

張廷玉等：《明史·列傳第一·后妃》

**Empresses of the Ming Dynasty: 1368–1462,
from the *History of the Ming Dynasty***

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Translator's Introduction

The biographies translated here are those of the first six empresses of the Ming dynasty, the most prominent women at the court from the dynasty's inception in 1368 until the death of Empress Dowager Sun, the second principal wife of the Xuande Emperor in 1462. The biography of Empress Ma also covers some events from the decades before Zhu Yuanzhang 朱元璋 (1328–1398), posthumously known by his temple name of Ming Taizu, founded the dynasty in 1368. The biographies were compiled by the official historians of the Qing dynasty on the basis of the *Shilu* 實錄 [Veritable records] kept by the Ming court historians for the reign of each emperor. They were published in their present form in chapter 113 of the *Mingshi* 明史 [History of the Ming dynasty] in 1736, nearly a century after the fall of the dynasty and nearly four centuries after the earliest of the events they narrate. I have used the 1974 punctuated edition of the *History of the Ming Dynasty*, published in Beijing in 1974 by Zhonghua shuju.

In addition to the biographies of the first six Ming empresses, I have also translated the preface to the biographies of imperial women. This text provides the formally articulated intentions of the Ming founder for the structures that he expected would govern the lives of the women of the imperial family and the women officials who staffed the palace.

The biographies follow standard conventions of Chinese biographical writing, assigning 'praise and blame' and also, in some cases, 'appropriate concealment'. It is noteworthy, for example, that criticism of the unwarlike Emperor Renzong is placed in the biographies of his mother, Empress Xu, and his wife, Empress Zhang. The biographies

of Empress Ma, Empress Xu, and Empress Zhang provide narratives of women who displayed an extraordinary range of virtues, fearlessly advising their husbands on practical and ethical matters, fighting alongside them in times of war, educating and advising their children, managing the imperial household, including managing many lesser consorts, interceding on behalf of 'virtuous' officials and suppressing the interests of their own families. They were portrayed as almost mythical in their virtue and selfless devotion to their husbands, to the officials who staffed the civil service and wrote the histories, and to the order and stability of the state itself. Needless to say, this was a view not always supported in unofficial sources not translated here.

In the historians' narratives, Empress Ma, Empress Xu, and Empress Zhang were all extremely successful, while the fortunes of the other three empresses reveal their engagement in a series of intense conflicts, not always capped with victory. The very brief biography of the wife of the ill-fated Jianwen Emperor records her tragic death in the fire that razed the palace at Nanjing in 1402, when the city fell to the armies of her husband's uncle, who usurped the throne and declared himself to be the Yongle Emperor. The victor was at pains to portray the civil war in which she died as a legitimate attempt to right the wrongs done by her husband and his advisers. Much of the history of her husband's reign was deleted from the record and the historians were unable to record for her any of the honours usually conferred on an empress: a posthumous title, a place for her spirit tablet in a hall for sacrifice to the ancestors or even burial in an imperial tomb. However, the inclusion in the official history of any biography for her at all reflects the success of official and unofficial historians working over several centuries to record the events of the usurpation as accurately as they could, a right that was hotly contested while the Ming ruled. One skirmish in this contest is illustrated by a narrative in Empress Zhang's biography, where we learn that on her deathbed in 1442 she asked that the *Veritable Records* for the reign of the Jianwen Emperor, who had lost the throne to his usurping uncle forty years previously, should still be compiled. It is a matter of conjecture whether we are hearing here the voices of the senior officials of the 1440s or whether this really was a project close to the empress' own heart.

The biography of Empress Hu, the first wife of Emperor Xuanzong, tells of her sad fate as the first Ming empress to be deposed by her husband and of her death just a few months after the death of her mother-in-law, Empress Zhang, who had protected her from her more powerful rival. Empress Sun's biography accuses her of having stolen the son of another palace woman, passing him off as her own and thus winning her husband's affection. There is sufficient textual and circumstantial evidence in official and unofficial sources to raise a serious question about whether this part of the narrative may have been

slander, engendered in the context of the politics of the court. In any case, Empress Sun's biography records that she received every honour to which a Ming empress could aspire.

The biographies reveal a clear shift in the power and legitimate authority of the empresses over time. At the beginning of the dynasty, the historians ascribe very high levels of power and authority to Empress Ma, Empress Xu, and Empress Zhang. The secure positions of each of these women bolstered the claims to legitimacy of their husbands, sons, and grandsons during times when the institutions of the Ming dynasty were being forged in a crucible of civil war and violence and the succession to the throne was in dispute more often than not. In the founding and re-founding of the dynasty and in the period of consolidation that followed, these three empresses had key roles to play. After the death of Empress Zhang in 1442, the tensions inherent in the institutional structures that governed the lives of women in the Ming imperial family led to increasing conflict among the women who shared with the emperor the super-charged political arena of the court. In the biographies of Empress Hu and Empress Sun the historians reveal with great clarity how this conflict played out.

The table below sets out the names and short titles of the six early Ming empresses whose biographies appear here along with the titles, reign names and reign dates of their husbands.

Early Ming empresses and the temple names, reign names, and reign dates of the emperors they served: 1368–1462

Xiaocigao Empress Ma (d.1382) 孝慈高皇后馬氏	Ming Taizu, Hongwu (r. 1368–1398) 明太祖
Empress Ma (d.1402) 馬皇后	Emperor Hui, Jianwen (r. 1399–1402) 惠帝
Renxiao Empress Xu (d.1407) 仁孝皇后徐氏	Emperor Chengzu, Yongle (r. 1402–1424) 成祖
Chengxiao Empress Zhang (d.1442) 誠孝皇后張氏	Emperor Renzong, Hongxi (r. 1425) 仁宗
Gongrang Empress Hu (d.1443) 恭讓皇后胡氏	Emperor Xuanzong, Xuande (r. 1425–1435) 宣宗
Xiaogong Empress Sun (d.1462) 孝恭皇后孫氏	Emperor Xuanzong, Xuande (r. 1425–1435) 宣宗

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Preface to the Biographies of the Empresses and Consorts of the Ming Dynasty

Taking a lesson from the disasters caused by women in previous dynasties, Ming Taizu established the fundamental principles of governance, first giving close attention to the teachings for women. In the first year of his reign [1368], he gave instructions to the learned officials to compile admonitions for women. He gave the following order to the Hanlin Academician, Zhu Sheng 朱升 [1299–1371] saying, 'In governing the state, first priority must be given to governing the family. Governing the family begins with respecting the relationship between husband and wife. Although the empress and the consorts are exemplars of motherhood to the empire, they must not be allowed to participate in affairs of state. The activities of the lower-ranking consorts and the women officials of the court must not exceed the bounds of their appointed duties which are to wait on the emperor with towel and comb. If women are shown excessive favour, they will become haughty and unrestrained and will overstep their appointed roles. Then, the distinction between superior and inferior will be lost. In palaces throughout history, disaster has seldom been averted when governance has emanated from the women's quarters. Only an enlightened ruler can discern such things before they come to pass. Many lesser rulers have been entrapped by this. You officials must compile precepts for women and accounts of virtuous consorts of former times that will serve as exemplars for the present so that our descendants in later ages may know what they must cling to and uphold.' Zhu Sheng and other officials then compiled and recorded these things and presented them to the throne.

In the sixth month of the fifth year of the Hongwu reign [July 1372], Ming Taizu ordered the officials of the Ministry of Rites to deliberate on the regulations for the responsibilities of the palace women and the women officials. The officials of the Ministry of Rites reported to the throne as follows, 'Under the system of the Zhou dynasty, women officials were established in the inner palace to aid in the governance of the household. Under the Han, there were fourteen ranks of women officials, in all several hundred persons. Under the Tang, there were six services and twenty-four offices, comprising one hundred and ninety women officials and more than fifty women scribes. All these positions were filled by women selected from good families.'

Ming Taizu believed that the number of positions for women established by these earlier dynasties was excessive and he ordered that fresh decisions should

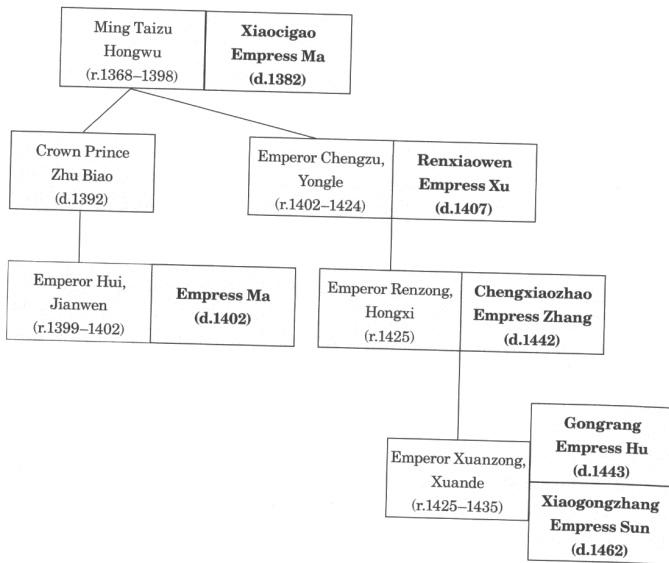
be made after further deliberations. As a result, there was a reorganization of the system and six services and one office were established. The six services were called the General Palace Service, the Ceremonial Service, the Wardrobe Service, the Food Service, the Housekeeping Service, and the Workshop Service, while the office was called the Office of Palace Surveillance. The heads of each held rank 6a. Each service had four subsidiary offices, so in total there were twenty-four offices. The General Palace Service supervised the work of all the six services. Responsibility for regulations and punishments rested with the Office of Palace Surveillance. With seventy-five women officials and eighteen women scribes, there were more than one hundred and forty fewer women palace staff than under the Tang dynasty. They were responsible for work in the bedchambers of the palace and for their official duties and nothing more.

The titles of those who held positions as consorts were to be selected only from the following list: worthy (*xian* 賢), gentle (*shu* 淑), dignified (*zhuang* 莊), respectful (*jing* 敬), gracious (*hui* 惠), complaisant (*shun* 順), peaceful (*kang* 康), tranquil (*ning* 寧). The women's quarters were harmonious and dignified and the significance of these directives was profound and far-reaching.

Ming Taizu also ordered the Ministry of Works to construct red plaques incised with exhortations to the empresses and consorts and to hang the plaques in the palace. The plaques were made of iron and the writing was embellished with gold. In addition, instructions were composed, stating that all the expenses, large and small, for clothing and food, as well as the provision of gold and silver currency, bolts of silk, furnishings and all other things, for all the women, from empresses, consorts and lesser consorts to servants and women officials, must always be ordered through the General Palace Service. The General Palace Service was then required to request the necessary items from the Directorate of Palace Attendants, which had to transmit the request to the ministry officials who would procure and supply the goods. If the General Palace Service failed to make the request or if the Directorate of Palace Attendants in its turn failed to transmit the request, and if instead the transaction took place directly with the relevant ministries, this was an offence punishable by death. If anyone wrote private letters to anyone outside the palace, the punishment was the same. If women of the rank of palace consort or below became ill, doctors were not permitted to enter the palace, but had to prescribe medicines on the basis of a description of the symptoms. How prudent this was! Because of these arrangements, until the end of the Ming era, the palace

apartments remained tranquil and pure and it was said that the excellence of the Ming regulations for the imperial family surpassed those of the Han and Tang dynasties.

Following a chronological sequence, from Ming Taizu's Filial and Compassionate Empress Ma to the Zhuanglie Emperor's Grieving Empress Zhou, the family backgrounds and origins of all the empresses have been examined. Although there are variations in their fortunes and in their prominence or obscurity, all those who occupied the properly designated position of empress are recorded here. Records of matters concerning lesser consorts have also been appended.



Biography of Filial and Compassionate Exalted Empress Ma

The Filial and Compassionate Exalted Empress of Emperor Taizu was a member of the Ma family and a native of Suzhou in Anhui. Her father and her mother, whose surname was Zheng 鄭, died early. Her father had always been on good terms with Guo Zixing 郭子興 and consequently entrusted the future empress to his care. When her father died, Guo Zixing reared the child as if she were his own daughter. Guo recognized the remarkable qualities of the young man who was to become Ming Taizu and so gave the future empress to him in marriage.

The empress was humane and compassionate, intelligent and perceptive. She loved the classics and the histories. When Ming Taizu needed to make records or notes, he always ordered the empress to take charge of it. No matter how busy she was, she never forgot anything. Guo Zixing once believed malicious accusations and suspected the future Ming Taizu of wrong-doing, but the future empress served Guo's wife well and was able to dispel these doubts. After Taizu had subdued Taiping in Anhui, the empress led the wives and concubines of the military in crossing the Yangtze River. They then came to live at Jiangning, their territory adjacent to that of the rival rebel states of Wu and Han. There was never a day's respite from battle. The empress personally made clothing and shoes for the soldiers to aid the army. When Chen Youliang 陳友諒 plundered the port of Longwan and Ming Taizu led troops to oppose him, the empress drained the palace reserves of gold and textiles to reward the troops. She frequently told the emperor that not killing people was basic to pacifying the empire. The emperor valued her advice.

In the first month of the first year of the Hongwu reign [1368] when Ming Taizu ascended the throne, she was designated empress. Previously, when the empress was travelling with the emperor and the army, there was a year when the harvest was extremely poor and food shortages were severe. Moreover, the future emperor was under suspicion by Guo Zixing and consequently he did not have enough to eat. The empress then stole some hot steamed bread for him, hiding it in her bosom to take to him so that her flesh was burned. In their quarters, she often saved dried grain and dried meat to serve to the emperor so that he lacked for nothing while she herself went hungry. Subsequently, when Taizu ascended the throne, he compared her actions to [those of General Feng Yi 馮異, who sustained the future Emperor Guangwu of the Eastern Han dynasty with] 'bean soup in the Wulou Pavilion' and 'wheat porridge made by the Hutuo River'. He often told

the assembled officials that the virtue of the empress was comparable to that of Tang Taizong's Empress Zhangsun. After the audience, he said the same thing to the empress. She replied, 'I have heard that it is easy for husband and wife to look after one another's welfare, but difficult for an emperor and his ministers to do so. Your Majesty has not forgotten that I shared in your time of poverty. I hope that you will not forget that these officials also shared your hardships. What is more, how could I dare to compare myself to Empress Zhangsun?'

The empress carefully looked after the governance of the inner household and when she was at leisure, she studied the ancient admonitions. She instructed all the ladies in the six palaces of the women's quarters about the many virtuous empresses of the Song dynasty and ordered the women scribes to write down their household regulations so that the palace ladies could attentively read them day and night. Some said that the Song had been excessively humane and generous. The empress replied, 'Is it not better to be too lenient than too harsh?' One day she asked the women scribes, 'What are the Huang-Lao Daoist teachings to which Empress Dou of Han was so devoted?' The scribes replied, 'Detachment and non-action are the foundation of the doctrine. If one breaks with humaneness and discards righteousness, then the people will return to filial piety and benevolence. These are its teachings.' The empress replied, 'Filial piety and benevolence in the end are humaneness and righteousness. How can it be that one must break with humaneness and righteousness to attain filial piety and benevolence?' The empress often recited Zhu Xi's 朱熹 *Xiaoxue* 小學 [Elementary learning] and encouraged the emperor to make its teachings manifest.

When the emperor was deciding matters of state in the audience halls, there were times when he became angry. The empress attended him when he returned to the inner palace where she would gently remonstrate with him about this. As a result, although the emperor was harsh by nature, she was able to persuade him to lighten sentences of corporal punishment or execution in many instances. Adjutant Guo Jingxiang 郭景祥 was garrisoned at Hezhou in Anhui and it was said that Guo's son had picked up a spear, intending to murder his father. The emperor was about to have him executed when the empress said, 'Jingxiang has only this one son. If what people say is untrue, I fear that you will needlessly put an end to his family line.' The emperor investigated the matter and the allegations were indeed shown to be false.

While Li Wenzhong 李文忠 was garrison commander at Yanzhou in Zhejiang,

Yang Xian 楊憲 falsely accused him of illegal activities. The emperor wished to recall Li, but the empress said, 'Yanzhou is on the enemy frontier. To change generals so lightly is not suitable. Moreover, Wenzhong has always been a person of good character. How can one believe the words of Yang Xian?' The emperor desisted and subsequently Li Wenzhong indeed achieved distinction.

Song Lian 宋濂, the former Chancellor of the Hanlin Academy [and tutor to the heir apparent], was arrested and condemned to death because of his grandson, Song Shen 宋慎 [who was executed when Prime Minister Hu Weiyong 胡惟庸 was deposed in 1380]. The empress remonstrated with the emperor, saying, 'When ordinary families engage a tutor for their sons, they manage everything in accordance with the rites from the beginning to the end. How much more should this be true of the Son of Heaven? Moreover, Song Lian is living at home. He certainly would have had no knowledge of these matters.' The emperor did not heed her. Then, when the empress was serving a meal to the emperor, she did not serve any wine or meat. The emperor asked her the reason for this and she replied, 'I am abstaining on behalf of Master Song.' The emperor was pained, threw down his chopsticks and rose from the table. The following day he pardoned Song Lian and ordered him demoted and banished to Maozhou in Sichuan.

Shen Xiu 沈秀 was a wealthy commoner from Wuxing in Zhejiang. He subscribed the cost of building one third of the city walls of the capital at Nanjing and then asked permission to reward the troops. The emperor was angry and said, 'For an ordinary man to grant rewards to the troops of the Son of Heaven is to cause disorder among the people. He must die.' The empress remonstrated with him, saying, 'I have heard that those who administer the law punish illegal actions, but do not punish what is merely inauspicious. When people have wealth that rivals that of the state, they have made themselves inauspicious and Heaven will visit catastrophe upon them. What need is there for Your Majesty to impose punishments in this case?' Thereupon, Shen Xiu was released and banished to Yunnan.

The emperor once ordered persons who had committed serious crimes to work on building the city wall. The empress said, 'Remission of crimes through labour service penalties is the great mercy of the state. However, if already exhausted convicts are forced to perform additional labour service, I fear that they will still not be able to escape death.' The emperor then pardoned them all.

The emperor once angrily reprimanded a palace woman. The empress also

feigned anger and ordered that the woman be turned over to the Office of Palace Surveillance for deliberation on the offence. The emperor asked, 'Why have you done this?' The empress replied, 'An emperor must not dispense punishments and rewards in delight or in anger. When Your Majesty is angry, I fear that you may be excessively severe. If the matter is transferred to the Office of Palace Surveillance, they will make a considered judgement and be fair. And Your Majesty also, in deciding on people's guilt, might well do so simply by instructing the appropriate offices of government to make the judgements.'

Once the empress asked the emperor, 'Are all the people of the empire now content?' The emperor replied, 'This is not a matter about which you should ask.' The empress said, 'If Your Majesty is the father of the realm, then I, your unworthy wife, am the mother of the realm. How can I not ask about the welfare of our children?' Whenever there was a year of drought, the empress always led the palace ladies in following a vegetarian diet and assisting at prayers for rain. When the harvest was poor, she would have coarse wheat porridge and soups made from wild plants dispensed. When the emperor ordered relief measures, the empress said, 'Better than relief measures would have been prior preparation of adequate stores.'

When officials in attendance at meetings of the court left the audience, they assembled to eat in the palace. The empress ordered eunuchs to bring the food and drink to her so that she could personally taste it. If the taste was not agreeable, she then said to the emperor, 'The ruler of men should be frugal in his personal expenditure, but in providing for worthy men it is appropriate to be generous.' The emperor instructed the officials of the Court of Imperial Entertainments accordingly.

When the emperor returned from visiting the National University, the empress asked how many students there were. The emperor replied, 'Several thousand.' The empress then commented, 'So many persons of talent! The students have their stipends, but what do their wives depend on for their support?' As a result, the Red Plank Granary was established to store grain, which was then bestowed on the families of the students. The provision of family living allowances for the students of the National University began with the empress.

When the Yuan capital was taken by the field commanders of the Ming army, the precious stones and gems they found there were brought back to the palace. The empress said, 'The Yuan dynasty possessed all these treasures but was unable to preserve the state. Doesn't this mean that emperors and kings have treasures

of their own?' The emperor replied, 'I understand that you are saying that to obtain the services of the worthy is to have treasure indeed.' The empress bowed in thanks and said, 'Truly it is as you say. I have come with you, rising out of poverty and hardship all the way to the present. I constantly fear that arrogance and licence will stem from waste and extravagance, and that peril and collapse will arise from minute and subtle beginnings. Therefore, I hope that you will seek out virtuous men and with them govern the empire.' The empress also said, 'When laws are frequently changed, abuses will result. When the law is abused, treachery will arise. When the people are repeatedly harassed, they must feel distress, and when people are in distress, disorder will follow.' The emperor sighed and said, 'Well spoken!' He ordered the women scribes to record these words. The admonitions of the empress were characteristically of this order.

Whenever food was to be served to the emperor, the empress always personally inspected it. Ordinarily, she wore coarse silk clothing that had been through many launderings. Worn though the clothes were, she felt reluctant to replace them. When she heard that the empress of the Yuan dynasty's Emperor Shizu had boiled old bow strings to recover the silk, she ordered that crude silk be used in making coverlets to be given to the old and solitary. The left-over cloth and flawed silk were sewn together to make clothing which she presented to all the consorts of the princes and to the princesses to raise their awareness of the difficulties of sericulture.

When consorts of various ranks or lesser palace women received the emperor's favour and bore him sons, the empress treated them generously. When the titled ladies of the outer court came to pay their respects, she treated them with the rituals appropriate for members of her own family. When the emperor wished to seek out the empress' family to give them official posts, the empress, in declining, said, 'To show partiality by ennobling the families of imperial women is not in accordance with the law.' She vigorously refused until the emperor desisted. But when conversation turned to the early deaths of her parents, she invariably became distressed and tearful. The emperor posthumously appointed her father as Prince of Xu and her mother as Princess Consort. Tombs were built for them and a shrine was erected there.

In the eighth month of the fifteenth year of the Hongwu reign [September 1382] the empress was stricken with illness. All the officials asked permission to offer prayers and sacrifices and to send for the best doctors. The empress said to the emperor, 'Death and life are decreed by fate. Of what use are prayer and sacrifice?

Moreover, how could doctors bring people back to life? If medicine were to be taken and if it should prove ineffective, would you not make the doctors bear the blame because of me? When the illness had reached its critical stage, the emperor enquired about her last wishes. She replied, 'I hope that Your Majesty will seek out the virtuous and heed their good advice. Be as careful to the end as you were from the beginning. May our descendants all be virtuous and may the officials and the people receive what is appropriate to their stations.'

In the same month on the *bingxu* day [17 September 1382] she died at the age of fifty-one *sui*. The emperor wept inconsolably and thereafter elevated no other to the position of empress. On the *gengwu* day of the ninth month [31 October 1382] the empress was interred at Xiaoling [the imperial tomb at Nanjing], and posthumously granted the title, Filial and Compassionate Empress. The women of the palace missed her and wrote a song:

Our empress, wise and compassionate,
Transformed family and state.
Comforted us, taught us,
We will not forget her graciousness.
We will not forget her graciousness,
In ten thousand years and more.
Like a spring pouring down,
Vast as the blue sky.

In the first year of the Yongle reign [1402], the emperor raised her honorific title to Filial and Compassionate, Chaste and Enlightened, Wise and Compliant, Humanely Resplendent, Complement to Heaven, Educator of Sages, Most Virtuous, Exalted Empress.

Biography of Empress Ma

Emperor Hui's empress was a member of the Ma family, the daughter of Ma Quan 馬全, Vice Minister of the Court of Imperial Entertainments. In the twenty-eighth year of the reign of the Hongwu Emperor [1396], she was invested as consort to the imperial grandson, the heir to the throne. In the second month of the first year of the Jianwen reign [March 1399], she was invested as empress. In the sixth month of the fourth year of the Jianwen reign [July 1402], the city fell and she died in the fire.

Biography of Humane and Filial Cultured Empress Xu

The Yongle Emperor's Humane and Filial Empress was a member of the Xu family, the eldest daughter of General Xu Da 徐達, the Prince of Zhongshan. In her youth, she was virtuous and serene and loved reading, and so she was called the girl scholar. When Ming Taizu heard of her worth and virtue, he summoned Xu Da and said, 'You and I wore the cotton cloth of commoners together. Of old, whenever there were bonds of mutual friendship between ruler and minister, this led them to make marriage alliances. You have an honourable daughter who would be a good match for my son, Zhu Di 朱棣.' Xu Da bowed his head in thanks.

In the ninth year of the Hongwu reign [1376], Xu Da's daughter was appointed principal consort to Zhu Di, the Prince of Yan, and the Exalted Empress Ma loved her deeply. Lady Xu accompanied her husband, the prince, to his princely estate at Yan, where she observed a three-year mourning period after the death of the Filial and Compassionate Exalted Empress Ma, and followed a vegetarian diet in accordance with the rites. Without exception, she recorded all the sayings of Empress Ma that were suitable for recitation.

When the military actions during the Pacification of the Troubles commenced [in 1399], the Prince of Yan attacked Daning [the seat of the Prince of Ning]. Li Jinglong 李景隆 [d.c.1424] took this opportunity to lay siege to Beijing. At that time, the future Emperor Renzong [1378–1425, the eldest son of the Prince of Yan and Lady Xu] was heir apparent to the principedom and had been left in charge of defending the city and most of the orders regarding troop deployments and defence preparations came from Lady Xu. Li Jinglong's assault on the city was intense and there were very few troops inside the city walls, so Lady Xu furiously exhorted the wives of the military officers and the populace, who were all given armour and armaments, to climb the ramparts of the city wall to defend it. As a result, in the end the city was saved.

When the Prince of Yan ascended the throne [as the Yongle Emperor], Lady Xu was appointed empress. She told him, 'In the north and in the south, war has raged for many years and the soldiers and the people are exhausted. It is advisable to give them a respite.' She also said, 'The great and worthy talents of our time are all men who have remained in service from the time of Ming Taizu. Your Majesty should not discriminate between newly appointed officials and the old.' Further, she said, 'The Sage Emperor Yao 堯 manifested benevolence starting from his own relatives first.' Thinking highly of her views, the emperor immediately accepted them.

Previously, the empress' younger brother, Xu Zengshou 徐增壽, had frequently reported to the Prince of Yan on matters of state and as a result he was executed by the Jianwen Emperor. When the Yongle Emperor wished to posthumously enoble Xu Zengshou, the empress firmly stated that this should not be done. The emperor did not listen to her advice and in the end posthumously ennobled Xu Zengshou as Duke of Dingguo and ordered that his son, Xu Jingchang 徐景昌, should inherit the position. Only then was the empress informed of the matter. She said, "This was not my intention." To the end, she did not thank the emperor. The empress once said that [her younger sons] the Prince of Han and the Prince of Zhao were not by nature compliant and that court officials should be selected to hold concurrent posts at their princely courts to supervise them.

Once the empress asked the emperor, "Who are the men with whom Your Majesty governs?" The emperor replied, "The Six Ministers manage governmental affairs and the Hanlin Academicians are responsible for theoretical discussions." The empress thereupon summoned the wives of these officials to an audience and bestowed on them official hats and robes and gifts of money. She also said, "How could it be that a wife's service to her husband should consist only in attending to matters of food and clothing? A wife must be of assistance to her husband. Advice from friends may sometimes be accepted and other times rejected, but between husband and wife, words of advice are more agreeable and may more easily enter the mind. Morning and evening I serve His Majesty, thinking only of the good of the people. You should also exert yourself in this matter." The empress once selected excerpts from the *Nüxian* 女憲 [Pattern for women] and from *Nüjie* 女誡 [Lessons for women] to compose the *Neixun* 內訓 [Household instructions] in twenty chapters. The empress also collected and categorized the virtuous words and good deeds of people of former times to make the *Quanshan shu* 勸善書 [Exhortations], which was promulgated throughout the realm.

In the seventh month of the fifth year of the Yongle reign [August 1407], the empress was stricken with a serious illness. She simply exhorted the emperor to show loving concern for the common people, to search far and wide for men of virtue and talent, to treat the imperial family with grace and generosity and not to over-indulge the families of imperial women. She also said to her son, the heir apparent, "Formerly at Beiping I led the wives of the military officers in taking up arms to defend the city. Alas, I was unable to accompany the emperor on his northern expeditions to comfort and reward them."

In the same month, on the *yimao* day [6 August 1407], the empress died at the age of forty-six *sui*. The emperor mourned her deeply, had major ceremonies carried out at the Linggu and Tianxi Temples, and permitted all the officials to make sacrifices. The Court of Imperial Entertainments prepared all the sacrificial offerings. On the *jiawu* day of the tenth month [13 November 1407] she was granted the posthumous honorific title Humane and Filial Empress. In the seventh year [of the Yongle reign, 1409] a tomb was constructed for her at Tianshou Mountain in Changping. Four years later, when the emperor's tomb was completed, she was buried within it. This was Changling. [After her death,] the emperor did not designate another empress. When Emperor Renzong [her son] ascended the throne, her posthumous title was raised to Humane and Filial, Compassionate and Virtuous, Sincere and Luminous, Dignified and Devoted, Companion of Heaven, Equal of the Sages, Cultured Empress. Her spirit was worshipped in the Imperial Ancestral Temple.

Biography of Sincere and Filial Luminous Empress Zhang

Emperor Renzong's Sincere and Filial Empress Zhang was a native of Yongcheng, Henan. Her father, Zhang Qi 張麒, was honoured because of his daughter and posthumously ennobled as the Earl of Pengcheng. This is all recorded in the 'Biographies of the Consort Families'. In the twenty-eighth year of the Hongwu period [1384], she was invested as consort to the heir apparent of the Prince of Yan. In the second year of the Yongle reign [1402] she was named consort to the heir apparent to the throne. When Emperor Renzong became emperor, the title of empress was bestowed upon her. When Emperor Xuanzong [her son] ascended the throne [in 1425], she was honoured as empress dowager. When Emperor Yingzong [her grandson] ascended the throne [in 1435], she was honoured as grand empress dowager.

At first, when she was consort to the heir apparent of the throne, she held fast to womanly virtue with the greatest care and her refinement won the affection of the Yongle Emperor and the Humane and Filial Empress Xu. Her husband, the heir apparent, was often the object of malicious attacks by [his brothers] the Princes of Han and Zhao. He was very fat and unable to ride a horse or shoot a bow and arrow. The Yongle Emperor was angry about this and reduced the provisions for his palace. Many times, the emperor was close to replacing him as

heir apparent, but in the end, because of his son's wife, he did not depose him. When Lady Zhang became empress, there was nothing she did not know about the affairs of the court and of the state.

In the early years of the reign of [her son] Emperor Xuanzong, many of the major military and state affairs were reported to and decided by Empress Dowager Zhang. At that time, the country was peaceful and prosperous. The emperor personally attended her in her daily routines within the palace and accompanied her when she left the palace for tours or banquets. Tribute goods from all quarters, even if they were only small things, were offered first to the empress dowager. The loving kindness of the empress dowager and the filial devotion of the emperor were known throughout the realm.

In the third year [of the Xuande reign, 1429] Empress Dowager Zhang toured the Western Garden with the empress and the imperial consorts in attendance. The emperor himself supported his mother's palanquin as she ascended Longevity Hill [behind the palace]. He respectfully offered her a cup of wine, wished her long life and presented her with poems in praise of her virtue. Two years later, when they visited Changling [the tomb of his grandparents, the Yongle Emperor and Empress Xu] and Xianling [the tomb of his father, Emperor Renzong], Emperor Xuanzong himself, dressed in armour, led the way on horseback. When they came to a bridge over the river, he dismounted from his horse and helped to steady the empress dowager's carriage. The people of the imperial domain lined both sides of the road, bowing and watching [the imperial entourage]. All those at the tombs, old and young alike, shouted words of respect and welcome. Seeing this, the empress dowager said to the emperor, 'The people support their ruler because of his ability to bring them peace. It behoves an emperor to remember this.' On the way home, they passed a farmer's house and the empress dowager summoned the old farmer's wife and asked her about her livelihood, then gave her some money. When some of the people offered them food, wine, and sauces, the empress dowager took it, gave it to the emperor and said, 'This is the taste of the food of the people who work the land.'

The officials in attendance, Zhang Fu 張輔, Duke of Yingguo, Minister Jian Yi 蹇義, Grand Secretaries Yang Shiqi 楊士奇, Yang Rong 楊榮, Jin Youzi 金幼孜, and Yang Pu 楊溥 requested an audience with the empress dowager in a temporary pavilion. The empress dowager expressed her appreciation for their hard work and said, 'You are the men who have served through the reigns of earlier emperors.

Strive to assist their heir, the present emperor.' Another day, the emperor said to Yang Shiqi, 'When the empress dowager came back from visiting the tombs, she said that you ministers have a great deal of experience in managing state affairs. She said that Zhang Fu, the military official, understood the high principles of righteousness and that Jian Yi was honest and careful, but indecisive. As for you, Yang Shiqi, you are upright and able to speak the truth without fear of offending your emperor. In the reign of the deceased Emperor Renzong, there were times when you caused him displeasure, but eventually he followed your advice and as a result, he did not fail. There were, however, three matters in which he later regretted that he did not follow your advice.' The empress dowager was very strict with her own relatives. Her younger brother, Zhang Sheng 張昇, was very honest and prudent, but she did not allow him to participate in affairs of state.

When Emperor Xuanzong died [in 1435], the future Emperor Yingzong was only nine *sui*. False rumours circulated in the palace, saying that the Prince of Xiang would be decreed the successor to the throne. The empress dowager immediately summoned all the high officials to the emperor's residence, the Palace of Heavenly Purity. Indicating the heir apparent and weeping, she said, 'This is the new Son of Heaven.' All the officials shouted, 'Long live the emperor!' Only then did the rumours cease.

The senior officials invited the empress dowager to establish a formal regency [lit. to attend to governmental affairs sequestered behind a lowered screen], but she replied, 'Do not violate the ancestral laws. Simply suspend action on matters that are not urgent and from time to time encourage the young emperor in his studies, entrusting the responsibilities of state to the able ministers.' Because of this, even though [the eunuch] Wang Zhen 王振 [d.1449] was a favourite of the emperor, until the empress dowager passed away, he did not dare to dictate affairs of state.

In the tenth month of the seventh year of the Zhengtong reign [November 1442] the empress dowager died. Just before her death, she summoned [Grand Secretaries] Yang Shiqi and Yang Pu to the palace and ordered the eunuchs to ask them what major affairs of state were still left undone. Yang Shiqi raised three matters. First, although the Commoner Jian [the deposed Jianwen Emperor] was dead, the *Veritable Records* for his reign should still be compiled. Second, the Yongle Emperor had decreed that anyone who kept letters handed down from Fang Xiaoru 方孝孺 and his fellow ministers should be executed, but it was

now appropriate to relax this prohibition. Yang Shiqi had not yet reported on the third matter when the empress dowager died. In her testamentary edict, she admonished the ministers to assist the emperor in administering a humane government. Her words were sincere and earnest. She was posthumously honoured as the Sincere and Filial, Respectful and Majestic, Illuminator of Virtue, Extender of Humaneness, Obedient to Heaven, Expositor of the Sages, Luminous Empress. She was buried with Emperor Renzong in his tomb at Xianling and revered in the Ancestral Temple.

Biography of Reverent and Deferential Empress Hu

Emperor Xuanzong's Reverent and Deferential Empress was a member of the Hu family. Her given name was Shanxiang 善祥 and she was a native of Jining in Shandong. In the fifteenth year of the Yongle reign [1417], she was appointed consort to the imperial grandson and subsequently became consort to the heir apparent. When Emperor Xuanzong ascended the throne, she was installed as empress. At that time, the Honoured Consort Sun had the affection of the emperor. Empress Hu had not borne a son and was often ill. In the spring of the third year of his reign [1428] the emperor ordered the empress to submit a memorial relinquishing her position, withdraw from her residence [in the Palace of Earthly Tranquility], and move to the Palace of Lasting Peace. He granted her the title Serene and Compassionate Daoist Master and designated the Honoured Consort Sun as empress. The senior officials Zhang Fu, Jian Yi, Xia Yuanqi 夏原吉, Yang Shiqi, Yang Rong and others were unable to contest this. Empress Dowager Zhang pitied the virtue of the deposed empress and so frequently summoned her to stay in her own residence, the Palace of Pure Tranquility. At court banquets in the inner palace, she ordered that the deposed Empress Hu should take a higher place than that of Empress Sun, who was therefore constantly discontent. In the tenth month of the seventh year of the Zhengtong reign [November 1442] Grand Empress Dowager Zhang died. Empress Hu wept bitterly and inconsolably and the following year she also died and was buried at Jinshan with the rites appropriate for a low-ranking consort.

The empress had not transgressed, yet was deposed, and when all throughout the realm heard of it, they pitied her. Later, Emperor Xuanzong also regretted what he had done, but once excused his actions by saying, 'This was an affair

of my youth.' In the sixth year of the Tianshun reign [1462] Empress Dowager Sun died and Empress Qian, the wife of Emperor Yingzong, said to her husband, 'Empress Hu was virtuous and had committed no offence and yet she was deposed and made a Daoist master. When she died, people feared Empress Dowager Sun, and as a result Empress Hu's burial was not in accordance with the rites.' Because of this exhortation Empress Hu's position and titles were posthumously restored. Emperor Yingzong asked Grand Secretary Li Xian 李賢 [1408–1467] for advice about this and Li Xian replied, 'Your Majesty's intention will win the regard of the spirits of Heaven and Earth. However, I think that the tomb, the sacrificial hall, and the memorial tablet for the late Empress Hu must follow the same pattern as in the Hall of Ancestral Worship. Then all the people will praise Your Majesty's luminous filial piety.' In the seventh intercalary month of the seventh year [of the Tianshun period, August 1463], Empress Hu was posthumously honoured as the Reverent and Deferential, Sincere and Submissive, Peaceful and Solemn, Serene and Compassionate, Manifest Empress. A tomb was built for her, but she did not receive a place in the ancestral temples.

Biography of Filial and Respectful Manifest Empress Sun

Emperor Xuanzong's Filial and Respectful Empress was a member of the Sun family of Zouping in Shandong. As a child, she was very beautiful. Her father, Sun Zhong 孫忠, was an assistant magistrate in Yongcheng county in Henan province. The Countess of Pengcheng, mother of the Sincere and Filial Empress Zhang, was also originally from Yongcheng county and she frequently visited the inner apartments of the palace and spoke of Sun Zhong's virtuous daughter. As a result, the girl was taken into the palace. As the child was then just over the age of ten *sui*, the Yongle Emperor ordered the Sincere and Filial Empress Zhang to bring her up.

When the future Emperor Xuanzong married, it was decreed that Lady Hu of Jining be designated principal consort and Lady Sun was appointed as a lesser consort. When Emperor Xuanzong ascended the throne, he granted Lady Sun the title Honoured Consort. By convention, the empress had been invested with a gold seal and a gold register while women of the rank of honoured consort and below had a register, but not a seal. The Honoured Consort Sun had the affection of the emperor and in the fifth month of the first year of his reign [June 1425], he asked

his mother, the Empress Dowager Zhang, to have a gold seal made to give Lady Sun. The custom of an honoured consort having a gold seal began from this.

The Honoured Consort Sun also did not have a son and so she secretly took the son of a woman in the palace as her own. This was the future Emperor Yingzong, and because of this the emperor's affection for her was redoubled. When Empress Hu memorialized the throne, giving up her position and asking that the succession be determined as soon as possible, the Honoured Consort Sun insincerely declined and said, 'When the empress has recovered from her illness, she will surely have a son. How could my son presume to take precedence over the son of the empress?' In the third month of the third year [of Emperor Xuanzong's reign, March 1428], Empress Hu was deposed and the Honoured Consort Sun was invested as empress. When Emperor Yingzong ascended the throne, she was honoured as empress dowager.

During Emperor Yingzong's 'northern progress' [when he was captured by the Mongols], Empress Dowager Sun ordered the Prince of Cheng to oversee the state. When the Jingtai Emperor [the Prince of Cheng] ascended the throne, she was honoured as the Supremely Saintly Empress Dowager. While Emperor Yingzong was [held captive] in the north, she several times sent him fur-lined clothing to protect him against the cold. When he returned and was living in seclusion in the southern palace, the empress dowager visited him there on a number of occasions. When Shi Heng 石亨 [d.1460] and others conspired to restore Emperor Yingzong to the throne, they first secretly informed the empress dowager, who gave her consent. After Emperor Yingzong was restored, she was granted the honorific title, Divine and Illustrious, Compassionate and Long-lived Empress Dowager. The Ming dynasty flourished and the custom of granting honorific titles to imperial women during their lifetimes began from this time.

In the ninth month of the sixth year of the Tianshun reign [September 1462], the empress dowager died. She was granted the posthumous honorific title, Filial, Respectful, Virtuous and Exemplary, Compassionate, Benevolent, Gravely Majestic, Equal of Heaven, Companion to the Sages, Manifest Empress. She was buried with the emperor in his tomb, Jingling, and revered in the Imperial Ancestral Temple. And yet, to the end no one knew the identity of the birth mother of Emperor Yingzong.