

AN IMPERIAL EDICT RESTRAINING OFFICIALS FROM EVIL
By the Hongwu Emperor (Zhu Yuanzhang)

Introduction

Zhu Yuanzhang (1328-1398) rose from obscure poverty to become a military strongman and founder of the Ming dynasty (1368-1644). Born into a poor family in modern Anhui province and orphaned at an early age, Zhu spent some time as a Buddhist beggar-monk before joining one of the many rebellions against the crumbling government of the Yuan dynasty. Although barely literate, Zhu proved a capable leader of men and a successful general. He founded the Ming dynasty in 1368, chased the hapless Mongols back to Mongolia, and established his dynastic capital in the city of Nanjing.

In the document below, Zhu Yuanzhang, as the Hongwu Emperor, reminds his civil and military officials that they are to "refrain from evil."

Document Excerpts with Questions (Longer selection follows this section)

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An Imperial Edict Restraining Officials from Evil
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... Those of you in charge of money and grain have stolen them for 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. ... 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 and evil actions.

Questions:

1. On what philosophical assumptions are the Hongwu emperor's words and actions based?
2. Do you think that his actions will solve the problems he refers to? Why or why not?

...

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. ...

Primary Source Document with Questions (DBQs) on

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... 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.

...

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.

[Translated by Lily Hwa]

Questions:

1. Does the emperor’s approach to solving the problem of evil behavior in this excerpt differ from that in the first? If so, how?
2. On what philosophical assumptions are Hongwu’s words here based?
3. As an official, what would be your reaction to the emperor’s admonitions?
4. The emperor clearly holds himself up as a model of self-restraint for his officials to emulate. As an official, how would you take this?
5. Would your reaction be changed if you suddenly learned that the Hongwu emperor had dozens of concubines and consorts, with whom he fathered twenty-six sons and sixteen daughters?

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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.

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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 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 222,000 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."

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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.

[Translated by Lily Hwa]