THE EMPRESS AND THE DRAGON THRONE

Imperial Women of the Early Ming Dynasty

ELLEN SOULLIERE

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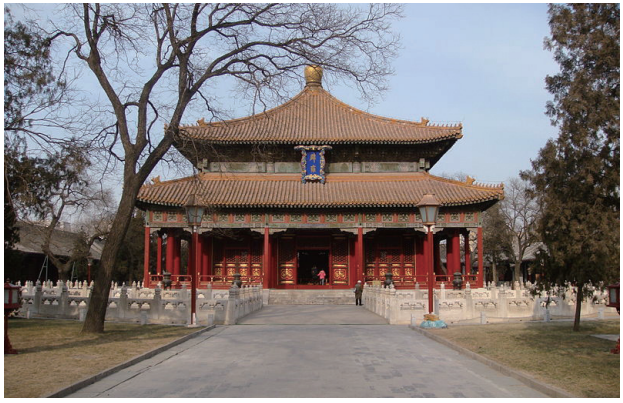

Fig. 0.1: The Biyong Hall at the Imperial University, Yuan dynasty to twentieth century. Wikimedia Commons.

An Empress Dowager Intervenes

In the blazing heat of August in 1443, Li Shimian, the chancellor of the Imperial University, and two of his distinguished colleagues stood near death in front of the university not far from the imperial palace in Beijing. Their heads and hands were encased in cangues, heavy, portable wooden stocks used to punish and humiliate criminals. Li was nearly seventy years old, and his students held grave fears that he might not survive the punishment. Only someone acting under imperial authority could have ordered this life-threatening, public punishment for such an illustrious official. The man responsible was Wang Zhen, a eunuch in the service of the Zhengtong emperor, then a boy of fifteen who had ascended the throne at the age of seven. In his role as director of ceremonial, Wang Zhen had angered the civil officials by his increasingly audacious actions under the emperor's aegis. Li

Shimian's offense was that he had deliberately, pointedly, and probably repeatedly declined to show ritual deference to Wang Zhen when he had come to inspect renovation work at the Imperial University. Confident in the authority that derived from his close relationship with the boy emperor, Wang Zhen had ordered the terrible punishment.

The university students marched to the imperial palace and stood outside the palace walls to protest. Their shouts and wails of anguish were so loud that they could be heard within. The situation was at last resolved when the emperor's mother, Empress Dowager Sun, was alerted by her father, Sun Zhong, who wrote to her, asking her to intercede for Li Shimian. Acting as intercessor, the empress dowager summoned her son and said,

> The chancellor is the teacher of the nation's students. What crime has he committed that he has been made into a public spectacle with his head in a cangue?

The emperor thanked his mother for her concern and said that he knew nothing about the matter. Furious, his mother replied,

> If you did not know, then what use is it for you to be emperor?

The emperor sent someone to inquire, learned what Wang Zhen had done, and ordered Li Shimian's immediate release.[1]

Who was Empress Dowager Sun and what was the basis of her moral authority over the Son of Heaven? How had she entered the palace and reached the position she held in 1443? What kinds of texts had been available for her education? Who were her parents and what was her family background? What can we learn about her relationships with her own family, the emperor, the senior officials, the eunuchs, and the other women in the imperial family? How did her interests overlap with or diverge from those of the emperor and the other members of the court? The richness of the textual and material records of the Ming dynasty provides opportunities to explore these questions and many more.

The Texts

Texts of many kinds inform the study of women in the Ming imperial family. Narrative sources with a Confucian orientation are abundant. First among these is the official history, completed in 1739 by a team of scholar officials under the direction of chief editor Zhang Tingyu. Two chapters are devoted to the biographies of the most prominent imperial women. Information in the biography of an individual woman is often supplemented by information in the biographies of her sons and daughters and her father and brothers. Further useful information can be

1. Mao Qiling, *Shengchao tongshi shiyi ji*, 2, 19b; Liu Tingyuan, *Guochao mingchen yanxing lue*, 2, 32b.

1

Women, Men, and Institutions in the World Before the Founding of the Dynasty

Fig. 1.1: Map of Nanjing and region, Chen Zushou (jinshi, 1635), hand copied between 1736 and 1861. Courtesy of Harvard-Yenching Library of Harvard College, Harvard University.

In the humid heat of late summer 1355, a heavily pregnant young woman in her early twenties stood on the northern bank of the Yangzi River surrounded by women and children. They were responsible for the gold and silver and all the supplies of water, food, clothing, fuel, and other portable goods that belonged to their households. Hundreds of small boats were waiting for them on the shore. The young woman's name was Ma Xiuying, and her mission was to lead the wives of men who belonged to a rebel military force on the dangerous crossing from the north to the south bank. She had helped her young husband, Zhu Yuanzhang, as he had gradually taken over the leadership of the force. Now they were positioning themselves to take Nanjing. The movement had originated in Haozhou north of the Huai River, and the territory they contested included a network of major waterways. The Huai linked water transport routes including the Yellow River to the north, the Yangzi River, and the Grand Canal. A hand-drawn copy of a map of the Nanjing region, based on earlier military maps, and annotated with historical commentary on the early Ming (Fig. 1.1),[1] shows the Huai River, the lower reaches of the Yangzi River catchment, and the great city that was their destination. It was the largest city on the southern side of the great river, set like a jewel amid a filigree of lakes, rivers, tributaries, and rich farmland. Since the third century CE, Nanjing had been the capital of successive dynasties. The following year, they would make it the capital of a new state, and their secure base there would be a key factor in their success in the years of warfare that lay ahead.

The Mongol Yuan dynasty was on the brink of collapse and rival groups in south-central China were competing to establish a successor state. In the thirteenth century, Genghis Khan and his descendants had established the most extensive empire the world had ever known, linking the Eurasian continent from China to Persia. Genghis's grandson, Kublai Khan, had been proclaimed emperor of China in 1280, but his reign and those of his descendants in China proved problematic, as the Mongol rulers sometimes struggled to design and maintain the structures and institutions that would allow them to successfully govern, tax, educate, and administer the village-based agrarian communities and the larger cities where most of their Chinese-speaking subjects lived. By the middle of the fourteenth century, the Mongol emperors of China, with a primary base at Dadu (Beijing) and secondary bases scattered around the empire, including at Yingtian fu (Nanjing), had begun to lose control of parts of their vast empire. They had reason to recall the resistance they had encountered in their efforts to subjugate South China after the fall of the Southern Song in 1279.[2]

In the first decades of the fourteenth century, the situation of many people was desperate. Epidemics, including smallpox, typhoid, cholera, and diarrhea, beset the people and limited their lifespans. Summer brought drought, famine,

1. Chen Zushou, *Huang Ming zhifang ditu*; Yan Ping et al., *China in Ancient and Modern Maps*, 150.
2. DMB, 383–84; Rossabi, *Khubilai Khan*, 205.

and plagues of locusts, and winters were exceptionally severe.[3] From the 1330s onward, many localities in the Yangzi River catchment were riven by conflict among contenders for military, political, cultural, and economic dominance. Rival groups with powerful leaders engaged in local rebellions, seeking allies and subordinates from among the populace and the followers of defeated rivals. Initially, they focused on establishing dominance in their own localities, geographically distant from Yuan seats of power. As they grew in strength, regional leaders in many localities began to think that they might have a chance to replace the Yuan imperium.

In the challenging context of the breakdown of central authority and conflict among rivals for dominance in an unstable political situation, there were many limitations on the social structures within which individuals could pursue their interests. Nuclear and extended families and the larger household organizations that often took shape around them were not always able to meet the needs of their members. Buddhist and Daoist clergy and religious organizations engaged in complex negotiations with their communities and with the central authorities about the positions they could occupy and the income streams they could access. Large collectives had responsibilities for agriculture, flood control, and irrigation and had taken on responsibility for education in the villages, but their coverage was far from universal.[4] Clan schools and temples were centers where teaching and learning could occur and social networks could be cultivated. In rural communities, especially those north of the Yangzi River, millenarian doctrines with Manichean and Maitreyan Buddhist origins, won adherents. Military organizations ranging from local militias to fully fledged armies affiliated themselves with White Lotus Buddhist and Red Turban sects. To women and men living in rural regions far from the center, the influence of the central government must have seemed close to invisible by comparison to the power and authority of local military leaders. This was the situation, and these were the dominant social structures within which women and men sought their fate and their fortunes toward the end of the first half of the fourteenth century.

Within this broad context, locally based military leaders grouped and regrouped, rose, and fell, fiercely competing with one other and challenging Mongol rule.[5] They gathered around themselves soldiers and talented people who could provide the skills they needed to organize, wage war, and prepare to govern in peacetime. When one rival leader defeated another, he sought to incorporate the defunct rival's forces into his own armies. As the military leaders became stronger, one by one they began to develop imperial ambitions. Some became

3. Dunstan, "The Late Ming Epidemics"; Franke and Twitchett, *Cambridge History of China* (hereafter CHC), 6:585; Brook, *The Troubled Empire*, 59–73.
4. CHC, 6:447–48.
5. Mote, *Imperial China 900–1800*, 537ff.

confident enough to claim that they had established a new dynasty. In North China, Han Lin'er declared himself to be the emperor of a new Song dynasty inspired by White Lotus beliefs. He took for himself the title Little Prince of Light (xiaomingwang, 小明王), a sobriquet with Manichean associations.

Each of the rival leaders amassed armies, and in the south some of them had navies, deployed on the Yangzi River and its network of tributaries and lakes. Around 1351, Guo Zixing emerged as the leader of a rebellion fueled by millenarian Red Turban belief systems. Early in 1352, Guo Zixing and his forces occupied the small city of Haozhou, later renamed Fengyang, in what is now Anhui Province.[6] Fengyang is an auspicious name, referencing the phoenix and the positive forces of yang. The city would retain an honored place as the ancestral home of the Ming dynasty, but for many people in the 1330s and 1340s, the situation in Haozhou was desperate.

Zhu Yuanzhang, the founder of a dynasty that would last for nearly three hundred years, began life there, born into a family under severe stress. His father, his mother, and most of his siblings and extended family perished of famine and disease in 1344, when he was sixteen years old. Only Zhu himself, one brother, a sister-in-law, and a nephew survived. He sought refuge in a monastery where he eked out a living, performing menial tasks until the monks were no longer able to support him and turned him out. For three years, he lived a hand-to-mouth existence as a mendicant monk, but when things improved, he returned to the monastery for another four years. It was probably during this period that he learned to read and write and acquired skills in archery and martial arts.[7] By all accounts an able, energetic, and intelligent young man confronted with a drastically narrow range of options in life, Zhu Yuanzhang decided that the most promising course was to enroll in the service of Guo Zixing, who was then well established in Haozhou. This he did in April 1352, aged twenty-three.

An Adopted Daughter 義女

The situation was different, though scarcely less dire, for the young women of Haozhou. If their families were fortunate, they could expect to be married into a comparable family while still in their teens. For a young woman whose own natal family could not protect and provide for her, the solution could be for her parents to have her join the entourage of a powerful man and live under his protection. She might become an adopted daughter, with a place in a fictive familial relationship within an established household and the opportunity to negotiate a better position for herself in the future. Such a young woman might be exchanged in marriage within the social network that bound together the shifting alliances among those

6. DMB, 485–88; Mote, *Imperial China 900–1800*, 581–83; Chan, *Ming Taizu*, 91ff.
7. DMB, 382; Mote, *Imperial China 900–1800*.

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Hongwu 洪武

An Empress in a Turbulent Family

Table 2.1: The Hongwu reign: January 23, 1368 to February 5, 1399

The Hongwu emperor, senior imperial women, and the children	
The Hongwu emperor	Zhu Yuanzhang, (posth.) Ming Taizu, Ming Xiaoling October 21, 1328–June 24, 1398, d. aged 69
The empress	Xiaocigao Empress Ma, personal name Xiuying 孝慈高皇后 馬秀英 1332–1382, d. aged 50 3 sons, all lived to maturity 2 daughters, both lived to maturity
19 other named and titled consorts 1 unnamed consort	
Children of the emperor	26 sons, 24 lived to maturity, 19 survived the emperor 16 daughters, 14 lived to maturity, 10 survived the emperor

Source: MS, juan 113 and juan 116–22; *Guo Que*, juan1; DMB.

The First Empress

Mother of five, titular mother of forty-two, and exemplary mother of everyone in the empire, Empress Ma was a remarkable woman. In wartime, she had administered the treasury and led the women and the families who supported the army. When the peace was won, her women officials assisted her in pursuing literature, philosophy, music, and philanthropy. She fearlessly advised the emperor on practical and moral matters and interceded on behalf of women and military and civil officials who had fallen afoul of him. The historians claim her as an exemplar, a woman who embodied every Confucian virtue. And yet, despite the glittering

array of virtues they ascribed to her, she died at the age of fifty before she could guide one of her three promising sons along the pathway to the dragon throne.

A Portrait of Empress Ma

A portrait of Empress Ma (Fig. 2.1) is the first in an album of paintings of Ming dynasty emperors and empresses. Suitable for use in the sacrifices to the ancestors, it provides abundant information on how the artists who served the court imagined her qualities and characteristics. Her image is shown at a seven-eighths angle, just short of fully frontal. She wears a rich imperial yellow silk robe adorned with phoenixes enclosed in roundels. The largest bird is positioned on the breast of the robe and smaller ones appear on the shoulders and sleeves. Under the robe, she wears a bright green silk jacket with a mandarin collar. Her hair is rather severely drawn back from her lined and weathered face and her expression is composed and kindly. Her hands are folded inside the sleeves of her robe. In her hair, she wears a small crown adorned with a phoenix, with green cloud-patterned designs across the front and three jeweled flowers on each side. Her pendant gold-and-pearl earrings are shaped like lanterns. The phoenix features prominently in the iconography of her robe and crown. The artist has given us an image of Empress Ma that reinforces the image available in texts—a strong, competent, benevolent woman who remembers her humble origins and her present responsibilities and who makes few claims to magnificence.

The Biography

The meanings embedded in Empress Ma's portrait are congruent with those in her biography in the official history, which positions her as an exemplar of the virtues of the wives of kings and emperors in the traditions of writing about exemplary women. She took a leadership role in the military operations that led to the founding of the dynasty, managed the treasury from which the troops were paid, and was generous to the emperor's other consorts when they bore him sons. She served as an exemplary counselor to Ming Taizu. Her biography records a series of occasions when she interceded on behalf of senior officials and stayed the emperor's hand when he was contemplating a violent response. We see her encouraging moderation and the rule of law and interceding with the emperor on behalf of officials who had crossed him. Two of these were military associates. The first was the son of Guo Jingxiang, who was accused of taking up arms against his own father. The second was Li Wenzhong, Ming Taizu's nephew and erstwhile adopted son, who was suspected of sedition but subsequently exonerated.

Her biography records that she forcefully interceded to protect Song Lian, one of the most prominent of Ming Taizu's scholarly Confucian advisers. Song Lian

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"Ellen Soulliere's long-awaited study sheds new light on the history of imperial women in the early Ming dynasty, illuminating their social origins, life trajectories, and opportunities for influence. Drawing on a wide and varied range of sources, the book is an important contribution to both Ming dynastic and women's history."

—**Nadine Amsler**, University of Basel

"Drawing on both textual and material records, this book offers the most comprehensive study to date of the lives and roles of imperial women in the early Ming dynasty. Highly readable and filled with fascinating detail, it is a significant and welcome contribution to Ming studies and the field of women in dynastic histories."

—**Yu-ping Luk**, British Museum

The rulers of the Ming dynasty enacted paradigms of hierarchical order. Like imperial families, households, and courts in earlier Chinese dynasties, they articulated patriarchal, patrilineal, and patrilocal organizational principles as exemplars for families and institutions throughout the empire. Women made indispensable contributions to the development of these paradigms and principles and to the social, cultural, and political fabric of the family and the state. And yet, in the existing literature in Chinese and English women are often burdened with stereotypes, positioned as peripheral, or rendered almost invisible.

Reading available texts "against the grain," and drawing on a trove of evidence from material culture, Soulliere shows how women defined a place for themselves in the multigenerational Ming imperial family, imperial household, and court. *The Empress and the Dragon Throne* spans the first Ming century from just before the founding of the dynasty in 1368 to the end of the Tianshun reign in 1465. This richly illustrated volume is a must-read for scholars, students, and anyone interested in learning about women's lives during the Ming dynasty.

Ellen Soulliere is an honorary research associate at Massey University in New Zealand and has published widely on the Ming court.

Cover image: Portrait of Empress Ma, ink and colors on silk
106.5 cm × 74.8 cm, © National Palace Museum, Taipei.

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