

2 / The Formative Years, 1360–1382

In the middle of the fourteenth century, when the English and the French were engaged in an early stage of the Hundred Years' War, various Chinese rebel leaders raised armies of different sizes, hoping to throw off the rule of the Mongols, who were by then corrupted and softened by the wealth of the nation they had conquered back in 1279. One great seat of insurrection was in the lower Yangzi valley, where large numbers of tough, poor, and thrifty Han Chinese attempted to free themselves of the alien gaze. Among the rebels—who included salt-smugglers, boatmen, sorcerers, itinerant artisans, and sturdy peasants—was an ordained monk named Zhu Yuanzhang, of Anhui. In alliance with a heterodox religious group called the Red Turbans, Zhu won victory after victory until he occupied Nanjing and the surrounding region in the spring of 1356.¹ Four years later, on May 2, 1360, his fourth son, Zhu Di, was born. While the wars decimated the peasantry in the Chinese countryside, the birth of Zhu Di—the future emperor Yongle of the Ming dynasty—was cloaked in mystery. By this time, the thirty-two-year-old Zhu Yuanzhang was well supplied with assorted concubines. According to Ming official records, Zhu Di's mother was Empress Ma (1332–82), who also had borne Zhu Yuanzhang's first three sons—Zhu Biao (1355–92), Zhu Shuang (1356–95), and Zhu Gang (1358–98)—and fifth son, Zhu Su (1361–1425). Other Ming sources reveal that Zhu Di's mother could well have been a Mongol or a Korean woman whom his father took from the harem of a Mongol prince by force or simply as desirable booty. Historian Li Dongfang, on the other hand, insists that the Mongol *Gold History*, in which this legend is found, is not reliable because Zhu Di was already nine years old when his father occupied the Yuan capital.²

Regardless of whether Zhu Di's mother was Empress Ma or a lesser consort by the name of Gong, or someone else altogether, his father saw to it that the healthiest and best wet nurses were provided for Zhu Di and his half-sister—the future Princess Linan—who was also born in 1360. When Zhu Di was one

month old, his hair was cut for the first time, but his father would not give him a real name until he was seven years old. At the name-giving ceremony, a eunuch once again cut his hair, and his severed locks were put into a special, exquisitely made sack for storage. His father gave him a pair of hemp sandals and a travel bag—symbols of frugality, diligence, and humility.³ During the first few months of his young life, the Mongol empire was on the verge of disintegration, but Zhu Di lived in Nanjing, where his father had accumulated ample provisions and had just built high walls around the beautiful city along the banks of the Yangzi River. Indeed, Zhu Di's father's affairs were going well, and he assumed the title of Duke of Wu in 1361. However, it was not until 1368, on the fourth day after the lunar New Year, that Zhu Yuanzhang proclaimed the establishment of the Ming dynasty in Nanjing.⁴ Zhu Di took part in the solemn and tedious coronation activities, including kowtowing to his mother (the new empress) and his eldest brother (the newly designated heir apparent).

In the meantime, his father's troops continued to rout the Mongols, who had by then lost the valor and vitality that were the hallmarks of Chinggis Khan's warriors. In the summer of 1368 the Ming army, under the command of Xu Da (1332–85), Zhu Di's future father-in-law, crossed the Yellow River and, before the autumn set in, captured the Yuan capital without a fight. On September 10, 1368, the last Mongol emperor—Toyon Temur (also known as Shundi, 1320–70)—and his court fled on horses to Shangdu, and when that fell, they fled still deeper into Mongolia. Two years later Toyon Temur died of dysentery in Yingchang, northwest of Jehol. In the meantime Zhu Yuanzhang changed the name of Dadu (Great Capital) to Beiping (Northern Peace), which was renamed Beijing (Northern Capital) by his son Zhu Di in 1402.

Maturing in such a volatile environment, Zhu Di had learned quickly about the people surrounding him. He knew that his father had been born on October 21, 1328, into a poor peasant family in Zhongli, Haozhou Subprefecture (present-day Fengyang), along the Huai River. In this impoverished, sprawling, and turbulent region of Anhui, his father was forced to work as a shepherd and a migrant farmhand when he was still a child but could barely find enough food to survive each day. Consequently, his parents had to arrange adoptions for their second and third sons and marry off their young daughters. When Zhu Yuanzhang turned seventeen, both of his parents and his eldest brother died of plague, and Yuanzhang placed himself in the care of Buddhist monks at Huangjue Monastery as a novice. He had been there only fifty-two days when, for lack of food, the abbot had to let all of his disciples go. Yuanzhang endured crushing poverty by begging for food in neighboring towns until 1348, when he returned to the same monastery.

In his new life as a monk, he daily burned incense, beat drums and bells, carried water, and gathered fuel for the kitchen. But he also found the time to learn how to read and write. Blessed with a retentive memory and practicing diligence, Zhu Yuanzhang quickly accumulated a fair amount of knowledge and developed a fine writing style. In February 1352 the Red Turban rebels entered Fengyang, and the Mongol defenders burned Huangjue Monastery before abandoning the city. A few weeks later—in the leap month of March 1352—Zhu threw his lot in with the Red Turbans and began recruiting some seven hundred young men from Fengyang to join the anti-Mongol rebellion. Twenty-four members of the so-called “Fengyang mafia” (a secret society), including Xu Da and Tang He (1326–95), would play very significant roles in the founding of the Ming dynasty. In fact, several of them also were to become Zhu Di’s tutors. From Zhu Yuanzhang’s comrades-in-arms, Zhu Di learned that his father was an extremely hard worker, quick at making plans and arriving at decisions, and one who would not allow his troops to kill innocent people and plunder the populace. Indeed, the young Zhu Di was very proud of the fact that his father—who had a robust body and an indomitable will—devoted himself to relieving the sufferings of the people and had never lost a major battle. (Emperor Hongwu—as Zhu Yuanzhang was called—hired artists to draw several of the toughest battles so that his sons could learn from them.)

Zhu Di was also told that his real mother was the future Empress Ma, a foster daughter of the rebel leader Guo Zixing (d. 1355), for whom his father had served as a bodyguard. She was a powerful girl in the stables and was fit to do the work of two men. Zhu Yuanzhang was drawn to her by her remarkable dexterity and emotional clarity. Although she had to put up with brutality from the husband she loved, he loved her and never left her. When Guo Zixing died, the command of his army passed to Zhu Yuanzhang, and Zhu Di’s mother, who was physically strong and active, was required to perform the duties of the first lady of a revolutionary leader. To Zhu Di’s perplexity, the first lady of the palace often wore clothes of coarse silk, and her worn-out cotton apparel had been much restitched and mended. In fact, Zhu Di’s own clothes had been washed many times, and his mother not infrequently had to patch and stitch them with her own needle and thread. And whenever there was a famine, she would refuse to eat meat, although she always made sure that her sons’ food was palatable and well served. She frequently exhorted her sons to spurn the deadly draft of pleasure and stay away from vice, and to have sympathy for the poor.⁵ Such were the pedigrees from which Zhu Di drew his strength and resourcefulness. It was in this environment that he grew up to be a tall, strong, and athletic young boy. Clearly, his parents had successfully inoculated the ado-

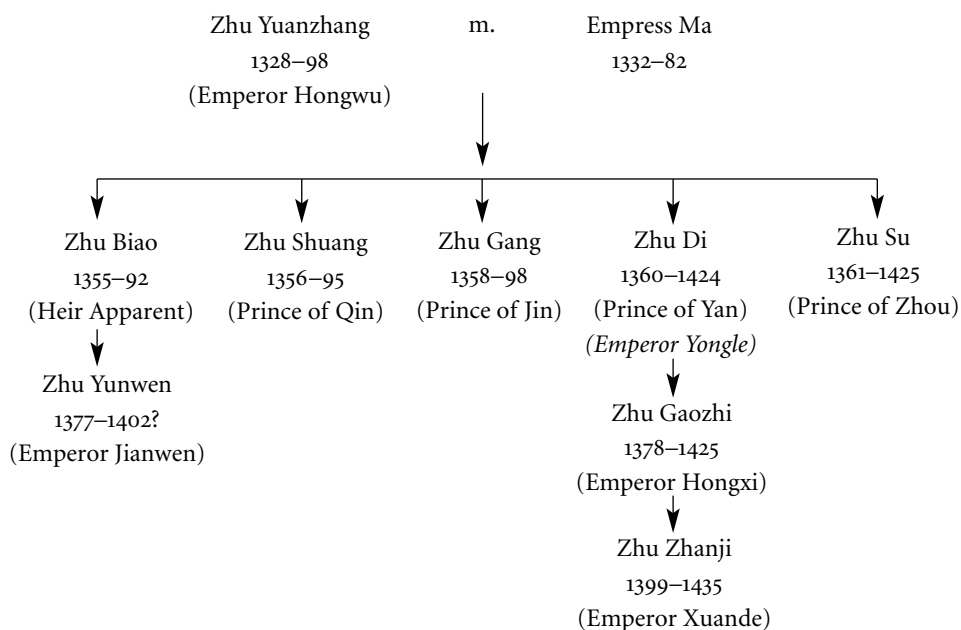
lescent prince against extravagant expectations, as he indeed cultivated a lifestyle of frugality and self-discipline, strictly avoiding riotous living. In his own writings years later, he often talked rhapsodically about the successes of his parents in rearing their children.⁶

When his father ascended the throne as the Emperor Hongwu of the Great Ming dynasty in 1368, Zhu Di's eldest brother, Zhu Biao, who was about thirteen years of age, was designated heir apparent. Zhu Biao seemed to have inherited the gentle and humane characteristics of Empress Ma and was generally nice to the young Zhu Di. His older brother Zhu Shuang was about three-and-a-half years older than Zhu Di, and Zhu Gang only two years his senior. When Zhu Di was eight years old, his father captured a young sister of the best-known Mongol general, Koko Temur (Wang Baobao, d. 1375). To demonstrate his admiration for the courage and integrity of Koko Temur, Emperor Hongwu had his brother Zhu Shuang marry this well-bred Mongol princess on October 15, 1371.

During the decade of the 1370s, the imperial family continued to grow, and Zhu Di soon found new playmates. Among his favorites were his younger sister, Princess Ningguo (1364–1434), his young half-brother Zhu Fu (1364–1428), and particularly his younger brother Zhu Su. Zhu Su was only fifteen months younger than Zhu Di, and they became best friends among the palace youngsters. Whenever there was a fracas among the royal siblings, Zhu Su was always on his side. While Zhu Di enjoyed archery, horseback riding, and other physically demanding games, Zhu Su spent much of his time brooding and studying plants, flowers, and herbs. Zhu Su later became an expert on botany and pharmacology, identifying 414 food plants and publishing books on his collection of prescriptions.⁷

No sooner had his father ascended the dragon throne than he recruited some sixty eunuchs to staff the imperial household and began a massive refurbishing of the palace, which was located at the center of Nanjing, as well as construction of the capital city. By the time Zhu Di was seventeen, in 1377, Nanjing had two walls—an inner one of brick and an outer one of clay and mud. The outer wall, which was approximately sixty kilometers in length, had eighteen gates. More than thirty kilometers in length and between fourteen and twenty-one meters in height, the inner wall was designed to be an impregnable barrier, with twenty-three arsenal depots hidden inside. Enclosed by the inner wall was the palace, which had a bridge called the Five Dragons (Wulongqiao), which crossed over the Qinhuai River. Four gates in the inner wall—Meridian, Eastern Flower (Donghuamen), Western Flower (Xihuamen), and Northern Military (Xuanwumen)—provided access to and from the capital city.

TABLE 2.1 Emperor Yongle's Immediate Family



Emperor Hongwu had bestowed honors on some twenty thousand wealthy families who gleefully moved their families to Nanjing, thus contributing to the prosperity and expansion of his newly established capital.⁸ Since the Eastern Jin dynasty set up its court in Nanjing around C.E. 317, this lower Yangzi valley city had been the capital of six dynasties and had existed for over a thousand years, frequently amid drama, crisis, and panic. It was a center of great wealth, and its silk and cotton industries achieved wide reputation. Soon Nanjing became a national center of scholarship, astronomy, mathematics, and other sciences and also a favored place of bohemian literati and eremitic poets and artists. Nanjing was where Zhu Di began his education, developed the foundations of his demagoguery, and cut his political teeth.

During his years of struggle, Zhu Yuanzhang had always sought out signal figures and well-learned people to advise him and to teach his children. He appointed prominent scholars to high places in government and endorsed the tenet of wisdom through classical study. One such person was Song Lian

(1310–81), a Zhejiang native and erudite Confucian scholar. While Zhu Yuanzhang was still engaged in a life-and-death struggle against his enemies in 1362, Song Lian was already giving lectures to the future emperor and his staff on the government stewardship. Among other topics, Song particularly liked to discuss the lessons from Confucius's *Spring and Autumn Annals* (Chunqiu). When Zhu Di's eldest brother, Zhu Biao, was about twelve, this small, plump, pleasant man came to the inner court to teach the crown prince classics, literature, and history.⁹ Zhu Di was then only seven or eight years old and had probably just mastered the thousand basic Chinese characters and memorized a few passages from *The Classic of Filial Piety*. However, it was customary that on his father's birthday—October 21—he and his siblings recite in front of the emperor congratulatory poems that they had written.

Later, when Zhu Di was a companion-reader of his older brothers, he had the opportunity to listen to Song Lian's lectures on the Four Books. He was often asked to write comments on *The Great Learning*, the classic that was considered the quintessential distillation of governmental wisdom. In addition to Song Lian, a native of Jurong County, Jiangsu, by the name of Kong Keren was also an important teacher of Zhu Di during his formative years. Kong was a well-rounded literatus and a trusted member of Zhu Yuanzhang's brain trust. He regarded the classics as books of augury, in which rulers should read cause-effect relations into sequences of political and natural phenomena. Kong's favorite subject was Han dynasty (206 B.C.E.–220 C.E.) history, and he often appraised the merits and demerits of the dynasty's two greatest emperors, namely, its founder Han Gaozi (Liu Bang, r. 206–195 B.C.E.) and Han Wudi (r. 141–87 B.C.E.).¹⁰ Years later, when Zhu Di himself became the emperor, he often cited as didactic examples the lives of the First Emperor of China, Qin Shihuang (r. 221–210 B.C.E.) and Han Wudi. Luckily, Zhu Di was able to avoid these two emperors' evil practices of engaging in witchcraft and taking elixirs.¹¹ These great historical figures taught him how to challenge himself, to use the levers of political power, and, above all, to harness the strength of his will. All of these curricula also ensured that Zhu Di had a first-class political education.

Kong also taught the subjects of philosophy and ethics, for Zhu Yuanzhang, who was something of a martinet, believed that the development of character should have high salience in education. However, what should be included in character education was thought of differently by the emperor and empress. It is said that once when the princes' tutor Li Xiyan struck one of them over the head for inattention, the emperor pondered retaliation against the tutor. Empress Ma, who generally practiced political purdah, was able to prevent him

from interfering. She said, "As brocade, in the process of weaving, needs shearing, so do children, undergoing instruction, require punishment. Indulging children does no good."¹² Even so, the pugnacious and crafty Zhu Di was occasionally emboldened to act recklessly and in a manner that his father believed was not morally exemplary. When that happened, he was always punished according to the degree of offense. Once, his father ordered him confined to a remote country cottage, without any food. During this predicament Empress Ma secretly sent her servants with food and drink to save Zhu Di's life.¹³ Interestingly, later in his life Zhu Di always attributed his "sound" upbringing to the character education by both his father and his mother. There is no record to indicate whether he kept the hemp sandals and the travel bag they gave him at his name-giving ceremony, but it is clear that Zhu Di's character education taught him to be self-disciplined and to endure hardship.

Even before Zhu Di reached the age of ten, Emperor Hongwu was planning how to secure and perpetuate his empire. Thus, on April 22, 1370, ten days before Zhu Di's tenth birthday, the emperor created eight princedoms for eight of his sons (Hongwu's second to tenth sons, except the ninth, who had died in infancy). On the day of the installment ceremony, Zhu Di, together with the other designated princes, arrived at Respect Heaven Hall at dawn and received from Senior Chancellor Li Shanchang (1314–90) a gold book and a gold seal, on which the inscription "Treasure of the Prince of Yan" was chiseled in large characters. The two-page book contained a seminal statement on the nature of his princedom:

Since ancient times, the masters who won the world have always built strong support on the peripheries. . . . I hereby name my fourth son Zhu Di to be Prince of Yan, permanently enfeoffed in Beiping. But is it an easy task? I came from the peasantry, battled with so many warlords, and endured all kinds of hardships. My goals have been to serve both the heavens and the earth, and to be worthy of their blessings. . . . You now have the possession of a princedom and must respectfully fulfill your duties and follow decorum. You must periodically sacrifice to your ancestors and pay tribute to sacred mountains and rivers. You should also diligently drill your troops and defend your domain, and have sympathy for your subjects. . . . Be sure to carry out my instructions and conduct yourself with prudence.¹⁴

Emperor Hongwu then appointed Song Lian as senior tutor in the crown prince's newly established household and announced that Zhu Di, now the Prince of Yan, would also study with his own tutors. Zhu Di was expected to

have a palace, a court of civil and military officials, and also personal troops when and if he went to Beiping. Until that time, however, his first senior counselor, Hua Yunlong (rank 2a), and his first senior tutor, Gao Xian (rank 2b), became his earliest mentors in Nanjing. Gao Xian tutored the young prince for four to five years, lecturing on topics such as irrigation, farming, and Confucian classics as well as interpreting the dynastic histories. Gao helped polish the young prince's writings in both prose and poetry and was required to discuss periodically a little pamphlet compiled by eminent Hanlin scholars and prefaced by Song Lian. Entitled *Record of Outstanding Examples* (Zhaojianlu), the booklet set a moral tone by listing numerous notable feudal lords and princes of previous dynasties, both good and bad. It warned the Ming princes to forswear their "habitual extravagance" and taught them to be moral exemplars, so that the country would not be scandalized by their exploits.¹⁵ Historical examples taught Zhu Di how to distinguish loyal persons from treacherous ones and how to reward and punish his subordinates. As a consequence, from an early age he put a premium on loyalty.

At the time Hua Yunlong was appointed senior counselor of the Prince of Yan, he held the concurrent title of vice commissioner-in-chief of a military commission. The Ming campaign against the Mongols resumed in earnest in January 1370, and before the end of the year successfully drove the remaining Tartars—then in a state of confusion, desperation, and despair—north of the Great Wall. Hua was promoted to the position of Marquis of Huaian in June 1370 and, early in February of 1371, took charge of the administration of Beiping and its vicinity, which covered eight prefectures, thirty-seven subprefectures, and 136 counties. Zhu Di was only ten years of age when enfeoffed and would not take up his residence in Beiping until Hua Yunlong had arranged a proper, secure, and comfortable princely establishment. While in Beiping, Hua took over the residence of a former Mongol prime minister and, in his search for certain imperial seals and regalia (which the Mongols had taken with them when they fled) allegedly plundered the old Yuan palace for his own collection. He was recalled in 1374 but died on his way to Nanjing.¹⁶

After the death of Hua Yunlong and the dismissal of Gao Xian, several other meritorious and learned persons were hired to tutor the Prince of Yan, including Fei Yu, Qiu Guang, Wang Wuban, and Zhu Fu. Fei's relationship with the prince was not always cordial, as evidenced by Zhu Di's refusal to bestow a title of nobility on Fei's grandson. On the other hand, Zhu Fu's tenure between 1373 and 1388 as a staff member of the princely establishment of Yan was long and significant. Zhu Fu received his first government post in 1370 as an instructor at the National University, where he helped edit *Record of Outstanding*

Examples. He joined the staff of the princely establishment of Yan during the autumn of 1373 and was quickly promoted to become its administrator. Four years later he was appointed the chief tutor of the Prince of Yan and ultimately was a trusted confidant of the prince until his retirement. Zhu Fu, a man of integrity, diligence, and honesty, had been a positive influence during Zhu Di's formative years. As late as 1416 Zhu Di still remembered this old teacher and granted him a posthumous title, Branch Minister of Beijing.¹⁷

While receiving an excellent general education at the hands of eminent scholars and virtuous tutors, the Prince of Yan always regarded the discipline and excitement of military life as vastly more attractive than the dull placidity of palace life. Early in 1374, when he was not yet fourteen, he first took part in the so-called "spring drill." Dressed in his military uniform, he rode his horse in a circle around a military compound near the palace, passed before seven review platforms, and finally gathered with other princes in a camp to enjoy specially cooked sacrificial lamb and pork. After this Zhu Di and his brothers would periodically go to their ancestral hometown, Fengyang, for the kind of training that would help bolster their confidence and competence in dealing with the real world. Located on the south bank of the Huai River some 400 *li* (200 kilometers) west of Huaian and Yangzhou on the Grand Canal, and some 330 *li* (165 kilometers) east of Nanjing, Fengyang had been established as a special administrative unit called the Central Metropolis. It was responsible for administering five subprefectures and eighteen counties and had eight guard units (each with roughly 5,600 soldiers) stationed there to protect the tombs of Zhu Yuanzhang's ancestors and to defend the city.¹⁸

The first time Zhu Di was required to go there was early in the spring of 1376, barely one month after his wedding. Leaving his teenage wife, Princess Xu (1362–1407), in Nanjing, Zhu Di went to Fengyang with his two elder brothers—the Prince of Qin (Zhu Shuang) and the Prince of Jin (Zhu Gang)—and stayed there for seven months, from the last days of the second lunar month to the ninth month. They lived in the rain and the snow and tasted the stern conditions of the Huai valley. They took part in the training of troops—including infantry, cavalry, and artillery—and learned all the dos and don'ts of fighting a battle. In addition, Zhu Di became familiar with gunpowder, firearms, swords, spears, crossbow triggers, arrowheads, scimitars, and so on.¹⁹ This military training taught him how to be a leader and how to exercise authority, and strengthened another foundation of his demagoguery—his preference for authoritarianism and his belief in himself.

Zhu Di would return to Fengyang two years later, this time with the Prince of Zhou (Zhu Su, his younger brother and intimate friend) and two half-

brothers, the Prince of Chu (Zhu Zhen, 1364–1424) and the Prince of Qi (Zhu Fu). This time he would stay for two long years and, in addition to learning how to command troops on the firing line, he paid particular attention to the logistics of warfare, such as transportation, provisions, and funding. Zhu Di had clearly begun to acquire organizational skills, and the successes he later achieved came in part from his ability to utilize the resources available to him. During this tour of duty, he sometimes dressed as an ordinary soldier and found opportunities to visit peasants.²⁰ By going out into the real world, Zhu Di further appreciated what his father had said about the people who were still recovering from a prolonged disorder: “People are exhausted both physically and economically. They are like young birds learning to fly, or like seedlings newly planted. Do not pull the feathers off the one or hurt the roots of the other.”²¹ Zhu Di recalled that those were among the happiest days of his young life, in which he lived in his own world of fantasy. He often asked the villagers about the price of rice, pork, vegetables, and other daily necessities and showed them the common touch. Whenever circumstances permitted, he bought fresh fruits and nuts from roadside vendors with his own Great Ming paper currency (*Da Ming baochao*), which was in circulation in five denominations. As his admirers would claim, the Prince of Yan was always a man of the people and an ordinary soldier among the masses.²²

It was during his first trip to Fengyang that Zhu Di imperiously instructed his elder cousin General Li Wenzhong (1339–84) to construct and refurbish buildings for his princely establishment in Beiping. Li was a nephew and adopted son of Emperor Hongwu, and, in spite of suffering a serious defeat at the hands of Koko Temur in 1372, he was in charge of military affairs in the north at the time. The construction of a palace for a new prince had to generally follow the guidelines called “The Ancestor’s Instructions” (Zuxunlu) personally drawn up by Emperor Hongwu, but because Beiping happened to have been the capital of the Yuan dynasty, the emperor was willing to relax the rules a little by permitting the Prince of Yan to move into the old palaces of the Mongol emperor. Consequently, the palaces owned by the Prince of Yan were much larger and better fortified than those of his brothers in Xi’an, Taiyuan, Kaifeng, and elsewhere. In fact, some of his less fortunate brothers had to reside in temples or county offices. However, since the color yellow was a Chinese imperial symbol, General Li had to change the color of the palace roof from yellow to green. In addition, he strengthened the defense capacity of the city wall and palace gates. So well fortified was the city that when General Li’s own son Li Jinglong (d. 1421) led the loyalist army against the rebellious Prince of Yan in 1399, his troops could not even get through the Beiping city wall.²³

Before the Prince of Yan took up his residence in Beiping in 1380, he had to fulfill another very important duty, that of marrying a young woman selected by his father as a suitable match, the eldest daughter of Xu Da, who was Emperor Hongwu's comrade-in-arms and ranked first among all of the early Ming military commanders. A woman of intellect, strong will, and abounding energy, Miss Xu was two years younger than the Prince of Yan, and the two were probably engaged when they were in their early teens. This was not unusual for royal or noble marriages; the generally accepted legal age of maturity was thirteen *sui* for females and fifteen *sui* for males (a Chinese baby is counted one *sui* at birth), conforming to contemporary ideas on mental and moral development. Such a marriage would not be consummated until later, when puberty had been reached at about fifteen *sui* for females and seventeen *sui* for males.

The marriage of the Prince of Yan to Miss Xu, in early 1376, was obviously a political one, meant to further solidify the alliance between the two families. In fact, Xu Da's two other daughters were married to Emperor Hongwu's thirteenth and twenty-second sons. Nevertheless, the young royal couple seems to have found love in one another and would share their joys and sorrows for the next thirty-one years. The first joy they shared was the birth of their first son, Gaozhi, two years later, on August 16, 1378, followed by their second son, Gaoxu, in 1380.

It was in the midst of these happy days, when the young couple and their babies were all set to take up their residence in Beiping, that the prince learned that his father had just foiled a conspiracy against the dynasty. The leader of this conspiracy was the generally arrogant and frequently reckless prime minister Hu Weiyong (d. 1380), who had long worked for Emperor Hongwu. In order to curb Hu's growing power, Hongwu trumped up charges not only against the man himself but also against many thousands of senior officials who were associated with him. As the evidence against the alleged culprits was either doctored or made up by the emperor, Hu and over fifteen thousand others were put to death in February 1380. Everyone in the Ming court, including generals and Hanlin scholars, was shaken up by this political storm unleashed by the calculating emperor, whose distrust of his officials seemed to be matched only by his contempt for innocent lives. Nevertheless, this was a great political lesson for the Prince of Yan on how to use sham politics to maintain one's autocratic power. He also learned that his father had ordered the abolition of the office of the premier and the chief military commission. From then on, governmental operations were to be carried out by the Six Ministries and the Five Military Commissions, all of whose chiefs were to take orders directly from the emperor. Although the Prince of Yan was not yet twenty, he had already

witnessed many examples of brutality and was indeed fairly familiar with the game of power. Much of what he absorbed remained unformulated in his mind, awaiting crystallization into decisions a decade later.

The last trace of snow on the North China Plain had all but disappeared when the yellow and purple wildflowers dotted the foothills of Mount Zhong (present-day Zijinshan, or Purple and Gold Mountain) in Nanjing. It was early in the spring of 1380 that the barely twenty-year-old Prince of Yan bade farewell to Emperor Hongwu and Empress Ma, receiving imperial blessings as he and his family departed for Beiping. The prince realized that from then on, unless there were special occasions or emergencies, he could see his brothers only once in a long while but that he was required to come to see his father in Nanjing once a year. With an annual income of some fifty thousand piculs (roughly thirty metric tons) of rice, plus cloth of various kinds, salt, tea, and fodder at his disposal, and three princely guard units under his command, the Prince of Yan, who had a tryst with power, had now embarked on a path that would capriciously lead him to become one of the most prominent monarchs in Chinese history. Fate, fulfilling the design of heaven, cast him into the strategically critical realm of Beiping, which ultimately would provide him the means to supreme power.

The royal entourage, escorted by more than 5,700 princely guard soldiers, made its first stop at Yangzhou, an important port along the Grand Canal. Concerned about the operations of remnant pirates on the coast as well as the dangers of the Shandong promontory, the royal party relied upon boats to carry them and their household goods from Yangzhou to Huaian and then used carts and horses to reach Jining, Shandong. This section of the journey was so hard and dangerous that a few years after the Prince of Yan ascended the throne, he ordered the construction of the Union Link Channel (Huitonghe) to ease the crossing of the northern course of the Yellow River and to facilitate the transportation of goods to Beiping. The party traveled slowly along the high ground of western Shandong and finally arrived at the northern section of the Grand Canal. They proceeded northward to the White River (Baihe) and made a stop at Tongzhou before sailing eighty-one more kilometers along the Channel of Communication Grace (Tonghuihe).²⁴ When they reached the city wall of Beiping, the Prince of Yan's father-in-law, General Xu Da, was waiting there for them. In 1381 Xu was to be named theater commander of the Mongol suppression forces, and for the next four years this uneducated, quiet, but brilliant strategist would take his son-in-law under his wing and train him to become a first-rate field marshal. Nevertheless, every winter Xu was ordered to return to Nanjing to visit his family, who lived in the capital as Emperor Hongwu's hostages.

The recent wars and expropriations had turned the peasants on the northern border into murderers, looters, and bandits. When General Xu Da first occupied the Mongol city of Dadu in the early autumn of 1368, his forces were ruthless in setting up a new administration. He found a plethora of weaknesses in the city's security system. In particular, because the Great Wall had not been an effective barrier since the sixth century, it would be susceptible to attacks by northern invaders. Consequently, the general decided that until he had the time and resources to reconstruct the wall and make it into an effective fortification, he needed a larger buffer zone between Juyong Pass (the pass nearest to the wall) and the newly renamed city of Beiping. With this strategic consideration in mind, he moved the city wall southward and also made it smaller and more defensible, hence destroying its original symmetry and leaving vacant a huge area in the northern part of the old Mongol city. He then built a new wall surrounding the northern section of Beiping with only two openings—Peace and Stability Gate (Andingmen) and Virtue and Victory Gate (Deshengmen)—clearly signifying the Ming's new mandate and the beginning of a new era. The walls on the east and west sides were heavily reinforced. In 1419 Zhu Di would move the southern wall farther south.²⁵ But devastation wrought by war, plague, famine, and attendant social disorder contributed to a stunning phenomenon: Beiping's population suffered extremely heavy losses in the 1350s and 1360s. Between 1358 and 1359, for instance, nearly a million people died of disease and hunger. Outside each of the eleven gates, more than ten thousand corpses lay unattended.²⁶ Indeed, long before General Xu Da arrived there, the imposing city that Marco Polo grandiloquently described in his *Travels* was no more.

When the Prince of Yan arrived at the old Mongol capital, a dozen years had elapsed, and although north China had not yet totally recovered from exhaustion, the economically emaciated core of the Beiping metropolis had regained some of its population, vivacity, and even grandeur. In addition to the hundreds of thousands of Ming troops stationed in the area, a large number of government personnel had been steadily filling in the newly established offices, and an army of artisans and workers brought from all over the country were still rehabilitating the city. The most pressing problem was the supply of food and daily necessities needed to meet the demand of the booming city. Some farmlands had been reclaimed, and peasants, soldiers, and even convicts were coerced to take part in agricultural production while the government supplied them with seeds, oxen, tools, and tax remissions. In the meantime, the government encouraged merchants to bring grain to the area, but instead of paying them in cash, the Ministry of Revenue issued them licenses

to buy and sell salt. The merchants obtained the salt from designated salt farms and sold it in the market for huge profit. The government also reopened coastal shipping so as to bring grain to Bohai Bay, but due to the unpredictable weather and resurgent piracy, such operations often sustained heavy losses. At this juncture, the Prince of Yan realized that in order to feed his ever-growing population in Beiping, he needed to transport at least 6.5 million piculs of grain from south China every year.²⁷

Soon after the prince and his family settled into the revamped palace, he encountered both cultural and military-administrative problems that he had never before faced in his young career. For example, Mongol customs remained evident in Beiping, and the Mongol language and script were kept alive and juxtaposed with Chinese in official documents. He was mindful that his father had outlawed several Mongol customs and fashions, and ordered the people to dress as they did before the Mongol invasions and not to use popular Mongol names. The prince found it difficult to enforce these orders at once, as he was convinced that it would take some time to embed changes in the new society. Fortunately, he was surrounded by men of rectitude and high ability who advised him to open the sealed Mongol “imperial” libraries and treasuries and to retain some of the Mongol eunuchs who were left there to take care of the palace women. The prince personally drilled his guard troops, deploying them in various precincts. He also became aide-de-camp of General Fu Youde (d. 1394), a highly competent commander with immense personal courage. To trace Fu Youde’s peripatetic path from his humble background in Anhui to his rise to become an eminent field marshal is to appreciate Zhu Yuanzhang’s knack for recognizing talent and rewarding loyal servants. In 1361, after serving under a succession of overlords, some of whom proved to be Zhu Yuanzhang’s toughest rivals, Fu surrendered to Zhu. After his brilliant campaign in Sichuan in 1371, Fu was awarded the rank of marquis, and when the Prince of Yan met him in 1380, he was serving as Xu Da’s deputy, training troops, conducting patrols of the border, and supervising construction of defense along the Great Wall. It was his expertise as a shrewd field tactician, however, that would benefit his newest disciple, the Prince of Yan.²⁸

Alexander the Great of Macedonia was only twenty-one years old when he took over his father’s command and ultimately built a huge empire. The Prince of Yan was the same age when he was baptized on the battleground and learned how to handle the levers of power in the northern region; he had begun a journey that would lead him to the dragon throne exactly twenty-one years later.²⁹ In 1381 his father-in-law and General Fu took him to engage the remnant Mongols, led by Nayur Buqa. The prince’s first experience was a success as the



MAP 2. Beijing and Its Vicinity during Yongle's Reign

Ming forces prevailed. Even though Nayur Buqa escaped, the Ming troops captured a large number of prisoners and animals. As the prince battled the Mongols in the barren, brown wasteland of north China, he learned how to gather intelligence on the enemies, to look for hoofprints and horse dung, and to study every water well and dead animal he could find along a northbound overland trek. Above all, he learned from his two mentors the important lessons of caution, of sharing the lot of his men, and of instilling respect and loyalty in his subordinates.³⁰ This maiden campaign would become the spur to the prince's hyperkinetic life.

Scarcely had the prince concluded his first military campaign than he had to bid farewell to his mentor General Fu Youde, who was in the autumn of 1381 ordered to command an army of three hundred thousand troops in Yunnan—then still an outpost of a remnant of Mongol power. During the next few months, the prince tried to familiarize himself with his princely domain by such activities as going to admire the two-dragon-shaped Heavenly Longevity Mountain, north of Beiping; walking on the beaches of the lovely Bei Lake (Beihai); and inspecting the several rivers that were linked to the Grand Canal. He then journeyed to Shanhai Pass, a fortress wedged between the mountains and the sea where the Great Wall meets the ocean. He also checked the exposed towns, forts, stockades, ports, passes, barriers, and other Beiping strategic locations that required constant vigilance. From his father-in-law he learned how many troops were needed to defend these places and how to assign troops from nearby guard units in rotation. After this learning-by-inspection tour, the prince was convinced that two ingredients were still lacking before the Ming government could complete the garrison defense in his area: recruitment and training of at least seventeen guard units with a total of more than one hundred thousand men, and construction of a new wall at Badaling (some seventy kilometers northwest of Beiping) so that Ming commanders would have updated beacon towers and new facilities for stationing cavalry and infantry.

While the prince was blossoming in Beiping, his mother, Empress Ma, who had just celebrated her fiftieth birthday, passed away in September 1382. Grief immediately gripped the entire household, in particular Princess Xu, who had served her mother-in-law with filial piety when she lived in Nanjing. Although every member of the imperial family wore traditional mourning apparel for three years, Princess Xu followed, additionally, a strict vegetarian diet, a practice consistent with her Buddhist background. The royal couple soon journeyed southward to comfort the emperor, who had suspended court business and was terribly grieved at the loss of his wife and most trusted advisor. The Prince

of Yan then learned that his father had chosen the south side of Mount Zhong, which rises 448 meters above the sea level in northeastern Nanjing, to be the empress's burial site.

On October 31, exactly forty-four days after her death, the coffin of the empress was carried by an elaborately decorated wagon, first passing through Xuanwu Gate, then circulating Sparrow Lake and turning north from Great Gold Gate (Dajinmen) to her final resting place. The trees on Mount Zhong stood burnished with scarlet and gold, Mother Nature's farewell to the beloved empress. There she was interred at Filial Piety Tomb (Xiaoling), which was heavily guarded by special troops. Eunuchs took turns lighting incense and candles every day and kept the fires in the tomb temples burning all the time. On the anniversary of Empress Ma's death, eunuchs wearing smocks mourned and prayed for forty-nine days. To alleviate his grief, the Prince of Yan remembered that his mother had always taught him not to act hastily. Regarding his character, especially his level of comfort with himself, he seems to have inherited and learned from his mother the trait of coolness under fire. More than two decades later, soon after he ascended the dragon throne as emperor, Yongle ordered the canonization of his mother as the Filial and Kind Progenitor Empress (Xiaocigao Huanghou). He also commanded the distinguished Hanlin scholar Xie Jin (1369–1415) to write a glowing biography of his mother.³¹