. Across northern China, a series of droughts, famines, and epidemics in the 1630s and early 1640s drove millions of peasants from their land. Many of them joined rebel armies, and two great rebel leaders, Li Zicheng and Zhang Xianzhong, carved out vast territories across the north and west.

In April 1644, Li Zicheng's army marched on Beijing. The capital fell almost without resistance. The last Ming emperor, Chongzhen, climbed the small hill behind the Forbidden City known as Coal Hill and hanged himself from a tree. Li Zicheng proclaimed a new dynasty, the Shun, and his soldiers began to plunder the city.

At that moment, the strongest Ming army still in the field was stationed at Shanhai Pass, where the Great Wall meets the sea, under the command of a general named Wu Sangui. His task had been to hold the pass against the Manchus. Now his emperor was dead and his capital in rebel hands. Wu made a decision that would shape the next century of Chinese history: he invited the Manchus through the pass to help him defeat Li Zicheng. At the battle of Shanhai Pass in late May 1644, Manchu cavalry joined Wu's troops and routed the rebel army. Within days, the Manchu prince regent Dorgon entered Beijing. The Manchus did not restore the Ming. Instead, in the autumn of 1644, they brought the six-year-old Shunzhi Emperor from their capital at Mukden and enthroned him in the Forbidden City as the ruler of all China.

The Manchus called their dynasty the Qing, meaning "pure" or "clear." They were a people of perhaps a few hundred thousand, descended from the Jurchen tribes of the northeastern forests and river valleys. In the early seventeenth century, a chieftain named Nurhaci had united the Jurchen tribes, created the banner system, and declared himself khan. His son Hong Taiji renamed the people "Manchu" in 1635, proclaimed the Qing dynasty in 1636, and absorbed many Mongol tribes and Chinese defectors into his state. The Manchus had learned from the Mongols how to fight, from the Chinese how to administer, and from their own traditions how to bind warriors together through hereditary loyalty. Their banner system mixed Manchu, Mongol, and Han Chinese units under a single command, and its soldiers and their families formed a privileged caste that lived apart from ordinary civilians.

Taking Beijing was one thing; conquering China was another. Through the late 1640s and the 1650s, Qing armies—many of them made up of former Ming soldiers—fought their way south. They captured Nanjing in 1645, and in the lower Yangzi valley they met resistance of a kind they had not expected. The order that all Chinese men must adopt the Manchu hairstyle, shaving the front of the head

and braiding the hair behind in a long queue, provoked fury among people who regarded their hair as a gift from their parents. Cities that resisted were punished savagely. At Yangzhou, the massacre that followed the city's fall in 1645 became a byword for horror, and at Jiading, the town was sacked three times. These memories would linger among the scholar families of the south long after the fighting stopped.

Loyalist Ming princes established courts in the south, one after another, and were destroyed one after another. The last of them, the Prince of Gui, who reigned as the Yongli Emperor, retreated into the far southwest and finally fled to Burma. On the coast, a remarkable sea lord named Zheng Chenggong, known to Europeans as Koxinga, kept the Ming cause alive with a fleet of hundreds of ships and an army financed by maritime trade.

When Xuanye was born in 1654, therefore, the conquest was a decade old but far from complete. The capital was secure, the north was largely pacified, and most of the provinces had submitted. But Ming loyalists still held parts of the southwest and the coast. The great Chinese generals who had won the south for the Qing, including Wu Sangui, were becoming dangerously powerful. And within the Manchu court itself, the question of who truly held power had been fought out only a few years before.

The Father and the Court

The Shunzhi Emperor had spent his childhood under the regency of his uncle Dorgon, the prince who had led the Manchus into Beijing. Dorgon was a brilliant soldier and a ruthless politician, and in practice he had ruled the empire. When he died in a hunting accident in 1650, the twelve-year-old emperor and his mother moved swiftly to destroy his faction. Dorgon was posthumously stripped of his titles, his tomb was desecrated, and his followers were purged. At the age of thirteen, Shunzhi began to govern in his own name.

He was an unusual young man. He was intelligent, emotional, and drawn to Chinese culture more deeply than many of his Manchu nobles thought appropriate. He studied Chinese literature and painting. He favored Han Chinese officials. He became fascinated by Chan (Zen) Buddhism and spent long hours with Buddhist monks. He also developed an extraordinary friendship with a German Jesuit named Johann Adam Schall von Bell, who directed the Imperial Astronomical Bureau. The young emperor visited Schall at his residence, called him mafa, the Manchu word for grandfather, and listened to his discussions of astronomy, morality, and religion. Schall hoped to convert him, and for a time it seemed possible. In the end, Shunzhi turned to Buddhism instead.

Shunzhi's emotional life was turbulent. He quarreled with his first empress, a Mongol cousin chosen by his mother, and demoted her. He fell passionately in love with a consort of the Donggo clan, who bore him a son in 1657. When both the infant and then the consort herself died, in 1658 and 1660, the emperor was devastated. He reportedly considered abandoning the throne to become a monk. Then, in the first days of 1661, he fell ill with smallpox.

Smallpox was the great terror of the Manchu court. The Manchus came from the cold northeast, where the disease was less common, and many of them had no immunity. In China proper, where smallpox was endemic, it struck the newcomers with devastating force. Manchu princes were kept away from crowded places during outbreaks, and children of the imperial house were sometimes raised outside the palace to protect them. Xuanye had been among them. As a small boy, he was sent to live with nurses in a residence outside the walls of the Forbidden City, and there, at about the age of two, he caught smallpox and survived. The disease left his face marked with pockmarks for life, but it also gave him something precious: immunity.

The Shunzhi Emperor was not so fortunate. He died on 5 February 1661, at the age of twenty-two.

The Choice of a Child

The question of succession was urgent. Shunzhi left several young sons, none of them old enough to rule. The eldest surviving son, Fuquan, was nine; Xuanye was six. According to an account preserved by the Jesuits, Schall was consulted and argued for Xuanye on the ground that he had already survived smallpox and could not be taken by it. Whether or not the Jesuit's voice was decisive—Chinese sources do not mention it—the reasoning was compelling. A dynasty that had just lost an emperor to smallpox did not want to risk losing another.

What happened next was shaped as much by the Grand Empress Dowager as by the dead emperor. A last testament was issued in Shunzhi's name. In it, the emperor was made to confess a series of faults: he had neglected Manchu traditions, favored Han Chinese officials over Manchus, indulged in extravagance, grieved excessively for his consort, and relied on eunuchs. Historians generally agree that this document reflected not the wishes of the dying young man but the views of his mother and the Manchu nobles who resented his Chinese tastes. It named Xuanye as heir and appointed four senior Manchu officials, all from the banners directly controlled by the emperor, as regents to govern until the boy came of age.

On 7 February 1661, the six-year-old Xuanye was enthroned. The reign title chosen for him was Kangxi, combining characters meaning "health," "peace," or "abundance" and "bright," "flourishing," or "prosperous." It was a statement of hope. The reality was a dynasty still at war on its frontiers and a court divided among powerful men.

The Purple Forbidden City

The world into which the boy emperor was enthroned was, in physical terms, one of the most extraordinary settings ever built for a monarch.

The Forbidden City—in Chinese, the Zijin Cheng, the "Purple Forbidden City," named for the purple star at the celestial pole around which the heavens were believed to turn—had been built by the Ming Yongle Emperor in the early fifteenth century, when he moved the capital from Nanjing to Beijing. It covered some seventy-two hectares, enclosed by a moat and a wall nearly ten meters high, and contained hundreds of buildings arranged along a strict north–south axis. The southern half, the outer court, held the great ceremonial halls in which the emperor received his officials on formal occasions: the Hall of Supreme Harmony, raised on a triple marble terrace, where the throne itself stood; the Hall of Central Harmony; and the Hall of Preserving Harmony. The northern half, the inner court, held the residences of the emperor and his family, the palaces of the empresses and consorts, gardens, shrines, and workshops.

Every element of the design carried meaning. The roofs of the principal buildings were covered with yellow glazed tiles, yellow being the imperial color. The number of figures on the roof ridges, the number of studs on the doors, the height of the terraces—all were fixed according to the rank of the building. The axis of the city continued beyond its walls, south through the Gate of Heavenly Peace to the Altar of Heaven, and north to Coal Hill, where the last Ming emperor had hanged himself. The emperor, seated on his throne facing south, was symbolically at the center of the world, mediating between Heaven above and the people below.

When the Manchus entered Beijing in 1644, much of the palace had been damaged by fire during Li Zicheng's brief occupation. The new dynasty repaired it and moved in, keeping the Ming buildings and the Ming ceremonial forms almost intact. It was a deliberate choice. By occupying the palace of the Ming emperors and performing the rituals the Ming had performed, the Qing claimed to be their legitimate successors. The child who was enthroned there in 1661 was surrounded by symbols of a Chinese imperial tradition that was

not his own by birth, but which he would spend his life making his own.

For a six-year-old, of course, the palace was not a symbol but a home, and not always a comfortable one. Its halls were vast and cold in winter. Its courtyards were paved with stone, and few trees grew within its walls, partly, it was said, so that no assassin could hide in them. Its life was governed by ritual from before dawn until night. The boy was attended by nurses, eunuchs, and guards, and he was rarely alone. Years later, Kangxi would speak with evident pleasure of the freedom he found outside the palace, on the hunt and on his travels. The Forbidden City was the center of his world, but it was also, in a sense, a gilded cage, and much of his life would be spent finding ways to leave it.

The Four Regents

The four regents were Soni, Suksaha, Ebilun, and Oboi. All were veterans of the conquest, and all had been loyal to Shunzhi against Dorgon. But they were not equals, and they did not trust one another.

Soni was the senior regent, an elderly man of great prestige from the Hešeri clan who had served the dynasty since the time of Nurhaci. He was cautious and conservative, and his age and health limited his ability to dominate the council. Suksaha belonged to the Plain White Banner, which had once been Dorgon's, and he had switched sides to support Shunzhi after Dorgon's death. The other regents regarded him with suspicion as a turncoat. Ebilun was a respected but relatively passive figure who tended to follow stronger personalities. And Oboi, of the Bordered Yellow Banner, was the most forceful of them all: a famous warrior, physically imposing, proud, and ambitious, who had fought in many of the conquest's hardest campaigns and who believed that the dynasty had grown soft under Shunzhi.

Under the regents, the court's direction changed sharply. Where Shunzhi had leaned toward Chinese ways, the regents emphasized Manchu supremacy. They abolished the Thirteen Offices, the eunuch-run agencies that Shunzhi had revived on the Ming model, and executed the most powerful eunuch. They reduced the role of Han Chinese officials in policy-making and strengthened that of the Manchu princes and banner leaders. They pursued the war against Ming loyalists with relentless severity.

That severity was felt most painfully in the wealthy and cultured lower Yangzi region, known as Jiangnan. In 1661, the regents launched a campaign against tax arrears among the gentry of the region. More than thirteen thousand degree-holders and officials were punished, many stripped of their degrees, some flogged, some imprisoned. Among them was the young scholar Han Tan, who would later become a senior official under Kangxi; he had been cashiered because of a debt equivalent to a trivial sum. The episode, known as the Tax Arrears Case (Zouxiao an), was meant to break the power of the southern elite and fill the treasury. It succeeded in the first aim but deepened the resentment of the scholar class.

In the same years came the Ming History Case. A wealthy man from Zhejiang named Zhuang Tinglong had acquired an unpublished manuscript history of the Ming and expanded it with the help of local scholars. After his death, his family published it. The book used Ming reign titles for the years after the Manchu conquest of the northeast and spoke disrespectfully of the Qing founders. When an informer brought it to the attention of the authorities, the regents responded with fury. In 1663, about seventy people—authors, editors, printers, booksellers, and even purchasers—were executed, and hundreds more were exiled. Zhuang Tinglong's body was exhumed and mutilated. It was a warning that the conquerors would not tolerate nostalgia for the fallen dynasty.

On the coast, the regents adopted a still more drastic measure. To starve Zheng Chenggong's forces of food, recruits, and trade, they

ordered in 1661 that the entire coastal population of the southeastern provinces be moved inland by a distance of ten to fifteen miles and more. Villages were burned, fields abandoned, and fishing fleets destroyed. Hundreds of thousands of people lost their homes and livelihoods. This policy, known as the Great Clearance, would remain in force for more than twenty years.

In the far southwest, Wu Sangui pursued the last Ming claimant into Burma. In 1662 the Burmese king handed the Yongli Emperor over to him, and Wu had him executed in Kunming, strangled with a bowstring. The Ming imperial line in China was extinguished. In the same year, Zheng Chenggong, having driven the Dutch from their colony on Taiwan, died suddenly on the island at the age of thirty-seven. The great Ming loyalist movement had lost both its emperor and its most formidable general.

None of these decisions were made by the boy on the throne. But all of them would shape the empire he inherited, and he would spend much of his reign dealing with their consequences.

The Education of an Emperor

What was the young emperor doing while the regents governed? He was learning.

The Grand Empress Dowager Xiaozhuang took charge of his upbringing. Kangxi later recalled that from the time he could walk and speak she had taught him how to behave: how to move, how to sit, how to speak in measured words. She insisted on discipline. She would not tolerate laziness or carelessness. She wanted him to understand that an emperor's every act was observed, and that his self-control was the foundation of his authority. Kangxi would remember her with a devotion that he expressed for the rest of her long life, and when she died in 1688 he grieved for her with an intensity that alarmed his officials.

Another important figure in his early life was Sumalagu, a maidservant of the Grand Empress Dowager who had accompanied her from Mongolia. Sumalagu helped teach the young emperor Manchu and supervised his daily care. He regarded her almost as a second grandmother. His wet nurse, a woman of the Sun family, was another lasting attachment. Her son by her husband, a Chinese bondservant named Cao Xi, was a boy named Cao Yin, who grew up as one of the emperor's companions. Decades later Cao Yin would serve as Kangxi's most trusted agent in the south, sending him secret reports on the moods of the Jiangnan elite, and his grandson would write the greatest novel in the Chinese language, The Dream of the Red Chamber. The networks of personal loyalty formed in the imperial nursery would become instruments of state.

Kangxi's formal education was demanding. He learned to read and write Manchu, the language of his ancestors and of the dynasty's internal communications. He learned Chinese, which he would master so thoroughly that he could discuss the finer points of classical philology with the leading scholars of his age. He also learned some Mongolian, which he would use in dealing with the Mongol princes. He studied the Confucian classics—the Analects of Confucius, the Mencius, the Great Learning, the Doctrine of the Mean—and the great histories, particularly the Comprehensive Mirror for Aid in Government of Sima Guang, which narrated more than a thousand years of Chinese history as a vast collection of lessons for rulers.

In later life, Kangxi described his youthful zeal for study in terms that are still striking. He said that from the age of about eight he had read the classics aloud, repeating each passage a hundred and twenty times until he knew it by heart, and that in his teens he had studied so hard that he coughed blood. Even allowing for the conventional exaggeration of a ruler presenting himself as a model of diligence, the picture is consistent with everything else we know: he was a boy who

wanted to know things, and who believed that knowledge was a form of power.

He was also trained as a Manchu warrior. He learned to ride, to shoot with the powerful composite bow, and to hunt. These skills were not merely recreations. The Manchus had conquered China on horseback, and their rulers were expected to embody the martial virtues of their people. Throughout his life, Kangxi would be a passionate hunter, and his great autumn hunts in the north would serve as military exercises, diplomatic gatherings with the Mongols, and expressions of Manchu identity. He took pride in his skill. In old age he claimed to have killed, over a lifetime of hunting, well over a hundred tigers, more than a hundred bears, and many hundreds of deer and wolves. Whatever the precise numbers, the claims show how he wished to be seen: as a ruler who had not grown soft.

The Calendar and the Jesuits

One of the most dramatic episodes of the regency years concerned the calendar, and it would leave a deep mark on the young emperor.

In imperial China, the calendar was not merely a practical tool. It was a sacred instrument of rulership. The emperor was the Son of Heaven, and his duty was to harmonize human affairs with the order of the cosmos. Accurate prediction of eclipses, solstices, and the movements of the planets demonstrated that the dynasty was in tune with Heaven. A failure of prediction could be read as a sign that Heaven's favor was waning. For this reason, the Imperial Astronomical Bureau was an important institution, and the choice of which astronomical system to use was a political matter.

Since the late Ming, Jesuit missionaries had offered the Chinese court the benefits of European astronomy, which in the seventeenth century could predict celestial events with greater accuracy than the traditional Chinese methods. Under the Qing, Schall had been appointed director of the Astronomical Bureau and had produced a

new calendar based on European methods. His prominence aroused resentment among traditional astronomers, among Muslim astronomers who had served the Ming, and among officials who distrusted foreign influence.

In 1664, a scholar named Yang Guangxian, a fierce opponent of Christianity, brought formal charges against Schall. He accused the Jesuit of propagating a subversive foreign religion, of plotting against the state, and of using his astronomical position to cause harm—specifically, of choosing an inauspicious date for the burial of the infant son of Shunzhi's beloved consort, thereby bringing calamity on the imperial family. The regents took up the charges. Schall, by now elderly and partially paralyzed by a stroke, was tried along with several other Jesuits, including a young Flemish priest named Ferdinand Verbiest, and with Chinese Christian astronomers who had worked with them. In 1665 Schall was sentenced to death by dismemberment.

Then, on the day the sentence was being considered, a powerful earthquake struck Beijing. Part of the palace was damaged, and a fire broke out. The Chinese understood such events as warnings from Heaven. The Grand Empress Dowager intervened, recalling Schall's friendship with her late son, and the sentence was commuted. Schall was released but died the following year. Several of the Chinese Christian astronomers, however, were executed. The missionaries in the provinces were rounded up and sent to Canton. Yang Guangxian was appointed director of the Astronomical Bureau, and the traditional calendar was restored.

The young emperor, only ten or eleven at the time, observed these events. Years later, he would say that this case had first made him aware of his own ignorance in matters of mathematics and astronomy. How could he, as emperor, judge between competing claims if he did not understand the science involved? It was a question that would lead him, within a few years, into a personal

engagement with Western learning unmatched by any other Chinese ruler.

Marriage and the Politics of Alliance

In 1665, at the age of eleven, Kangxi was married. His bride, a girl of about twelve, was a granddaughter of the senior regent, Soni, and a member of the powerful Hešeri clan. The choice was made by the Grand Empress Dowager, and its purpose was clear: to bind Soni more firmly to the young emperor and to strengthen him against Oboi, who had sought to promote a candidate from his own faction. The marriage made Soni's son, Songgotu, the emperor's uncle by marriage, and Songgotu would become one of the most powerful men in the empire.

The empress, posthumously known as Xiaochengren, appears to have been a gentle and dignified young woman, and Kangxi was genuinely fond of her. In 1674, during the darkest days of the Three Feudatories rebellion, she gave birth to a son and died the same day. The emperor's grief would shape the fate of that son, and the fate of the dynasty, for the next forty years.

The Rise of Oboi

As the years passed, the balance among the regents shifted. Soni grew old and ill. Ebilun followed Oboi's lead. Suksaha, isolated and distrusted, found himself increasingly at odds with Oboi, who regarded him with personal hatred. Gradually, Oboi came to dominate the regency.

The crisis that revealed his power concerned land. When the Manchus conquered the north, they had seized vast tracts of farmland around Beijing for the banner people. In the original distribution under Dorgon, the Plain White Banner, Dorgon's own, had received choice lands that by rights, according to the order of precedence, should have gone to the Bordered Yellow Banner. Oboi, a Bordered

Yellow man, revived the grievance two decades later and demanded an exchange. In 1666, despite the enormous disruption it would cause to the farmers on the land, the regents ordered the exchange to proceed.

Three senior officials objected: Sunahai, a Manchu who was president of the Board of Revenue, and two Han Chinese governors, Zhu Changzuo and Wang Denglian, whose provinces would be affected. They argued that the exchange would ruin thousands of families and serve no purpose of state. Oboi demanded their execution. The twelve-year-old emperor, who by now was attending council meetings, opposed the death sentences. Suksaha also opposed them. But Oboi persisted, and in early 1667 the three officials were put to death. The case showed that Oboi was willing to override even the emperor's expressed wishes.

The Emperor Comes of Age

In the summer of 1667, Soni, near death, petitioned that the emperor, now thirteen, begin to rule in person. It was an astute move. Shunzhi had taken personal power at a similar age, and the precedent gave the request legitimacy. With the support of the Grand Empress Dowager, the request was granted. In August 1667, Kangxi formally assumed personal rule. Soni died shortly afterward.

But formal power was not real power. The regents continued to "assist" the emperor, and Oboi remained the dominant force in the government. Almost immediately, he moved against Suksaha. Suksaha, perhaps sensing his danger, petitioned to be allowed to retire and to guard the tomb of the late Shunzhi Emperor. Oboi seized upon the request as evidence of disloyalty: by asking to withdraw, Suksaha implied that the emperor's personal rule did not deserve his service. Oboi drew up a list of twenty-four crimes and demanded that Suksaha and his entire family be executed. Kangxi refused to approve the sentence. Oboi, according to the records, argued furiously in the emperor's presence, raising his voice and rolling up his sleeves in the

manner of a man preparing to fight, until the emperor yielded in part. Suksaha was strangled, and many of his relatives were executed.

For the thirteen-year-old emperor, the lesson was bitter. He held the title of ruler. He sat on the throne. His name stood at the head of every edict. And yet a man who was supposed to be his servant had compelled him, in his own audience hall, to sanction the death of a regent appointed by his father. The question was no longer whether Kangxi would rule, but whether Oboi would let him.

Over the next two years, Oboi's arrogance grew. He placed his relatives and allies in key posts. He handled memorials before the emperor saw them and sometimes issued decisions in his own name. He sat in the emperor's presence in ways that courtiers found disrespectful. Officials who wished to advance learned to court him rather than the throne. To many observers it seemed that the Qing, which had freed itself from the regency of Dorgon only eighteen years before, was falling under the control of another overmighty subject.

The young emperor watched and waited, as his grandmother had taught him. He continued to study, to ride, to attend council. He gave no outward sign of hostility. Behind the walls of the palace, however, he was preparing. Among his preparations was a group of young Manchu men, his own age or a little older, whom he gathered around him under the pretense of practicing buku, the Manchu and Mongol style of wrestling. Officials who noticed the wrestling matches thought them a harmless amusement for a teenage ruler with too much energy. They were not.

By the spring of 1669, Kangxi was fifteen years old. He had been on the throne for eight years and had been nominally ruling for nearly two. He had watched Oboi kill his opponents, override his decisions, and treat him with contempt. He had studied the histories, where the fates of rulers who tolerated overmighty ministers were written in blood. He had a grandmother who had already survived one regency and helped destroy it. And he had a plan.

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