

47 PROCLAMATIONS OF THE HONGWU EMPEROR

In 1368 Zhu Yuanzhang (1328-1398) founded the Ming dynasty. He was the first commoner to become emperor in 1500 years. His origins were truly modest; after his parents died in an epidemic when he was sixteen, he became a monk and even for a while begged for his living. During the chaotic years of the fall of the Yuan dynasty, he became a rebel organizer. In 1356 his group of rebels seized Nanjing and two years later Beijing. Known by his reign title as the Hongwu Emperor, he is famous as both a conscientious and a despotic ruler. In the two proclamations below, he discusses two topics that were to worry social and political observers for the rest of imperial China: the corruption of high officials occupying positions that made extortion or acceptance of bribes all too easy; and the disruptive and dishonest activities of the assorted underlings, runners, guards, and servants who did the bidding of officials and controlled ordinary people's access to them. Hongwu's proclamations can be read as expressions of the values and thoughts of a man who rose meteorically within the Chinese social system. They also reveal much about the working of the bureaucracy and its impact on people's lives.

AN IMPERIAL EDICT RESTRAINING OFFICIALS FROM EVIL

To all civil and military officials:

I have told you to refrain from evil. Doing so would enable you to bring glory to your ancestors, your wives and children, and yourselves. With your virtue, you then could assist me in my endeavors to bring good fortune and prosperity to the people. You would establish names for yourselves in Heaven and on earth, and for thousands and thousands of years, you would be praised as worthy men.

However, after assuming your posts, how many of you really followed my instructions? Those of you in charge of money and grain have stolen them yourselves; those of you in charge of criminal laws and punishments have neglected the regulations. In this way grievances are not redressed and false charges are ignored. Those with genuine grievances have nowhere to turn; even when they merely wish to state their complaints, their words never reach the higher officials. Occasionally these unjust matters come to my attention. After I

discover the truth, I capture and imprison the corrupt, villainous, and oppressive officials involved. I punish them with the death penalty or forced labor or have them flogged with bamboo sticks in order to make manifest the consequences of good or evil actions.

Those who have died from their punishments are mute. However, those who survive confuse the truth by speaking falsely. Lying to their friends and neighbors, they all say they are innocent. They complain, "The court's punishments are savage and cruel." This kind of slander is all too common. Yet I had clearly warned my officials from the beginning not to do anything wrong. Too often they have not followed my words, thereby bringing disaster upon themselves.

When a criminal commits a crime or when a good person mistakenly violates the law, he is going to be punished. Among these guilty ones there will always be some who are so afraid of being flogged or of dying that they will try to bribe the law enforcement officials with gold and silk. The law enforcement officials, for their part, place no value on bringing glory to their ancestors, their wives and children, or themselves; nor do they seek to preserve their own lives. The guilty persons, afraid of death, use money to buy their lives. The officials, not afraid of death, accept the money, thereby putting their lives in danger of the law. Yet later, when they are about to be punished or are on their way to the execution ground, they begin to tremble in fear. They look up to Heaven and they gaze down at the earth. They open their eyes wide, seeking for help in every direction. Alas, by then it is too late for them to repent their actions. It is more than too late, for they now are no longer able to preserve their lives.

For example, the former vice-president of the ministry of war, Wang Zhi, accepted a bribe of 220,000 cash for making up false reports on runaway soldiers and other matters. I questioned him face to face, "Why are you so greedy?"

He replied, "Money and profit confused my mind. They made me forget my parents and my ruler."

I then asked, "At this moment what do you think about what you did?"

"Facing punishment," he replied, "I begin to feel remorse, but it is too late."

Alas, how easily money and profit can bewitch a person! With the exception of the righteous person, the true gentleman, and the sage, no one is able to avoid the temptation of money. But is it really so difficult to reject the temptation of profit? The truth is people have not really tried.

Previously, during the final years of the Yuan dynasty, there were many ambitious men competing for power who did not treasure their sons and

daughters but prized jade and silk, coveted fine horses and beautiful clothes, relished drunken singing and unrestrained pleasure, and enjoyed separating people from their parents, wives, and children. I also lived in that chaotic period. How did I avoid such snares? I was able to do so because I valued my reputation and wanted to preserve my life. Therefore I did not dare to do these evil things.

For fourteen years, while the empire was still unpacified, I fought in the cities and fields, competing with numerous heroes, yet never did I take a woman or girl improperly for my own pleasure. The only exception occurred after I conquered the city of Wuchang. I was enraged at Chen Youliang's invasion, so after I took over the city, I also took over his former concubine. Now I am suddenly suspicious of my own intentions in that case. Was it for the beauty of the woman? Or was it the manifestation of a hero's triumph? Only the wise will be able to judge.

In order to protect my reputation and to preserve my life, I have done away with music, beautiful girls, and valuable objects. Those who love such things are usually "a success in the morning, a failure in the evening." Being aware of the fallacy of such behavior, I will not indulge such foolish fancies. It is not really that hard to do away with these tempting things.

DISMISSAL OF EXCESSIVE LOCAL STAFF BECAUSE OF THEIR CRIMES

Among those with no redeeming features, the worst are the riffraff found in the prefectures of Su and Song. It is indeed a great misfortune that these ne'er-dowells can cause such great disturbances among the cities' inhabitants. For the average town dweller there are four types of occupation. These idle riffraff engage in none of them, but just hang around, concerned only with establishing connections with the local officials. In the city and suburbs of Songjiang alone there are 1350 persons who do not engage in any actual production but busy themselves only with currying favor with local officials. In the city and suburbs of Suzhou, 1521 individuals fall into this category. Alas, those who engage in productive work are few, while those who shirk work are many!

These idlers understand neither the hardships of the farmer nor the hard labor of other occupations. They work for the local government, calling themselves the "little warden," the "straight staff," the "record staff," the "minor official," and the "tiger assistant"—six types in all, each with a different name.

Even during the farmers' busiest season these idle persons will go to the fields to make trouble and interrupt agricultural activities. When it is time to transplant

rice, and the farmers, with rice sprouts in their hands, are busy with their chores, these idlers will come into the fields, clutching an official dispatch. They will drag people away from the irrigation water wheel and arrest them on the spot. They have even been known to take the rice sprouts out of a farmer's hands and arrest him right in his field. Yet when formal official matters are not really pressing, government officials are not supposed to interrupt agricultural work. Therefore, how could one interrupt the farmer as he farms with something that is really nothing?

At this time, if I were to thoroughly eradicate this riffraff, in addition to those already imprisoned, I would have to deal with no less than 2000 people from each of these two prefectures. These men take part in none of the four useful occupations. They utilize the prestige of the government to oppress the masses below. If people outside the government do not know how wicked these men are, they are going to say that I am harsh in my punishments, since they see only the severity of the law. They do not know that certain persons have used the name of the court and the government to engage in evil practices.

In the morning I punish a few; by evening others commit the same crime. I punish these in the evening and by the next morning again there are violations. Although the corpses of the first have not been removed, already others follow in their path. The harsher the punishment, the more the violations. Day and night I cannot rest. This is a situation which cannot be helped. If I enact lenient punishments, these persons will engage in still more evil practices. Then how could the people outside the government lead peaceful lives?

What a difficult situation this is! If I punish these persons, I am regarded as a tyrant. If I am lenient toward them, the law becomes ineffective, order deteriorates, and people deem me an incapable ruler. All these opinions can be discerned in the various records and memorials. To be a ruler is indeed difficult.

I have exterminated the vicious riffraff in the prefectures of Suzhou and Songjiang. Evil persons in other areas, seeing this edict, take heed. Discontinue your evil practices and you will perpetuate your good fortune and prosperity. But if you violate this edict, you will be exterminated and your family will be broken. Be cautious! Be cautious!

Translated by Lily Hwa