

The Humane and Filial [Renxiao] Empress of the Yongle Emperor, Lady Xu, was the eldest daughter of the Prince of Zhongshan [Xu] Da. From her earliest years, she was chaste and quiet and because she was fond of reading, she was called the “Girl Student.” When the Hongwu emperor [r. 1368–1398] heard of her sagacity and modesty, he summoned [her father] Da and said to him: “You and I have a friendship that goes back many years. In ancient times, when there was a mutual affinity between lord and subject, it was often sealed by a marriage alliance. You have a fine daughter so why don’t we arrange a match for her with my son, Di [Zhu Di, the future Yongle emperor]?” Da kowtowed in gratitude.

In the ninth year of the reign period Hongwu [1376] Lady Xu became the principal wife of the Prince of Yan [the Yongle emperor before he ascended the throne]. The Empress Ma [the wife of the Hongwu emperor] loved her deeply. Lady Xu [even] followed the prince when he went to his border fiefdom. During the three-year mourning period following the death of the Filial and Compassionate Empress Ma, she ate only vegetarian food exactly as prescribed by the rites. She had committed to memory each and every one of the words of wisdom left by the Empress Ma, and never forgot any of them.

The Prince [in 1399] had raised his troops to quell the disturbances and had left the capital in order to carry out a surprise attack on Daning. Li Jinglong then availed himself of this opportunity to advance upon and surround Beiping [Beijing]. At the time, the Renzong emperor [the heir-apparent who would take over the throne in 1425] as eldest son was left in charge of the defense of Beijing, but in all matters regarding defensive preparations, he sought the advice

of [his mother] the empress. Jinglong vigorously attacked the city. Because there were too few soldiers inside the city, the empress roused the wives of officers, gentry, and common people, who after having been provided with armor, climbed the ramparts in order to defend the city. In the end, the city was not taken.

When the Prince [in 1402] ascended the imperial throne [in Nanjing], Lady Xu was named empress. She said: "Every year there has been fighting and warfare in both the north and the south; both the soldiers and the common people are weary and worn. It would be fitting for them to be allowed to rest." She also said: "The wise and talented of this generation were all bequeathed by the Hongwu Emperor so it is not appropriate for you to make distinctions between the new and the old." She also said: "In the bestowal of His grace, Emperor Yao began with those closest to Him."⁴ In each case, the emperor valued her suggestions and adopted them.

In the beginning, the empress's younger brother Zengshou often relayed information regarding state affairs to the Prince of Yan and for this was executed by the Jianwen emperor. When the Yongle emperor ascended the throne he wanted to confer upon him a hereditary rank, but the empress argued strongly against it. The emperor did not listen to her, and in the end awarded him the title of State-Stabilizing Duke and ordered that [Zengshou's] son Jingchang should inherit that title. When he then told the empress about this, she said: "This was not something that I wanted," and never thanked him for it. On another occasion, she said that [her two sons] the Prince of Han and the Prince of Zhao were unruly characters, and that the government would do well to choose someone from the ranks of the officials to take charge of the affairs of their princedoms.

One day, she asked [her husband]: "With whom does Your Highness decide matters of administration?" The emperor replied: "The Six Ministers manage administrative affairs and the Hanlin Academy [scholars] takes care of strategy and planning." The empress then requested that all the wives of the officials be summoned to court and gifted with items of clothing as well as money. She then instructed them saying: "How could it be that the service of a wife to her husband is limited to ensuring that he is provided with food and clothing? There should also be other ways in which she assists him. As regards the words of a friend, there are those that he follows and those that he rejects; when it comes to the words exchanged between husband and wife, they are pleasant and accommodating and easily accepted. From morning until night I wait on His

4. Emperor Yao is a sage emperor of hoary antiquity.

Highness, and my only concern is for the well being of the people. This is what all of you should diligently devote yourselves to as well." Basing herself on selections from the *Charter for Women* and [Ban Zhao's] *Precepts for My Daughters*, she wrote her *Household Instructions* in twenty chapters. She also arranged in classified order the notable words and worthy actions of the ancients, which she made into a book entitled *Exhortations*. All of these books were promulgated throughout the empire.

In the Seventh Month of the fifth year of the Yongle reign period, the empress fell gravely ill. Still her sole concern was to urge the emperor to love and cherish his subjects, to seek far and wide for wise and talented [officials], to treat the members of the Imperial House with gracious propriety, and not to be arrogant toward members of other families. In addition, she spoke to the heir apparent and said: "In the past, the wives of the officers of Beijing took up arms and defended the city walls on our behalf. I regret that I have not been able to accompany the emperor on one of his northern tours and reward them for their efforts." That month, on the day *yimao*, the empress passed away at the age of forty-six.

The emperor was filled with grief, and ordered great [vegetarian] feasts prepared on her behalf at the Linggu and Tianxi Monasteries. He permitted the officials to present offerings, and the Court of Imperial Entertainments supplied the sacrificial paraphernalia. On the *jiawan* day of the Tenth Month, Empress Xu was posthumously awarded with the title of Empress Humane and Filial. In the seventh year of the Yongle reign period [1409], construction began on a tomb on Mount Tianshou in Changping, and when four years later the tomb was completed the empress's body was placed inside it. This is none other than the Changling or Eternal Tomb. The emperor did not install another empress after her death. When [her son, the emperor] Renzong ascended the throne, he conferred upon her the posthumous title of Cultured Empress Humane and Filial, Compassionate and Virtuous, Sincere and Bright, Sedate and Devoted, Match for Heaven and Equal to the Sages [Renxiao Ci'i Chengming Zhuangxian Peitian Qisheng Wen Huanghou] and [ordered that] she be worshipped in the great ancestral hall.