

KANGXI'S VALEDICTORY EDICT, 1717

The imperial edict below was issued by the Kangxi emperor (1654—1722) on December 23, 1717. By this time, Kangxi had ruled China for over fifty years and placed the stamp of his thoughtful and inquiring mind on the workings of the imperial state. The ambitious rivals who threatened the throne at the outset of Kangxi's reign were long since under control. Oboi, Galdan, Wu Sangui, and Koxinga were all dead and the forces they commanded in vain efforts to achieve their aims followed them into oblivion. In the final years of the emperor's life, Kangxi was the master of a powerful and unified state.

While one glimpses through this edict the emperor's sense of his own accomplishments, there are also ruminations on mortality and the concerns of ruling a state so vast and complex as seventeenth- and eighteenth-century China. One of the agonizing difficulties of the final years of Kangxi's reign was the problem of finding an appropriate successor. Until 1712, Kangxi favored his second son, Yinreng, but the erratic and conspiratorial behavior of the heir apparent made him an impossible choice. By the time of the 1717 edict, Kangxi appeared to favor Yinti, his fourteenth son, for the throne, but the document merely suggests how burdensome this problem had become and makes no explicit reference to how Kangxi intended to resolve it.

When I was young, Heaven gave me great strength, and I didn't know what sickness was. This spring I started to get serious attacks of dizziness and grew increasingly emaciated. Then I went hunting in the autumn beyond the borders, and the fine climate of the Mongolian regions made my spirits stronger day by day, and my face filled out again. Although I was riding and shooting every day, I didn't feel fatigued. After I returned to Peking the Empress Dowager fell ill, and I was dejected in mind; the dizziness grew almost incessant. Since there are some things that I have wanted to say to you on a normal day, I have specially summoned you today to hear my edict, face to face with me.

The rulers of the past all took reverence for Heaven and observance of ancestral precepts as the fundamental way in ruling the country. To be sincere in reverence for Heaven and ancestors entails the following: Be kind to men from afar and keep the able ones near, nourish the people, think of the profit of all as being the real profit and the mind of the whole country as being the real mind, be considerate to officials and act as a father to the people, protect the state before danger comes and govern well before there is any disturbance, be always diligent and always careful, and maintain the balance between leniency and strictness, between principle and expediency, so that long-range plans can be made for the country. That's all there is to it.

No dynasty in history has been as just as ours in gaining the right to rule. The Emperors T'ai-tsu and T'ai-tsung initially had no intention of taking over the

country; and when T'ai-tsung's armies were near Peking and his ministers advised him to take it, he replied: "The Ming have not been on good terms with our people, and it would be very easy to conquer them now. But I am aware of what an unbearable act it is to overthrow the ruler of China." Later the roving bandit Li Tzucheng stormed the city of Peking, the Ming Emperor Ch'ung-chen hanged himself, and the officials and people all came out to welcome us. Then we exterminated the violent bandits and inherited the empire. In olden times, it was Hsiang Yu who raised an army and defeated the Ch'in, yet the country then passed to the Han, even though initially Emperor Han Kao-tsu was only a local constable on the Ssu River. At the end of the Yuan, it was Ch'en Yu-liang and others who rebelled, yet the country then passed to the Ming, even though initially Emperor Ming T'ai-tsu was only a monk in the Huang-chueh Temple. The forebears of our dynasty were men who obeyed Heaven and lived in harmony with other men; and the empire was pacified. From this we can tell that all the rebellious officials and bandits are finally pushed aside by truly legitimate rulers.

I am now close to seventy, and have been over fifty years on the throne— this is all due to the quiet protection of Heaven and earth and the ancestral spirits; it was not my meager virtue that did it. Since I began reading in my childhood, I have managed to get a rough understanding of the constant historical principles. Every Emperor and ruler has been subject to the Mandate of Heaven. Those fated to enjoy old age cannot prevent themselves from enjoying that old age; those fated to enjoy a time of Great Peace cannot prevent themselves from enjoying that Great Peace.

Over 4,350 years have passed from the first year of the Yellow Emperor to the present, and over 300 emperors are listed as having reigned, though the data from the Three Dynasties—that is, for the period before the Ch'in burning of the books—are not wholly credible. In the 1,960 years from the first year of Ch'in Shih-huang to the present, there have been 211 people who have been named emperor and have taken era names. What man am I, that among all those who have reigned long since the Ch'in and Han Dynasties, it should be I who have reigned the longest?

Among the Ancients, only those who were not boastful and knew not to go too far could attain a good end. Since the Three Dynasties, those who ruled long did not leave a good name to posterity, while those who did not live long did not know the world's grief. I am already old, and have reigned long, and cannot foretell what posterity will think of me. Besides which, because of what is going on now, I cannot hold back my tears of bitterness; and so I have prepared these notes to make my own record, for I still fear that the country may not know the depth of my sorrow.

Many emperors and rulers in the past made a taboo of the subject of death, and as we look at their valedictory decrees we find that they are not at all written in imperial tones, and do not record what the emperor really wanted to say. It was

always when the emperors were weak and dying that they found some scholar-official to write out something as he chose.

With me it is different. I am letting you know what my sincerest feelings are in advance.

When I had been twenty years on the throne I didn't dare conjecture that I might reign thirty. After thirty years I didn't dare conjecture that I might reign forty. Now I have reigned fifty-seven years. The "Great Plan" section of the Book of History says of the five joys:

The first is long life; The second is riches; The third is soundness of body and serenity of mind; The fourth is the love of virtue; The fifth is an end crowning the life.

The "end crowning the life" is placed last because it is so hard to attain. I am now approaching seventy, and my sons, grandsons, and great-grandsons number over 150. The country is more or less at peace and the world is at peace. Even if we haven't improved all manners and customs, and made all the people prosperous and contented, yet I have worked with unceasing diligence and intense watchfulness, never resting, never idle. So for decades I have exhausted all my strength, day after day. How can all this just be summed up in a two-word phrase like "hard work"?

Those among the rulers of earlier dynasties who did not live long have all been judged in the Histories as having caused this themselves through their own wild excesses, by overaddiction to drink and sex. Such remarks are just the sneers of pedants who have to find some blemishes in even the purest and most perfect of rulers. I exonerate these earlier rulers, because the affairs of the country are so troublesome that one can't help getting exhausted. Chu-ko Liang said: "I shall bow down in service and wear myself out until death comes," but among all the officials only Cho-ko Liang acted in this way. Whereas the emperor's responsibilities are terribly heavy, there is no way he can evade them. How can this be compared with being an official? If an official wants to serve, then he serves; if he wants to stop, then he stops. When he grows old he resigns and returns home, to look after his sons and play with his grandsons; he still has the chance to relax and enjoy himself. Whereas the ruler in all his hardworking life finds no place to rest. Thus, though the Emperor Shun said, "Through non-action one governs," he died in Ts'ang-wu [while on tour of inspection]; and after four years on the throne Emperor Yu had blistered hands and feet and found death in K'uai-ch'i. To work as hard at government as these men, to travel on inspection, to have never a leisure moment—how can this be called the valuing of "non-action" or tranquilly looking after oneself? In the I Ching hexagram "Retreat" not one of the six lines deals with a ruler's concerns—from this we can see that there is no place for rulers to rest, and no resting place to which they can retreat. "Bowing down in service and wearing oneself out" indeed applied to this situation.

All the Ancients used to say that the Emperor should concern himself with general principles, but need not deal with the smaller details. I find that I cannot agree with this. Careless handling of one item might bring harm to the whole world; a moment's carelessness could damage all future generations. Failure to attend to details will end up endangering your greater virtues. So I always attend carefully to the details. For example: if I neglect a couple of matters today and leave them unsettled, there will be a couple more matters for tomorrow. And if tomorrow I again don't want to be bothered, that will pile up even more obstructions for the future. The emperor's work is of great importance, and there should not be delays, so I attend to all matters, whether they are great or small. Even if it is just one character wrong in a memorial, I always correct it before forwarding it. Not to neglect anything, that is my nature. For over fifty years I have usually prepared in advance for things—and the world's millions all honor my virtuous intentions. How can one still hold to "there being no need to deal with the smaller details"?

I was strong from my childhood onward, with fine muscles; I could bend a bow with a pull of 15 li and fire a fifty-two inch arrow. I was good at using troops and confronting the enemy, but I have never recklessly killed a single person. In pacifying the Three Feudatories and clearing out the northern deserts, I made all the plans myself. Unless it was for military matters or famine relief, I didn't take funds from the Board of Revenue treasury, and spent nothing recklessly, for the reason that this was the people's wealth. On my inspection tours, I didn't set out colored embroideries, and the expenses at each place were only 10,000 or 20,000 taels. In comparison, the annual expense on the river conservancy system is over 3,000,000—so the cost was not even one percent of that.

When I studied as a child, I already knew that one should be careful with drink and sex, and guard against mean people. So I grew old without illness. But after my serious illness in the forty-seventh year of my reign, my spirits had been too much wounded, and gradually I failed to regain my former state. Moreover, every day there was my work, all requiring decisions; frequently I felt that my vitality was slipping away and my internal energy diminishing. I fear that in the future if some accident happened to me I would not be able to say a word, and so my real feelings would not be disclosed. Wouldn't that be regretful? Therefore I am using this occasion when I feel clear-headed and lively to complete my life by telling you all that can be revealed, item by item. Isn't that wonderful?

All men who live must die. As Chu Hsi said, "The principle of the cyclical cosmic forces is like dawn and night." And Confucius said, "Live contentedly and await Heaven's will." These sayings express the great Way of the Sages, so why should we be afraid? I have been seriously ill recently: my mind was blurred and my body exhausted. As I moved around, if no one held me up by the arms it was hard for me to walk. In the past I fixed my mind on my responsibilities to the country; to work "until death comes" was my goal. Now that I am ill I am

querulous and forgetful, and terrified of muddling right with wrong, and leaving my work in chaos. I exhaust my mind for the country's sake, and fragment my spirits for the world. When you wits aren't guarding your body, your heart has no nourishment, your eyes can't tell far from near nor ears distinguish true from false, and you eat little and have a lot to do— how can you last long? Moreover, since the country has long been at peace and people have grown lazy, joy goes and sorrows mount, "peace" departs and "stagnation" comes. When the head is crammed with trifles, the limbs are indolent—until everything is in ruins and you inevitably bring down at random and together calamities from Heaven and destruction for men. Even if you want to do something, your vitality is insufficient, and by then it's too late to admit your mistakes. No more can you be roused up, and moaning in your bed you'll die with eyes open—won't you feel anguish just before you die?

Emperor Wu-ti of the Liang was a martial dynastic founder, but when he reached old age he was forced by Hou-ching into the tragedy at T'ai-ch'eng. Emperor Wen-ti of the Sui also was a founding emperor, but he could not anticipate the evil ways of his son Yang-ti and was finally unable to die in peace. There are other examples, like killing oneself by taking cinnabar, or being poisoned and eating the cakes, or the case of Sung T'ai-tsu, when people saw the candlelight from afar. There are records of all kinds of suspicious cases— are these nor tracks of the past that we can see? All these happened because [the emperors] didn't understand in time. And all brought harm to country and people. Han Kao-tsu told Empress Lu about the mandate; T'ang T'ai-tsung decided on the heir apparent with Chang-sun Wu-chi. When I read such things I feel deeply ashamed. Perhaps there are mean persons who hope to use the confusion, and will act on their own authority to alter the succession, pushing someone forward in expectation of future rewards. As long as I still have one breath left, how could I tolerate that sort of thing?

My birth was nothing miraculous—nor did anything extraordinary happen when I grew up. I came to the throne at eight, fifty-seven years ago. I've never let people talk on about supernatural influences of the kind that have been recorded in the Histories: lucky starts, auspicious clouds, unicorns and phoenixes, chili grass and such like blessings, or burning pearls and jade in the front of the palace, or heavenly books sent down to manifest Heaven's will. Those are all empty words, and I don't presume so far. I just go on each day in an ordinary way, and concentrate on ruling properly.

Now, officials have memorialized, requesting that I set up an heir apparent to share duties with me—that's because they feared my life might end abruptly. Death and life are ordinary phenomena—I've never avoided talking about them. It's just that all the power of the country has to be united in one person. For the last ten years, I've been writing out (and keeping sealed) what I intend to do and what my feelings are, though I haven't finished yet. Appointing the heir-apparent is a great matter; how could I neglect it? The throne of this country is one of the

utmost importance. If I were to relieve myself of this burden and relax in comfort, disentangling my mind from every problem, then I could certainly expect to live longer. You officials have all received great mercies from me—how can I attain the day when I will have no more burdens?

My energies have shrunk, I have to force myself to endure, and if everything finally goes awry, won't the hard work of the last fifty-seven years indeed be wasted? It is my intense sincerity that leads me to say this. Whenever I read an old official's memorial requesting retirement, I can't stop the tears from flowing. You all have a time for retiring, but where can I find rest? But if I could have a few weeks to restore myself and a chance to conclude my life with a natural death, then my happiness would be indescribable. There is time ahead of me; maybe I will live as long as Sung Kao-tsung. We cannot tell.

Nor until I was fifty-seven did I begin to have a few white hairs in my beard, and I was offered some lotion to make it black again. But I laughed and refused, saying: "How many white-haired emperors have there been in the past? If my hair and whiskers whiten, won't that be a splendid tale for later generations?" Not one man is now left from those who worked with me in my early years. Those who came later to their new appointments are harmonious and respectful with their colleagues, they are just and law-abiding, and their white heads fill the Court. This has been the case for a long time, and for this I am grateful.

I have enjoyed the veneration of my country and the riches of the world: there is no object I do not have, nothing I have not experienced. But now that I have reached old age I cannot rest easy for a moment. Therefore, I regard the whole country as a worn-out sandal, and all riches as mud and sand. If I can die without there being an outbreak of trouble, my desires will be fulfilled. I wish all of you officials to remember that I have been the peace-bearing Son of Heaven for over fifty years, and that what I have said to you over and over again is really sincere. Then that will complete this fitting end to my life.

I've been preparing this edict for ten years. If a "valedictory edict" is issued, let it contain nothing but these same words.

I've revealed my entrails and shown my guts, there's nothing left within me to reveal.

I will say no more.