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Yongle Emperor

The Architect of Imperial Grandeur — The Forbidden City, Maritime Exploration, and the Glory of the Ming Dynasty

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PART ONE

The Northern Prince

Chapter One

Born into the New Dynasty

Zhu Di was born on May 2, 1360, in the city of Yingtian, which his father had captured four years earlier and which would soon be renamed Nanjing, the "Southern Capital." By the calendar still officially in use, it was the twentieth year of the Zhizheng reign of the Yuan dynasty. The Mongol emperors who had ruled all of China for nearly a century were still on their throne in Dadu, far to the north, but they no longer governed much of the country. The Yangtze valley belonged to whichever warlord could hold it, and in 1360 one of the strongest of those warlords was Zhu Yuanzhang, the father of the newborn boy.

Zhu Yuanzhang's life story was already becoming a legend. He had been born in 1328 to a family of landless tenant farmers in Fengyang, in the poor and flood-prone country north of the Huai River. In 1344, when he was sixteen, drought, locusts, and epidemic disease swept through the region. Within a few weeks his father, his mother, and his eldest brother were dead. The family had no land in which to bury them; a neighbor finally gave a corner of a field. With nothing to eat and no one to support him, the boy entered a Buddhist monastery as a novice. The monastery itself soon ran short of food and sent its novices out to beg. For three years Zhu Yuanzhang wandered the countryside of the Huai region with a begging bowl, seeing the condition of the people and, almost certainly, encountering the secret religious societies that were spreading through the starving villages. Many of them preached that the Buddha Maitreya would soon

descend to the world and the Prince of Light would appear to end the age of suffering.

In 1351 those societies rose in revolt. The rebels wrapped red cloths around their heads and became known as the Red Turbans. Within a year rebellion had spread across much of central China. In 1352 Zhu Yuanzhang, now twenty-four, received a letter from a childhood friend urging him to join the rebels. The monastery where he lived was burned by government troops soon afterward, and he made his choice. He walked to the rebel-held city of Haozhou and enlisted with a Red Turban commander named Guo Zixing. He was tall, ungainly, and, according to later portraits, strikingly ugly, with a jutting jaw and a pockmarked face. He was also intelligent, ruthless, and an exceptional judge of men. Within months he was one of Guo's trusted lieutenants. Guo gave him his adopted daughter in marriage. She was a young woman surnamed Ma, and she would become the most admired empress in Ming history.

By the time Zhu Di was born, his father had his own army, his own administration, and his own capital at Nanjing. He was nominally a subordinate of the Red Turban "Song" regime, but in practice he was an independent power. He had begun recruiting Confucian scholars as advisors. One of them, Zhu Sheng, is supposed to have given him a three-part strategy that he followed for the rest of the war: "Build high walls, store up grain, and be slow to call yourself king." His rivals were powerful. Upriver lay Chen Youliang, who commanded an enormous fleet on the Yangtze and the great lakes. Downriver lay Zhang Shicheng, who controlled the wealthiest cities in China, including Suzhou and Hangzhou. In 1363, when Zhu Di was three years old, his father met Chen Youliang's fleet on Lake Poyang in one of the largest naval battles in premodern history and destroyed it. Four years later he took Suzhou and captured Zhang Shicheng. By the end of 1367 the whole of the Yangtze basin was his.

The World in 1360

The year of Zhu Di's birth was a year of upheaval far beyond China. Across Eurasia, the great Mongol empire that had united most of the continent in the thirteenth century was falling apart. In Persia, the Mongol Ilkhanate had already collapsed into competing successor states. In the steppes north of the Black Sea, the Golden Horde was entering a period of civil war. In Central Asia, a young warrior of the Barlas tribe named Timur was beginning the career that would make him the most feared conqueror of his age.

The plague that Europeans called the Black Death had swept across the continent a decade earlier, killing perhaps a third of the population of Europe and the Middle East. China had suffered its own catastrophic epidemics in the 1330s and 1340s, which contributed to the collapse of Yuan authority. In Western Europe, England and France were locked in the long struggle later called the Hundred Years' War; in 1360 the Treaty of Brétigny brought a temporary peace. In the eastern Mediterranean, the Ottoman Turks had just crossed into Europe and were expanding into the Balkans.

The world into which Zhu Di was born was one in which old empires were dying and new powers were being forged by war. He would grow up to be one of the forgers.

A Question of Mothers

The boy born in 1360 was the fourth of Zhu Yuanzhang's sons. Who his mother was is one of the oldest puzzles of his reign, and it matters more than it might seem.

Official Ming records, in the form in which Zhu Di allowed them to survive, state that he was a son of the principal wife, Empress Ma. So, according to the same records, were his elder brothers Zhu Biao, Zhu Shuang, and Zhu Gang, and his younger brother Zhu Su. Empress Ma,

in this version, was the mother of five sons, and Zhu Di was the eldest of her sons still living when the succession came into question.

There are good reasons to doubt this. Several Ming writers, working from records that escaped Zhu Di's revisions, recorded a different arrangement. Their sources included the memorial tablets in the ancestral shrine attached to the founder's tomb outside Nanjing, as well as the registers of the Court of Imperial Sacrifices. In those records, the tablets of the founder's consorts were arranged in a fixed order around his own. One account lists the mother of Zhu Di as a consort named Lady Gong, who had no recorded children of her own in the official genealogy. Another tradition, recorded by later writers, identified his mother as a Korean woman; Korea routinely sent women to the Mongol court, and some came into Zhu Yuanzhang's household as the Yuan collapsed. A third story, preserved in Mongol chronicles written centuries later, claimed that Zhu Di was the son of a Mongol consort of the last Yuan emperor, captured when Dadu fell, and therefore secretly a Mongol prince. This last story is chronologically impossible, since Zhu Di was born eight years before Dadu fell, but it says something about how the steppe peoples wanted to remember the emperor who fought them for so long.

Modern historians generally conclude that Empress Ma was probably not Zhu Di's birth mother, and that his claim to be her son was strengthened, if not invented, after he took the throne. The Korean-mother story cannot be proven. The Lady Gong records are the strongest evidence, but they do not settle where she herself came from. What can be said with confidence is that Zhu Di cared enormously about the question. Once he was emperor, he had the founder's Veritable Records rewritten twice. One of the clearest effects of the revisions was to place him firmly among Empress Ma's sons, and to suggest that his father had loved him best and had even considered naming him heir.

This was not vanity. In the system of inheritance Zhu Yuanzhang created, the sons of the principal wife came first. Among them,

seniority decided everything. If Zhu Di was the son of a lesser consort, his claim to the throne after the deaths of his elder brothers was weak. If he was the son of the empress, and the eldest surviving son of the empress when his nephew fell, then he could present himself as the natural heir. A great deal of the history of his reign was shaped by that "if."

Whatever the truth of his birth, Empress Ma was the mother who raised him, and he honored her memory throughout his life. She was by every account a remarkable woman. She had shared her husband's years of danger. When Guo Zixing once imprisoned Zhu Yuanzhang in a quarrel, she was said to have smuggled food to him hidden against her skin, burning herself on the hot cakes. As empress she wore old clothes, wove silk with her own hands, and repeatedly urged her husband toward mercy. When he raged against an official, she was often the only person who could talk him out of an execution. She died in 1382. Her husband never named another empress, and his cruelty, many historians believe, grew worse without her.

A Household Under Arms

Zhu Di grew up in a household that was still half an army camp. His father was at war for the first eight years of his life. His earliest memories would have been of soldiers, messengers, captured enemy banners, and the constant movement of men and supplies through the gates of Nanjing. The child had no reason to know that the world could be otherwise.

He also grew up with a father who trusted almost no one. Zhu Yuanzhang had seen too many allies turn on him. He had watched Guo Zixing's sons plot against him, and he had executed his own nephew, Zhu Wenzheng, for disloyalty. His suspicion of his subordinates would become pathological in his later years. But he had a theory about his own children. Officials, he believed, would always be tempted to serve themselves. Sons were different. Sons shared the family's interest in the survival of the dynasty. If the empire were

defended by the emperor's sons, stationed as princes across the realm, it would be safe from both the Mongols outside and ambitious ministers within.

That theory shaped the boy's education. The princes were tutored in the Confucian classics by some of the most respected scholars in the empire, including the great literatus Song Lian, who supervised the education of the crown prince and the younger princes alike. They learned to read and write classical Chinese, to recite the Analects and the Mencius, and to understand the histories of earlier dynasties. Their father insisted that they learn from the past. He commissioned special texts for them describing the good and evil princes of earlier ages and the fates that befell them.

But Zhu Yuanzhang had little patience for scholars who had never held a sword. He also wanted his sons to be soldiers. They learned to ride and shoot. They were drilled with the troops. They were expected to endure hardship. There is a story, preserved in sources sympathetic to Zhu Di, that as a boy he disguised himself as an ordinary soldier so that he could share the lives of the men he would one day command. The story may be a later embellishment, but it fits the man he became. As emperor he slept in tents on campaign, ate with his officers, and seemed happiest when he was far from the capital.

The Founding of the Ming

On January 23, 1368, when Zhu Di was seven years old, his father ascended the throne in Nanjing and proclaimed a new dynasty. He called it Ming, meaning "bright" or "brilliant." The name may have carried echoes of the Manichaean and Maitreyan language of the Red Turbans, with their Prince of Light, though Zhu Yuanzhang would soon suppress the very sects that had carried him to power. He chose as his reign name Hongwu, "Vast Martial Power." Unlike earlier emperors, who had often changed reign names several times, he kept the same one for his whole reign. From this point on, Chinese emperors are usually known by their reign names. Zhu Yuanzhang became the Hongwu Emperor. His fourth son would become the Yongle Emperor.

That same year, the Ming general Xu Da marched north. In September 1368 his army entered Dadu. The last Yuan emperor, Toghon Temür, had already fled north through the passes to the old summer capital of Shangdu, and then deeper into the steppe. The city that the Mongols had called Khanbaliq, the "City of the Khan," the capital that Marco Polo had described, fell almost without a fight. The Ming renamed it Beiping, "the North Pacified." It became a frontier garrison city. Its palaces were partly dismantled, and its population declined. The center of gravity of China shifted back to the south.

The Mongols, however, had not been destroyed. They had been driven back to the steppe from which they had come, and from there they could still raid the frontier and, in the minds of the new dynasty's leaders, might someday return. The Yuan court in exile continued to call itself the Great Yuan. In 1372 a great Ming expedition into Mongolia under Xu Da was defeated, with heavy losses, near Karakorum. The new dynasty learned that the steppe could not easily be conquered. Hongwu shifted to a defensive strategy. He fortified the northern passes, established military colonies along the frontier, and placed his sons in command of the great frontier garrisons.

Princes of the Realm

In May 1370 Hongwu enfeoffed nine of his sons as princes. The ten-year-old Zhu Di received the title Prince of Yan. Yan was the ancient name of the region around Beiping, a state of the Warring States period whose capital had stood near the site of the modern city. The title marked him for the most important frontier post in the empire.

Hongwu's system of princely establishments was one of the defining features of his reign, and it would directly shape the fate of his fourth son. Each prince received a palace in a strategic city, an annual stipend in grain and silk, and an establishment of officials. Most importantly, the frontier princes received military guards: personal armies that could number from three thousand to nearly twenty thousand men. In time of war, a prince could take command of the regular garrison troops in his region as well. The princes did not govern their territories directly; the civil administration remained in the hands of the emperor's officials. But in military matters along the northern frontier, they were the emperor's lieutenants. The princes of Qin at Xi'an, Jin at Taiyuan, and Yan at Beiping formed a line of defense across the north. The father intended them as a shield. His grandson's advisors would come to see them as a sword pointed at the throne.

The boy did not go north immediately. He remained in Nanjing for another decade, studying and training. In 1376, along with several of his brothers, he was sent to Fengyang, his father's ancestral home, which Hongwu had briefly intended to make his capital and had filled with palaces and garrisons. There the princes lived among soldiers and peasants. They learned about agriculture and taxation and the hardships of the common people. They also learned the life of an army in garrison. Zhu Di later described these years as among the happiest of his life. He came to know the soldiers' world intimately, and he came to know the country north of the Yangtze, which was poorer, harder, and more dangerous than the comfortable south.

Twenty-Six Sons

Zhu Di was one of a very large family. His father had twenty-six sons and sixteen daughters by many consorts, and most of the sons were enfeoffed as princes as they came of age. The household of the founder was therefore not only a family but a political system in miniature, and the fortunes of the brothers varied enormously.

Some of them were scholars and patrons of culture. Zhu Chun, the Prince of Shu, was so devoted to learning that his father called him "the Scholar of Shu," and he made his fief at Chengdu a center of letters. Zhu Su, the Prince of Zhou, was a botanist and physician who sponsored the compilation of works on medicine and famine plants. Zhu Quan, the Prince of Ning, would become one of the most prolific writers of the dynasty on music, drama, Daoism, and tea.

Others came to bad ends long before the succession crisis. Zhu Tan, the Prince of Lu, became obsessed with Daoist elixirs of immortality and died in 1389, poisoned by the minerals he swallowed; his father gave him the posthumous name "Wasteful." Zhu Zi, the Prince of Tan, was summoned to the capital in 1390 after his wife's family was implicated in the Hu Weiyong treason case. Afraid of what awaited him, he shut himself and his wife in their palace and set it on fire. Several of the brothers were notorious for abusing their servants and their subjects, and their father's instructions to them are full of rebukes.

The boys grew up in competition for their father's approval and in fear of his anger. They learned early that the founder's love was conditional, and that the line between a favored son and a disgraced one could be crossed in a day. Zhu Di, by all accounts, learned this lesson better than most. He kept out of scandal, served his father loyally, and built his reputation on the one thing the founder valued above all else: success in war.

Lady Xu

In 1376, at sixteen, Zhu Di married the eldest daughter of Xu Da. The match was political, as all imperial marriages were. Xu Da was the greatest general of the founding generation, a childhood friend of Hongwu's from the Huai country, and the conqueror of Dadu. By marrying his fourth son to Xu Da's daughter, the emperor bound the dynasty's most important military family even more closely to the throne. Xu Da would spend much of the rest of his life on the northern frontier, and the young prince learned a great deal from his father-in-law.

The bride was fourteen. She would prove to be one of the most capable women of the early Ming. The official histories describe her as studious from childhood, fond of reading, and known in her father's household as a "female scholar." Whether or not these descriptions owe something to the conventions of imperial biography, her later actions show that she was intelligent, politically shrewd, and physically brave. She would bear Zhu Di three sons and four daughters, among them the future Hongxi Emperor, Zhu Gaochi, born in 1378. During the civil war she would organize the defense of Beiping, arming the wives of officers and soldiers and sending them to the walls. As empress she would compile a book of instructions for women and a collection of Buddhist texts.

Their marriage was, by the standards of imperial unions, unusually close. Zhu Di had other consorts, as every prince did, but there is no sign that any of them ever challenged Lady Xu's place. She advised him on politics and personnel. After she died in 1407, he never named another empress. In this, if in little else, he followed the example of his father.

To the North

In 1380, at the age of twenty, Zhu Di finally took up residence in Beiping. The city he found was a shadow of the Mongol capital. Much of the old Yuan palace had been destroyed or stripped. The population had fallen sharply, both because of the war and because the Ming had deported many of the city's inhabitants and moved troops in their place. The northern part of the old city had been abandoned, and the walls pulled in. But the location remained what it had always been: the hinge between the North China Plain and the steppe, the point at which the routes from Mongolia and Manchuria converged on the passes leading to the agricultural heartland.

The prince was given the old Yuan palace complex as his residence. He was now the senior imperial representative on the most dangerous frontier of the empire. Mongol groups still raided across the passes. Former Yuan officers still commanded armies in the northeast. To the northwest, the eastern Mongols and the Oirats competed for control of the steppe, and the Ming could never be sure which way they would turn.

He also arrived as one of several princes on the frontier, each of them watched by their father. Hongwu was entering the darkest period of his reign. That same year, 1380, he accused his chief minister Hu Weiyong of plotting treason. Hu was executed along with his family, and the emperor abolished the office of chief minister altogether. From then on the six ministries reported directly to the throne, and the emperor personally reviewed hundreds of documents every day. Over the next fourteen years, a series of investigations growing out of the Hu Weiyong case and later the case of the general Lan Yu led to the deaths of tens of thousands of people. Officials who went to court in the morning reportedly said farewell to their families, not knowing whether they would return.

The young Prince of Yan, far away in Beiping, watched these purges from a safe distance. He learned several lessons from them. He

learned that power in the Ming state ultimately rested on the emperor's person, and that an emperor who acted decisively could destroy any rival. He learned that the founder trusted his sons more than his officials. And he learned, perhaps, that his father would not hesitate to destroy anyone whose loyalty came into question, whether a minister, a general, or a member of his own family.

The Shadow of Succession

The succession, at least, seemed settled. The eldest son, Zhu Biao, had been named crown prince in 1368 at the age of thirteen. He was an earnest, gentle young man, carefully educated by Song Lian and the best Confucian scholars of the realm. He sometimes argued with his father for leniency and seems to have been genuinely loved by his younger brothers. As long as he lived, no prince could dream of the throne.

Zhu Biao died in May 1392, at the age of thirty-seven, after an illness contracted on an inspection tour to Shaanxi. His death devastated his father. It also opened a question that the old emperor had never expected to face. Zhu Biao's eldest son had died as a child. His next son, Zhu Yunwen, was fourteen years old. The founder's surviving sons included the Prince of Qin, Zhu Shuang, aged thirty-six; the Prince of Jin, Zhu Gang, thirty-four; and the Prince of Yan, Zhu Di, thirty-two. Each of them commanded large armies on the northern frontier.

Hongwu chose his grandson. In September 1392 Zhu Yunwen was proclaimed Imperial Grandson and heir apparent. The decision followed the principle of primogeniture: the heir's son inherited before the heir's brothers. It was also a decision that would be second-guessed for the next six centuries. Later historians sympathetic to Zhu Di claimed that the old emperor had seriously considered naming his fourth son instead, and that he had been talked out of it by his Confucian advisors. Contemporary evidence for

this is slight, and much of it was produced after Zhu Di had taken power.

Zhu Di accepted the decision publicly. He had little choice. In private, he must have understood what it meant. The new heir was a scholarly teenager raised among Confucian tutors who regarded the military princes with suspicion. The princes were his uncles. Several of them were already notorious for arrogance and cruelty. The Prince of Qin was accused of abusing his subjects and of building a palace on an imperial scale. One day the boy would sit on the throne, and the men around him would ask how a young emperor could govern when his uncles commanded the strongest armies in the realm.

Then fate cleared Zhu Di's path. The Prince of Qin died in 1395, and the Prince of Jin in early 1398. When Hongwu himself died on June 24, 1398, at the age of sixty-nine, Zhu Di was the eldest surviving son of the founder. He was also the most experienced general in the dynasty, with the largest and most battle-hardened army on the frontier.

The new Jianwen Emperor and his advisors moved quickly to reduce the power of the princes. They began with the weaker ones. Everyone knew they would come for the Prince of Yan last.

He was ready.

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