On July 17, 1402, after a brief visit to his father’s tomb at Mount Zhong, Zhu Di, at the prime age of forty-two, was enthroned as Emperor Yongle at Respect Heaven Hall, the tallest palace building in Nanjing. However, he did not install his wife as Empress Xu until four months later. Neither did he issue his inauguration decree proclaiming the imperial will until July 30, when he conducted a state sacrificial ceremony in the southern suburb of Nanjing. In his first imperial decree, Yongle gave routine amnesties to inmates with good behavior and waived land taxes for a year for people living in the war zone and in Fengyang, Huaian, Xuzhou, and Yangzhou; for the rest of the nation, land taxes were waived for half a year. But the corvée labor tax was to be reinstated for households in Beiping, Henan, and Shandong for three years to facilitate speedy reconstruction and rehabilitation on the war-torn North China Plain. He also made known his will that, since all of the major culprits of Jianwen’s regime had been apprehended and would be dealt with by the authorities, any unauthorized reprisal, revenge, or vindictive acts against former enemies would not be condoned. In order to allay the fears of the populace and to prevent the spread of chaos across the land, Yongle ordered the Ministry of War to issue a proclamation urging the people not to listen to rumors but to return to their normal lives and resume their daily business. He then commanded his soldiers to release all of the women and girls they had captured during the civil war. A few weeks later, in September 1402, when Yongle was asked to send troops to arrest bandits in Jiangxi, he rebuked the Jiangxi official and told him to offer food and clemency to the desperados, who Yongle believed had been driven to stealing and robbery by the heavy taxes and maladministration of the previous regime. Meanwhile, he removed thousands of landless peasants from Shanxi to homesteads in Beiping.

After the nation’s four years of strife and turmoil, Yongle was trying to heal wounds and at the same time to legitimize his authority and secure his posi-
tion. He still did not quite believe that he had been able to take over Nanjing with such ease and continued to feel a great sense of insecurity during his early days as the emperor of China. This is why he took three immediate and simultaneous measures to establish control. First of all, he relentlessly sought to learn the whereabouts of his nephew Jianwen, scoured out clandestine subverters, and mercilessly purged the key political personnel of Jianwen’s court. Second, he recruited low-ranking scholars to process his administrative paperwork and to build his own political clique by establishing the office of the Grand Secretariat, thus steadily consolidating his centralized and authoritarian rule. And third, he established a secret police apparatus first in the Embroidered-Uniform Guard and then boldly and extensively used his eunuchs for intelligence gathering, military supervision, diplomatic missions, and the like. All of these measures were the seeds of Ming absolutism; Yongle’s macabre purge turned out to be not the end but the beginning of a pernicious political trend. His heralded Grand Secretariat effectively stifled any independent organisms that contradicted imperial opinions or checked the emperor’s powers. And his extensive use of castrated courtiers unwittingly involved eunuchs in court politics, espionage and internal security, military and foreign affairs, tax and tribute collection, the operation of imperial monopolies, and so on. Yongle was indeed a mover and shaker as he continued his father’s campaign to transform the character of Chinese government and politics by concentrating all power in his own hands.

The practical Yongle also knew that the best way for him and his family to enjoy and endure absolute power was to revive and support the agrarian masses. As a consequence, during the summer of 1403, when locusts migrated in great swarms to Henan and destroyed crops, Yongle wasted no time in sending relief to the ravaged areas and had negligent officials there brought under investigation. Four months later, Minister of Revenue Yu Xin (d. 1405) reported that Huguang was awfully late in remitting summer taxes to Nanjing and asked His Majesty to punish the local officials of that province. Yongle told Minister Yu to be more lenient with the tax delinquents and to find out the real problems behind the tax delay. He reminded Yu to always first take into consideration the interests of the people and not to blame or pressure them until they became sick. That winter Zhending also suffered various natural disasters, and Yongle provided food, clothing, and tax relief for the people there. One of his urgent reconstruction projects was the dredging of the Wei River in Shandong so that grain boats from the south could sail all the way to Beijing (formerly Beiping) for the famine relief. Then, during the summer of 1404, Minister of Rites Li Zhigang memorialized that a congratula-
tory delegation from Shandong wished to offer His Majesty silk cocoons spun by the larvae of wild silkworms, but Yongle told his minister that this was too trivial to warrant an audience. He added that it was good that Shandong could increase its silk production by using the wild strain, but that he would not be happy until every corner of the empire had enough food and clothing and none of his subjects suffered from hunger or cold. It is to be noted that throughout his reign, Yongle lived frugally and could not have cared less about imperial trappings.

These anecdotes were recorded not in the standard Ming histories but in Treasure Instructions from Ming Emperor Yongle (Ming Taizong baoxun), edited by Minister of Rites Lü Ben and published in 1430 by Yongle’s grandson Zhu Zhanji, Emperor Xuande. Treasure Instructions was written in dialogue form, with Yongle posturing here and there; it is clear that the intent of the newly crowned emperor was to win the hearts and souls of the people. Two months after ascending the dragon throne, Yongle gave awards and promotions to 109 people—including two dukes, thirteen marquises, and eleven earls—who had helped him win the civil war, which was now euphemistically called the “Suppression of Trouble.” At the victory ceremony, Yongle told his comrades-in-arms to remain forever trustworthy and to continue performing good deeds for the state. He clearly understood the teachings of Mencius—who held that the state had a stake in the livelihood of the populace—when he announced that he was seeking new talent and soliciting sound suggestions for reconstructing the nation. Among the many who responded was a minor army officer by the name of Zhang Zhen from the western frontier. Even though Zhang’s memorial was crude and somewhat naive, Yongle was impressed with his sincerity and courage, and rewarded him with a garment plus one thousand guan of paper money. (In 1390 one guan was worth about 250 coins.) He also ordered that Zhang receive a promotion.

Six months into his new reign, Yongle finally laid down the intellectual groundwork of his rulership in an edict issued to his top civil and military officials. In it, he said,

Giving and nourishing lives is the utmost virtue of the heavens. A humane ruler needs to learn from heaven; hence, loving the people should become the principle of his rulership. The four seas are too broad to be governed by one person. To rule requires delegation of powers to the wise and the able who can participate in government. That was the way followed by such sage-kings as Yao, Shun, Yu, Tang, Wen, and Wu. Throughout history there have been clear examples that when the government was run by wise
and able ministers, the state was orderly. On the other hand, when the ruler failed to find the wise and the able to help him, the state was chaotic. My late father, Emperor Hongwu, received the mandate of heaven and became the master of the world. During the thirty years of his rule, there was peace and tranquility within the four seas. There was neither catastrophe nor tumult. His clean government and disciplined population were not matched by any in the recent past. The way he accomplished these feats was by selecting the wisest persons of the world to help protect the people and run the government.\textsuperscript{10}

This decree suggests that Yongle was fully aware that the imperial system of China was difficult to run and that it required the inherited monarchy of the Inner Court and the recruited literary bureaucracy of the Outer Court to work as a team.

Yongle’s philosophy of rulership was further expounded in 1403 in his fortuitous instructions to his revenue officials:

\begin{quote}
The purpose of establishing various agencies and appointing graded officials at the court was to govern the people. And the way to achieve the governance of the people was to protect and to feed them; that’s all. It is based on this belief that, after I assumed the emperorship, I dutifully followed the instructions of my father and the established laws. I now personally command you to check any desolate lands that have not been tilled or worked upon. I want your subordinates to report all such lands truthfully and exempt them from taxes so that you will not create trouble among the populace.\textsuperscript{11}
\end{quote}

Nearly five years later, in 1408, when Yongle bade farewell to some 1,540 provincial officials from around the empire, he made another, similar speech:

\begin{quote}
The way of rulership is to follow the wishes of the people. The reason for setting up offices and selecting graded officials and the importance of finding wise and able staff is to bring peace and security to the people. If all of you provincial officials can appreciate my love for the people and carry out that principle of love in your official capacity, then the people all over the world will feel at ease.\textsuperscript{12}
\end{quote}

There is no question that Yongle looked to past emperors who ruled well and tried to emulate them. But if he also sounded like a modern politician run-
Yongle’s reliance upon the power and mercy of heaven for maintaining his mandate is no different from a Christian ruler’s prayers for the support of God. Even though Confucianism deals primarily with earthly ethics, society, and politics and lacks a consecrated priesthood and sacred scriptures, it can be viewed as a religion in that it stresses dependence on a higher power and concerns itself with the meaning of life and the destiny of mankind.16 Yongle’s resolve to live up to Confucian ideals can thus be seen not only as a political commitment but also as a religious conversion. Whereas following the teachings of the sages and cultivating virtues within himself were imperative in winning the heavenly mandate, frequent rituals were equally important as outward expressions of his respect for heaven—and Yongle took them extremely seriously. During the Ming period, of the nine temples in Beijing south of Meridian Gate, the two most sacred were the Ancestral Temple on the east side of the road leading to the gate and the Altar of Earth and Grain on the west side. Since the central focus of Chinese spiritual beliefs was on ancestral spirits who were believed to have become divine dwellers in heaven, the dead were venerated and seen as active participants in the lives of their living descendants. And because the earth and grain provided material resources for human beings, Yongle diligently made state sacrifices at these temples on the first days of the first, fourth, seventh, and tenth lunar months. Whenever there was a solar eclipse or a leap month, the sacrificial ceremony was changed to the fifth day. On other state holidays and special occasions, such as severe and prolonged droughts or locust infestations, Yongle would offer sacrifices to heaven and personally plead for rain.

Before each ceremony, Yongle would bathe thoroughly and avoid eating meat, drinking liquor, or engaging in sex. Prohibition of meat and sex was based on the idea that abstinence not only had intrinsic religious value but enhanced the emperor’s concentration on spiritual matters. Yongle would pray day and night before approaching the sacrificial temples.17 At the ceremony, brand new ornamental utensils featuring abstract patterns of intertwined dragons were used, and ostentatious objects and auspicious foods were displayed to show the emperor’s awe of and respect for supernatural powers.18 Regular ancestral worship rituals had been held and sacrifices offered to heaven for a millennium. However, Yongle learned how to effectively use these occasions to improve his image as the worthy inheritor of the mandate, to glorify his regime, and to convey his benevolence, virtue, and majesty. He also seemed to believe that favorable omens were the harbingers of his virtuous and humane rule, and he therefore frequently memorialized such events as military exploits, bumper crops, enfeoffments, treaties, and weddings.
On the other hand, Yongle was mindful that calamities or natural disasters could be warnings that the Son of Heaven was deviating from proper conduct. For example, at the Lantern Festival of 1415, there was a fire that destroyed a palace warehouse and killed several guards. Yongle took the fire as an unfavorable omen and immediately called off the wasteful festival. He then ordered his ministers to refuse further congratulations or gifts. He also sent surveillance censors to the four corners of the empire to identify nasty and corrupt bureaucrats who had caused people misery. Finally, he asked the crown prince to make a sacrifice to heaven and beg for celestial forgiveness for his misdeeds. Stories such as this can be found throughout *The Yongle Veritable Record* (Ming Taizong shilu), which was written under the supervision of Duke Zhang Fu and completed in 1430. They show that Yongle was not blindly insensitive to the possibility that sometimes even he could make mistakes. Only about four months after the capital was moved from Nanjing to Beijing in 1421, the three major palace buildings—Respect Heaven Hall, Flower-Covered Hall, and Prudence Hall—caught fire. The terrified Yongle felt that something he did might have upset the natural order, and he immediately called his top advisors to admonish him for his shortcomings. Consequently, he agreed to provide restitution to taxpayers who had been victimized by natural disasters the previous year. In the meantime, he dispatched twenty-six imperial commissioners to inspect the nation in order to give relief and assistance to the poor and the needy and to impeach and arrest irresponsible local officials. Somehow Yongle blamed the fire on his own ineptitude and excesses, and in accordance with the Confucian doctrine of self-restraint, he cancelled his birthday celebration that year.

Can Yongle’s reactions to natural calamities be interpreted as repentance for not living up to his potential or for not fulfilling his rightful obligations? Or were these reactions spiritual mechanisms that allowed him to look inward and confront his weaknesses and vulnerability? His own writings suggest that after he took the helm in 1402, there was a maturation of Yongle’s personality. He became more thoughtful and introspective. Sensing that he was both divine and secular, he now believed that timely repentance and even occasional mortification were necessary for turning away from transgression and toward renewal. By the Ming period, the cult of ancestor worship and Confucianism had already interacted and intermingled with both religious Daoism and Buddhism. It is safe to say that Yongle’s religion, like that of the vast majority of the Chinese, was ecumenical, acknowledging the necessity of various teachings to suit various needs. He therefore also patronized Buddhism, sponsoring, for example, the publication of several Buddhist texts.
Only a few months after ascending the throne, Yongle learned that a certain Tibetan lama possessed profound knowledge and a plenitude of wisdom and was eager to meet him. In the spring of 1403 Yongle appointed the court eunuch Hou Xian (fl. 1403–27) and the prominent Buddhist monk Zhi Guang (d. 1435) to journey to Tibet. After traveling tens of thousands of li and searching out abbots in various monasteries, Hou Xian’s mission was finally able to bring a Tibetan high lama, Halima, to Nanjing. Yongle was obviously pleased with Halima’s holiness and erudition, as he received the high monk at Respect Heaven Hall, then gave a state banquet in his honor at Flower-Covered Hall. On April 10, 1407, the twenty-three-year-old Halima presided at religious services, held in Nanjing’s biggest monastery, Soul Valley Monastery (Linggusi), for the benefit of Yongle’s deceased parents. Several members of the imperial family, including Empress Xu, received blessings and spiritual guidance from Halima, who spent almost a year in Nanjing. Halima taught Yongle’s family and courtiers prayers to enhance optimistic moods and chants asking for blessings from the Buddha. It was reported that Halima dissuaded Yongle from sending troops to occupy Tibet. The Tibetan lama also provided Yongle with a full set of portents and omens indicating that the heavens had destined him for the throne, and reassured him that his family’s imperial succession would go on for many generations without interruption.

Even though Yongle conferred an extremely prestigious title on Halima and showered his Tibetan guest with all kinds of gifts, he never allowed himself to overindulge in lavish Buddhist festivities. Once he even criticized Emperor Wu of the Later Liang dynasty (r. 502–49) and the last Mongol emperor, Toyon Temur, for indulging in excessive Buddhist ceremonies and creating a quagmire of ethics and laws. In early 1403, when over 1,800 young men from Nanjing and Zhejiang shaved their heads and requested to register as monks, Yongle banished them to Liaodong for punishment. He then sternly warned, “My father decreed that only men above forty would be permitted to register as monks. Those who violate this law do not care about the existence of the imperial court.” Early in the fall of 1407 the magistrate of Jiading, Suzhou, reported that his subprefecture had lost more than half of its original 1,200 monks and requested His Majesty’s permission to register six hundred additional novices to man Jiading’s Buddhist temples. The request was denied.

Yongle’s policy on religion was inconsistent. While trying to curtail the growing number of Chinese monks, he took measures to convert non-Chinese aboriginals to Buddhism. It seems that he treated religion as a derivative of underlying social and political processes and used Buddhism not only to overcome the backwardness of China’s frontier and border regions but also to tighten
his grip on ethnic minorities within China proper. For instance, in 1406, seven years before making Guizhou a full-fledged province, Yongle established a religious office there called the Buddhist Registry (Senggangsi) to induce the Miao (Hmong) and Buyi peoples to embrace Buddhism. Yongle realized that not only could Buddhism provide spiritual solace, but it could calm restless local warriors and thereby remove the threat that had bedeviled Ming authorities in the remote region. During the era of political reconstruction, Yongle did not overlook the problems and the opportunities of the distant southwest, where an amalgam of non-Han peoples lived.

The land of southwest China was—and still is—majestic, featuring forests, lakes, and shallow streams curled up against the edge of karst hills. It also held wealth: silver, timber, and plants for producing oil, especially valuable tung oil, which was used for making soap, linoleum, paints, and varnishes. The most numerous of the region’s minorities were the Zhuang people, who had had a close affiliation with the Han for centuries. They shared with the Dai (ethnic kin to the people of Thailand) common linguistic roots and a love of festive singing and dancing. Then there were the Bai, who were rice farmers and the original inhabitants of the Yunnan plains. Scattered in small stockaded villages in rugged mountains were the Yao, who raised rice, corn, and vegetables by slash-and-burn farming. The Yi people, on the other hand, were fierce warriors who practiced slavery (even their slaves owned slaves) and embraced a religion based on sacred scriptures. Finally, there were the Miao and Buyi peoples, who were scattered around the enchanting karst hills, streams, and greenery of the Guizhou plateau. During the Ming period, these aboriginal groups had not been assimilated into Han Chinese society and were thus considered “barbarians.” They were generally suspicious of the Han and were often hostile to the Ming regime.

The Ming used force, appeasement, and guile in dealing with these groups. Emperors invested aboriginal titles (tuguan) on the local chiefs with nominal military or civil ranks and granted them “self-governments,” much as “autonomous status” is given to ethnic minorities in China today. In practice, Chinese “advisors” were also appointed to assist these ethnic groups in both civil and military affairs. The highest aboriginal titles were soothing minister (xuanweishi, rank 3b) and pacification minister (xuanfushi, 4b), and the lesser titles included conciliation minister (anfushi, 5b), punitive minister (zhaotaoshi, 5b), and elder official (zhangguan, 6a). In 1375 Emperor Hongwu had cobbled together a plan to shore up his administrative apparatus in the region. He invested eleven soothing ministers, ten pacification ministers, nineteen conciliation ministers, one punitive minister, and 173 elder officials in the south-
west region. Though the local chiefs performed their administrative tasks as Ming functionaries, they did not receive government stipends. In this sense, they had not really joined Ming officialdom—they “had not yet entered the current” (weiruliu).\(^{25}\)

In order to bring stability to the region, Emperor Hongwu installed in Yunnan a provincial administration office and a regional military commission in 1382, and a provincial surveillance office in 1397, thus completing the triad of autonomous agencies of a provincial government. Under this structure, the three offices (sansi) shared administrative powers, and no one man had the authority of a typical provincial governor. But as time went on, the Ming government gradually replaced the aboriginal chiefs with bona fide Chinese executive officials who “had already entered the current.”\(^{26}\)

Chinese writers often have reported the lives of aboriginals as idyllic and rarely have mentioned the ethnic and economic divisions that the political system fomented in border regions. The relationship between the ruling Han Chinese and ruled natives was actually fraught with conflict, and there were abuses and oppression on the part of Chinese officials. When mismanagement became flagrant and social conditions unbearable, minority groups often staged anti-Chinese revolts, to which the Ming authorities generally reacted by launching punitive campaigns. However, in hilly and rocky Guizhou—adjacent to Yunnan and Huguang and between Sichuan and Guangxi—the situation was more difficult. The area was populated largely by the Miao and Buyi peoples, who planted wheat, rice, tea, and tung trees in terraced fields that extended to the hilltops.

Decades before the founding of the Ming, the Guizhou area was wracked by a cycle of petty interethnic wars. After the ascendency of the Ming, Emperor Hongwu used the Wu River as a demarcation and designated the Song people to manage the affairs of indigenous peoples east of the river, and the An people to administer the territory west of the river. In 1382 Madame Liu Shuzhen succeeded her husband as the head of the Song people and accompanied her son to Nanjing to pay homage to Emperor Hongwu. Wearing several wraparound aprons of various colors and patterns, and donning a cap over her elaborate hairdo, Madame Liu was also received by Yongle’s mother, Empress Ma. Soon after Liu’s visit to Nanjing, the Ming government established for the first time a regional military commission in Guiyang, with Ma Ye as its commissioner. At this juncture another aboriginal woman, Madame She Xiang, succeeded her deceased husband as the head of the An people and was allowed to oversee all of the interethnic affairs in western Guizhou. Unfortunately, Commissioner Ma Ye, who saw the world through a prism of race and gender, demonstrated
his prejudice by unleashing a torrent of abuse on the Miao people and pro-
voked She Xiang to a bruising battle.

Ma Ye probably thought no woman could ever equal a male in such a situ-
ation, but She Xiang fought him to a standoff. The usually politically sensitive
Hongwu then summoned She Xiang for an interview in 1385. Dressed in a long,
dark gown and a pointed hat, She Xiang pleaded her case to His Majesty, who
was impressed by her eloquence and resolve, and later gave her silk fabrics,
jade and gold jewelry, and clothing. Emperor Hongwu also worked out an agree-
ment to recall and punish Commissioner Ma Ye in exchange for She Xiang’s
promise to annually remit eighty thousand piculs of grain and a substantial
number of tribute horses to the Ming court. She Xiang, officially a Ming sooth-
ing minister, would visit Nanjing again in 1388 and, until her death in 1397,
contributed to the development of western Guizhou. Among the nine agricul-
tural stations she developed was the Longchang Station, where the promi-
nent Ming philosopher Wang Yangming (1472–1528) later lived as an exile.27

The first time Yongle paid close attention to Guizhou was during the sum-
mer of 1406, when the Song people east of the Wu River refused to remit trib-
ute grain to the Ming authorities. Yongle dispatched troops to pacify the
disgruntled Song but still could not find the best means by which to mend
relations. In 1410 two Song chieftains, Tian Chen and Tian Zongding, began
to fight over the ownership of a mine. When Yongle learned that the two mor-
tal enemies had escalated their battle without regard for what it was doing to
their people, he was determined to get a firm grip on the political and mili-
tary fronts in this underutilized region. He ordered Marquis Gu Cheng to
lead a punitive army of fifty thousand to quell the disturbance in Guizhou.
A native of Xiangtan (in what is now Hunan), Gu Cheng had been a brawny
boatman when he first joined Hongwu’s rebellion against the Mongols. In his
early career, he worked as a groom, carrying raincoats and umbrellas for
Hongwu’s outings. He later served under Emperor Jianwen, but at the battle
of Zhending during the civil war, Gu was captured by the Prince of Yan. After
his surrender, Gu performed numerous good deeds and earned the title of mar-
quis. At the time he was ordered to go to Guizhou, he was already seventy-two
years old.

Marquis Gu had no difficulty apprehending Tian Chen, who was then
chained and delivered to Yongle for punishment. Yongle also stripped Tian
Zongding of his Song title and then decided to abandon all aboriginal chiefs
and replace them with Ming officials.28 To make Guizhou a full-fledged pro-
vince, Yongle installed a provincial administration office in Guiyang in 1413,
with Jiang Tingzan as its senior administrator and Meng Ji its junior administrator. This newest province was further subdivided into ten prefectures (fu), nine subprefectures (zhou), and smaller areas administered by seventy-six elder officials. He assigned one pacification minister, then deployed eighteen guard units to bolster his Guizhou regional military commission. Even though he would continue to allow the aboriginals to serve as office lictors, runners, bearers, and flunkies, from then on only those who “had entered the current” would be eligible for provincial posts above the prefectural level. The total population of the new province was estimated at around only 230,000, which was infinitesimal in a nation of nearly sixty-five million. But by incorporating Guizhou into the Ming hierarchy, Yongle not only brought the entire southwestern region under the control of the central government, but also ended the region’s ambient local anarchy.29

Since centralism, hierarchy, and leadership were integral to Yongle’s thinking, he needed effective means to help him run the empire. These included the moral (especially Confucian) teachings of the Chinese past as well as the terror and violence bequeathed by his father. Therefore, he constantly and earnestly looked for men of high caliber and trustworthy disposition so that he could change the political dynamic and run the difficult imperial system more smoothly than had his deposed nephew. But because most of his confidants were military people from the north and because so many bureaucrats had lost their lives due to the carnage of the civil war and its ensuing purge, Yongle was in desperate need of filling his court with new talent. In grappling with this problem, he asked Minister of Rites Li Zhigang to prepare examinations for new recruits. Li reported that during Hongwu’s reign, the number of new recruits had varied from ministry to ministry, with some taking in only thirty but others hiring as many as 470. Yongle then told Li to find him as many talented men possessing broad views, common sense, and honesty as he could; he should reject supercilious men and those who wrote in a conceited style.30

By early in the spring of 1404, the minister of rites had managed to recruit 473 new examination graduates. Among them, the top twenty-eight were given the title of “Hanlin bachelor” (shujishi). They were to stay at the Hanlin Academy, continuing their scholarly pursuits while providing literary services to the throne, including editing the Veritable Records of the previous emperors. It is to be noted that as soon as Yongle gained control of the imperial household, he ordered the revision of his father’s own Veritable Record and extended Hongwu’s reign through 1402, thus changing the fifth year of the Jianwen reign to the thirty-fifth year of Hongwu and making Jianwen an illegitimate usurper. Almost every scholar of Ming history believes that the records on Jianwen’s
reign are so muddled with falsehoods that it is impossible to reconstruct a true picture of Jianwen’s stewardship. Undoubtedly, the words and deeds of Emperor Jianwen had to be carefully edited by some of the newly accredited Hanlin scholars in Yongle’s service. Traditionally, “Diaries of Activity and Repose” (Qijuzhu)—which record in minute detail all the public doings and sayings of each emperor, together with all business, governmental or otherwise, in which he participated—were primary sources for the Veritable Records. Such diaries bore the scrawls and aura of the reigning emperor. As soon as the emperor died, his successor would appoint a committee to comb through the diaries and condense them into the Veritable Record. But nearly every word written in the Veritable Record was drafted and redrafted, bucked back and forth, and vetted and polished, so that the final product does not bear the intellectual fingerprints of everyone who touched it. Historians receive only the final document—tidy, spell-checked, evenly margined, sterile, and bearing the unmistakable blandness of a deed done by committee. Unlike modern memoranda, the Veritable Records provide no marginalia that reflect the internal struggle that precedes policy and decision. Thus information about the Jianwen reign is meager and unreliable.

Three months after Yongle had recruited his first class of graduates, the Ministry of Rites selected an additional sixty so-called “tribute scholars” from various provinces and enrolled them, by early in the summer of 1404, at the National University for further training. This group of scholars was soon assigned to various departments in the central government and in local offices. In order to ascertain the efficiency and competence of the new recruits, Yongle demanded that their performance be reviewed every six months by both surveillance commissioners and investigating censors. In addition to the new recruits, he retained many of Jianwen’s veteran officials, particularly those who had started their careers during the reign of Emperor Hongwu. Yongle declared that because these people were hired by his father, he harbored neither prejudice nor hostility toward them. In order to make good his words, he promoted Tang Zhong (d. 1427) from the position of assistant magistrate of Luzhou Subprefecture, Guangxi, to that of junior minister of the Court of Judicial Review. It was a slick political move because Tang had once impeached Chen Ying—Yongle’s principal hatchet man during the bloody purge—for taking bribes from the then Prince of Yan. Soon afterward Yongle made known the criteria by which he selected his ministers:

When the ruler promotes or demotes a person, he must be able to convince the public. If, by promoting one person, the whole world knows that
the person has done something good, then every bureaucrat will do good. And if, by dismissing one person, the whole world knows that the person has done something evil, then no one would dare to do an evil thing. If a person has not done good deeds but receives promotion, that is called favoritism and selfishness. If the person has not committed evil deeds but is dismissed, that is called personal vendetta and revenge. If the ruler makes appointments with selfish principles, how can he persuade the whole world?34

In making appointments, Yongle also used the capacity of a container as a metaphor. He said that if a container can carry several bushels, you ought to give it several bushels. But if the container can hold only a few grams, you can give it only a few grams. Likewise, if a man of little talent is given a big position, he is bound to fail. But if a man of great talent is given a minor office, his talent will be wasted.35 Yongle applied the Confucian moral concepts of the gentleman (junzi) and the inferior man (xiaoren) in selecting his officials. In 1409, before his departure for Beijing, Yongle summoned his eldest son, Zhu Gaozhi, who had been invested as the heir apparent in 1404, and asked him to act as regent while Yongle was away from Nanjing. Yongle often did this, so that his son could gain experience in administration and learn how to appoint the right persons for the right jobs. On this occasion, Yongle wanted his heir to tell him how to distinguish a gentleman from an inferior man. Citing The Analects, Gaozhi said,

The gentleman cherishes virtue, the inferior man possessions; the gentleman thinks of sanctions, the inferior man of personal favors; the gentleman makes demands on himself, the inferior man on others; the gentleman is broad-minded and not partisan, the inferior man partisan and not broad-minded.

Yongle then asked why it is often easier for the inferior man than for the gentleman to advance forward and more difficult for the inferior man to fall from grace. The crown prince replied that it is because the inferior man is unscrupulous and also knows how to promote himself, whereas the gentleman is not avaricious and always follows the Dao, or the Way, to do what is right. Yongle pressed further by asking, “Why do the inferior man’s opinions often prevail?” The crown prince answered, “Because the ruler loves flattery and profit. If the ruler is enlightened, then the gentleman’s opinions should prevail.” Yongle was pleased with such an answer and finally quipped, “Then should the
enlightened ruler never appoint the inferior man to a responsible position?”
The crown prince hesitated before replying, “Not necessarily. If the inferior
man has demonstrated real skills and ability, the ruler need not dismiss him
outright. Instead, the ruler has to keep a close eye on him so that he will not
flounder.” Such were the criteria, at least on paper, by which Y ongle screened
his prospects, but in practice, he also looked for men of total, consuming loy-
alty and great efficiency to serve him, sometimes neglecting to assign a high
priority to virtue. In his Learning from the Sages and the Method of the Mind,
Y ongle indicates that he would appoint able and talented people to serve in the
central government as administrators but would assign virtuous men to local
governments for routine bureaucratic work. Nevertheless, Y ongle’s record of
appointments belies his pronounced distinction. For instance, in 1409 he first
appointed Jiang Hao and Wang Yan, two “virtuous” students from the National
University, as magistrates of Zhangzhou and Jiading in Suzhou Prefecture. But
when Jiang and Wang, who were long on character but short on expertise, could
not handle the burgeoning business of their counties, they were recalled and
replaced by men with proven ability.

By temperament Y ongle was an impetuous man, and by inclination he did
not esteem the literati as a class. Nevertheless, it was this class of men, many
of whom were proven administrators, who assisted him during the years of
reconstruction and helped him attain stability and prosperity. Stability was to
be attained by establishing state power through the monarchy and by promoting
Confucianism as the code of behavior among his bureaucrats. Y ongle wanted
his officials to effectively manage China’s agrarian masses and to work for what
he believed constituted the public good: basically, feeding and clothing the
people. With these goals in mind, Y ongle took enormous care in selecting his
top management team and core staff, namely, the heads of the established six
ministries plus his heralded seven grand secretaries—the latter to help him for-
mulate policies, the former to carry them out. During his tenure as the emperor
of China, from July 1402 to August 1424, Y ongle made a total of thirty-two min-
isterial appointments. Of these ministers, four had served under Emperor
Jianwen and lasted only two months under Y ongle as caretakers during the tran-
sition of power. Ten other ministers either held concurrent titles and were sta-
tioned in various provinces or stayed less than one year at their Nanjing posts.
Their records of service are fragmented and inconsequential. But the records
of the remaining eighteen ministers are intimately related to Y ongle’s own career,
clearly reflecting his domineering personality, intrepid intellectual curiosity,
and, above all, his hands-on management style.

The eighteen ministers came from a well-balanced geographical back-
ground: four were from the Nanjing area (Yu Xin, Li Zhigang, Jin Chun, and Chen Qia); three from Henan (Guo Zi, Song Li, and Zhao Hong); two each from Zhejiang (Jin Zhong, Fang Bin), Huguang (Xia Yuanji, Liu Zhun), Shandong (Wu Zhong, Huang Fu), and Beijing (Liu Guan, Li Qing); and one each from Fujian (Zheng Ci), Sichuan (Jian Yi), and Shaanxi (Lü Zhen). In terms of education, eight were graduates of the National University, five had received doctoral degrees (all in the year 1385, under Hongwu’s reign), and the remainder were appointed to top positions because of either special talent or reputation. But the minister whom Yongle trusted the most rose through the rank and file of the military service. He was Jin Zhong (1353–1415), who had studied divination and astrology and was said to have helped Yongle make crucial and correct decisions before and during the civil war. When Yongle ascended the throne, he first made Jin a deputy minister in the Ministry of Public Works but promoted him to be minister of war in 1404; Jin concurrently supervised the education of the heir apparent. He retained his posts for more than eleven years, effectively managing military personnel; maintaining military installations, equipment, and weapons; and overseeing the operation of the postal system. Jin, a loyal and honest man, was the only minister who can be called a comrade-in-arms of Yongle. He died in office during the spring of 1415.

Three other ministers—Guo Zi, Lü Zhen, and Wu Zhong—had also joined Yongle’s camp before he seized Nanjing in 1402. Guo was a senior administration commissioner in Beiping when he defected. During the civil war, he was in charge of logistic supplies; three years later, because of his significant contributions to the victory, he was rewarded with the post of minister of revenue. Guo had recruited an assistant commissioner, Lü Zhen, to join the forces of the Prince of Yan. Lü was first made a prefect, then a deputy minister in the Court of Judicial Review until 1405, when he was promoted to be minister of public works. Three years later he was reassigned to head the Ministry of Rites. Wu Zhong had surrendered to Yongle when he was the supervisor of a military colony at the northeastern frontier fortress of Daning. He supplied Yongle with provisions and horses during the civil war, and, for his service, Yongle first made him a censor-in-chief before appointing him minister of public works in 1407. Guo, Lü, and Wu dealt with policy rather than politics, and they survived under the unforgiving glare of their lord Yongle.

The second group of Yongle’s ministerial appointees—Huang Fu, Song Li, Liu Zhun, Fang Bin, and Jian Yi—were defectors who kowtowed and pledged their allegiance to the new master as soon as he passed through the palace gate in Nanjing. Yongle accepted their fealty, and Ming China was the richer for it. Among this group of ministers, Huang Fu, minister of public works for less
than three years, was probably the best cultivated. A thrifty and self-disciplined man, Huang consistently exhibited a combination of talent and moral character, paying close attention to his attire as well as his conduct and never squandering government funds. He was full of ideals and was noted for his impartiality toward colleagues and his popularity with the people he governed. Unfortunately, because of his association with the Jianwen regime, Huang never could gain Yongle’s total trust and was forced to spend most of his career in Annam and in the provinces. Yongle then found Song Li (d. 1422) to succeed Huang Fu as minister of public works. Song was also unable to join Yongle’s power circle, as he spent considerable time harvesting logs in Sichuan for the construction of ships and the new palace in Beijing. He died in office in 1422. Liu Zhun and Fang Bin, ministers of war, perished under unbearable circumstances: Liu took his own life in 1408 when he was surrounded by rebellious Annamese, and Fang was driven to suicide for ethical reasons in 1421.

Jian Yi, the only other defector, was able to find a way to win the confidence of the master and ultimately achieved a spectacular career in Yongle’s court. A native of Ba County, Sichuan, Jian earned his doctorate in 1385 and immediately began his civil service career. He spent his first nine years as a drafter in the Central Drafting Office, scribing and screening documents, until he was promoted by Emperor Jianwen to be junior deputy minister of personnel. Along with numerous Jianwen officials, he surrendered to Yongle, who first made him senior deputy minister, then minister of personnel. It is to be noted that after Emperor Hongwu abolished the office of premier in 1380, the Ministry of Personnel carried the heaviest workload in the central government, with increasing responsibility as well as power. It was in general charge of the appointment, merit evaluation, rating, promotion, and demotion of all civil officials as well as matters concerning noble and honorific titles. Jian Yi dedicated himself to Yongle and to the management of government personnel for twenty years, from the fall of 1402 to the fall of 1422. During that time he was accorded a concurrent title, “grand supervisor of instruction” (for the heir apparent). But because of this adjunct position, he was arrested for failing to admonish the crown prince on a ritual slip-up and was imprisoned for five months. After his release, Jian was reinstated and continued to manage the Ministry of Personnel not only for Yongle but also for Yongle’s son, grandson, and great-grandson until he died at the age of seventy-two. Jian was a hard worker and an honorable man who almost never sniped at his colleagues behind their backs. In addition to his administrative duties, he was very much involved in the compilation of The Yongle Veritable Record, which was completed only five and a half years after the emperor’s death.
The third group of Yongle ministers came from various social and political backgrounds, but they were generally cultivated, brave, and dedicated administrators. Among them, Xia Yuanji was the most beloved and revered by both Yongle and his successors because he always spoke with biting concision in favor of saving tax dollars as well as alleviating the sufferings of humanity. Born in Xiangyin, in what is now Hunan, Xia lost his father when he was very young. Upon completion of his studies at the National University, he was selected to work in the palace as a bookkeeper. He was noted for his attention to detail and was soon made a secretary, rank 6a, in the Ministry of Revenue. Jianwen then promoted him to be junior deputy minister of revenue and, at one point, dispatched him to Fujian and Hubei to investigate such matters as the population census, assessment and collection of taxes, and the handling of government revenues. At the end of the civil war, Xia was wrapped up and tied by rope when he was presented to Yongle as booty. However, Yongle had learned of Xia’s many talents and decided to charge Xia with the daunting task of resuscitating the Ming economy.

Yongle first made him a deputy, then minister of revenue. Although Xia served Yongle with total, consuming loyalty, he was imprisoned for nearly three years, from 1421 to 1424, for his opposition to Yongle’s costly campaign against the Mongols. But Yongle was well aware of Xia’s loyalty and straightforwardness, as the emperor’s dying words were “Xia Yuanji loves me.” During his tenure, Xia fought floods and constructed an irrigation system in western Zhejiang. He understood the problem of regional economic differences and did his best to account for both the land taxes and corvées recorded, respectively, in Registers Accompanied by Maps in the Shape of Fish Scales (Yulin tuce) and The Yellow Registers (Huangce). Even though the Ministry of Revenue was constantly understaffed, he managed to stabilize paper currency and the money supply and to institutionalize state storehouses, granaries, and custom houses, which collected transit duties on shipping on Grand Canal. In addition, he brought effective government control over salt and salt exchange. Due to Xia’s treasury skills, Yongle needed not worry about the exorbitant expenditures of several of his military campaigns and diplomatic adventures. A generous and magnanimous man, Xia would also survive Yongle and continue to serve under Yongle’s son and grandson. He died in office at the age of sixty-four.45

None of the ministers in the other four departments—Rites, War, Punishment, and Public Works—were able to endure for too long the demanding Yongle, and none of them enjoyed the confidence of the emperor as did Jian Yi and Xia Yuanji. If we characterize Jian and Xia as “gentlemen,” then there were a few “inferior men” who also served Yongle one way or the other. The
most typical inferior man was Lü Zhen, who had boundless energy and a photographic memory. Yongle first made him minister of punishment, then minister of rites, and, at one time, also the concurrently acting minister of war and revenue. But Lü was a devious man, skilled at flattering his superiors, and had no sense of decorum. Another lemon in Yongle’s Outer Court was Minister of Rites Li Zhigang, who was witty, quick, and had a knack for managing tedious and complex matters. However, Li was partisan and hateful toward people of equal or superior ability. Wu Zhong, minister of public works for more than two decades, also qualified as an inferior man by the standards of Confucius. He was in charge of the construction of the palace in Beijing and three imperial mausolea but was a womanizer and led a lavish lifestyle. Finally, Liu Guan, minister of rites, openly dallied with prostitutes and took bribes, and became a laughingstock among the literati.\(^4\)

In addition to the above-mentioned notable ministers, who represented the bureaucratic authority of the Outer Court, the domineering Yongle also appointed a handful of Hanlin scholars to help him with the horrendous daily burdens of detail in the Inner Court. In August 1402 Yongle established the Grand Secretariat inside the Eastern Corner Gate. After the routine evening audience, he usually invited two scholars to join him in a working dinner that lasted until midnight. One month later he recruited five more Hanlin scholars to attend and counsel him. They were first asked to process administrative paperwork but gradually to also participate in important military and political decisions. These scholars, officially known as the grand secretaries, also helped the emperor draft imperial decrees and later became representatives and spokesmen of the Inner Court. As time went on, they would become an instrument of imperial authority and would play a dominant executive role in the Ming government.\(^4\)

Emperor Hongwu had begun meeting with this secret council of grand secretaries in 1382 and assigned them for duty to three designated halls (Flower-Covered Hall, Military Excellence Hall, and Literary Flower Hall) and two pavilions (Literary Erudition Pavilion and the Pavilion of the East (Dongge)—within the imperial palace. They provided literary and scholarly assistance to the Inner Court by recording the emperor’s dictations, writing memoranda to officials, and performing other tedious jobs involving transcription. Hongwu purposely kept them at lower status and prevented them from obtaining any power or control. The grand secretaries under Yongle were now given real power and were all assigned to work regularly in only Literary Erudition Pavilion, leaving vacant the other previously used buildings. In fact, the term “Grand Secretariat” was coined in the Yongle reign; thus, the absolutist monar-
chy started by Hongwu was further developed by Yongle. In 1421, after the capital was moved to Beijing, the office of the Grand Secretariat was still called Literary Erudition Pavilion and was established at the southeastern corner of Meridian Gate. Upon the death of Yongle in 1424, his son reinstated Flower-Covered Hall, Military Excellence Hall, and Literary Flower Hall as the designated workplaces for the grand secretaries. In 1425 his grandson created a new office for the grand secretary at Prudence Hall. These legendary buildings have since been used to identify individual grand secretaries and collectively were viewed as the power nucleus of the Ming empire.

As the functioning of the Grand Secretariat evolved and it grew more powerful, constantly tapping into the resources and personnel of the Hanlin Academy, the latter ultimately became an appendage of the former. The Hanlin personnel included readers-in-waiting (shidu xueshi), expositors-in-waiting (shijiang xueshi), erudites of the Five Classics (Wujing boshi), and a special group who had ranked highest in the civil service examination and now had such titles as compiler (xujuan or bianxiu), Hanlin bachelor, and rectifier (jiantao). Among Yongle’s seven grand secretaries, Xie Jin was a reader-in-waiting and Huang Huai was a compiler; both began working in Literary Erudition Pavilion in August of 1402, when Xie was only thirty-three and Huang thirty-five. The other five joined this exclusive club one month later. They included expositor-in-waiting Hu Guang (thirty-two), compilers Yang Rong (thirty-one) and Yang Shiqi (thirty-seven), and rectifiers Jin Youzi (thirty-six) and Hu Yan (forty-two). The so-called “Yongle seven” were also involved in the education of the heir apparent, forming a decision-making power block in the Inner Court.

In the Ming bureaucratic hierarchy, the ministers of the Six Ministries usually ranked 2a, but the Hanlin scholars ranked lower, generally from the lowly 7b to 6a, and rarely did they climb beyond 5a. Xie Jin was promoted to 5b by the end of 1402 and to 5a when he became a Hanlin chancellor and concurrent grand secretary. Both Hu Guang and Huang Huai were first promoted to 5b and then 5a, but Hu Yan and Yang Rong went only as far as 5b. Yang Shiqi, on the other hand, remained stuck at 6a, and Jin Youzi never received a promotion. Nevertheless, because of their contributions to the education of the heir apparent, Yongle gave them such concurrent (but nominal) titles as junior preceptor, junior tutor, and junior guardian, all carrying 1b rank, and allowed them to wear the ministerial uniforms with 2a distinction when they attended court meetings. Their influence, however, came from their direct access to the throne. They functioned as Yongle’s individual counselors, being consulted daily and given responsibilities directly by Yongle. All seven grand secretaries were
Southerners: Xie Jin, Hu Guang, Jin Youzi, Hu Yan, and Yang Shiqi were from Jiangxi; Huang Huai was from Zhejiang; and Yang Rong was from Fujian. Since Yongle’s power base was in north China, there must have been a reason that he surrounded himself with a southern brain trust.

During the second half of the fourteenth century, Jiangxi was known for its literary excellence and produced much talent for the early Ming government. For instance, in the national examination of 1400, the top three graduates, including Hu Guang, were natives of Jiangxi. And among the top thirty, sixteen were from Jiangxi. Consequently, the so-called Jiangxi clique, headed by Huang Zicheng, had dominated the Jianwen court, but because of this association, the Jiangxi people also suffered a great deal during the civil war. In the war’s aftermath, squalor and instability lingered in the region. After Yongle seized power, the Jiangxi people, who possessed ample material and intellectual resources, continued to deny his legitimacy. It is against this backdrop that Yongle, a master of the impossible, decided to gamble again, as he had so many times in his career, by boldly appointing a substantial number of Jiangxi elites to his court. His message was loud and clear: he wanted the cooperation and support of the Jiangxi folks. Indeed, his newly acquired political stock would ultimately pay off. These young and well attuned Hanlin scholars, hungry for success, would serve him with skill, dedication, and unquestionable loyalty.

Once, in a convivial mood, Yongle was gloating over their services to his court and said,

You labor with me day and night diligently, and the help and assistance you render me are equal to those of the six ministers. . . . You should continue to do your best, and don’t worry about your ranks. Confucius said, “The ruler treats his ministers with decorum, and the ministers serve their ruler with loyalty.” You and I should follow the respective proper ways and perform our prescribed roles.

Among the seven grand secretaries who constituted the upper reaches of the Yongle court, Xie Jin was probably the most influential, the most talented, and also the most daring. Xie earned his doctorate when he was only nineteen years old, and at the time he joined Yongle’s secretive “kitchen cabinet,” he was barely thirty-four. It was Xie and Huang Huai who “often stood at the left side of the emperor’s bed, giving His Majesty advice until midnight; sometimes even after His Majesty was lying in bed, they were asked to sit in front of his bed, learning before anyone else every bit of intelligence and all of the important decisions.” Yongle also charged Xie with the most important task of chair-
ing a committee to edit *The Hongwu Veritable Record* (Ming Taizu shilu; 1418) and to help Empress Xu compile the three-volume *Biographical Sketches of Women of Chastity from Ancient Times to the Present* (Gujin lienü zhuan), a collection celebrating women noted for their accomplishments, humility, devotion, and chastity. Using precision, simplicity, and fluid language, Xie portrayed the striking images of many deserving women. To show her pleasure and appreciation, Empress Xu invited Xie’s wife to the palace for a special audience. From his perch at the Hanlin Academy, Xie also contributed to the compilation of *The Grand Encyclopedia of Yongle* and *The Great Collection of Literary and Historical Works* (Wenxian dacheng) and authored a genealogy of the imperial family and a biography of Yongle’s mother. Xie was straightforward, saying exactly what he had in mind, and was utterly honest and patriotic. It is believed that Yongle’s decision to install his eldest son as the heir apparent was principally due to Xie Jin’s relentless lobbying.

Yongle’s first three sons were borne by Empress Xu, and his fourth son, Gaoxi, mother unknown, died before receiving a title. The eldest son, Gaozhi, was not from the same physical mold as Yongle and interested himself primarily in literature and poetry instead of physical fitness and warfare. The second son, Gaoxu, on the other hand, was tall, strong, and athletic and had also distinguished himself in battle. The third son, Gaosui, was mediocre in character and ability and was to be involved in an attempted rebellion only two years after the death of Yongle and to die in 1431. Many of Yongle’s influential advisors time and again urged him to install his second son as heir apparent. Among these advisors was General Qiu Fu (d. 1409; one of the few dukes invested by Yongle), who pointed out that Gaoxu possessed all the vigorously physical qualities of leadership that so notably characterized Yongle and Hongwu. The duke also reminded Yongle that on several occasions Gaoxu had rescued Yongle from personal danger and had turned imminent defeats into victories during the civil war. But before making his critical decision, Yongle secretly sought Xie Jin’s advice. Xie said, “Your eldest son is noted for both his humanity and filial piety and has won the heart of the whole world.” While Yongle remained silent, Xie added, “Moreover, you have a splendid grandson to succeed your eldest son.” Xie was referring to Gaozhi’s six-year-old son, Zhu Zhanji, the future fifth Ming Emperor Xuande (r. 1426–35), who was Yongle’s favorite grandson. Yongle finally nodded his head and the difficult decision was made.55

Gaozhi was soon summoned from Beijing to Nanjing and invested as the heir apparent to the throne on May 9, 1404. The next day, Yongle appointed his most meritorious general, Qiu Fu, the Duke of Qi, the nominal grand preceptor of the heir apparent and his number one advisor, the monk Dao Yan,
the junior preceptor of the crown prince. He also named his son Gaoxu the Prince of Han, with control of Yunnan, and his son Gaosui the Prince of Zhao, to reside in Beijing. By making these appointments, Yongle clearly signified that the successional issue had been resolved and that he could proceed wholeheartedly with his reconstruction program. However, Gaoxu continued to jockey for his father’s mantle and refused to go to Yunnan. Yongle allowed him and his family to stay in the capital, where Gaoxu undermined his older brother and inflicted political wounds on the heir apparent’s tutors. Ultimately, Gaoxu found an opportunity to accuse Xie Jin of violating the sacred traditions of confidentiality and impartiality in favor of his fellow Jiangxi candidates during the doctoral civil service examination. Early in the spring of 1407, Xie was demoted and sent to Guangxi and to Jiaozhi (Annam) to serve as a lowly assistant administration commissioner.

Three years later, Xie returned to Nanjing for state business when Yongle was directing a campaign in the north. Soon after Xie was received by the heir apparent, his old enemy Gaoxu set out to get him with a whole new set of charges. Gaoxu charged that Xie’s audience with the heir apparent was “a secret meeting without proper cause” and had Xie arrested for further investigation. During interrogation, Xie was tortured and then convicted on the basis of questionable evidence, thus ending his meteoric political career. Five years later, in 1415, the commander of the Embroidered-Uniform Guard, Ji Gang, presented a list of prison inmates for Yongle’s perusal. Yongle went through the whole list and asked, “Is Xie Jin still alive?” Taking the cue, Ji Gang invited Xie for a drink. After making Xie drunk, the commander had the forty-six-year-old Xie buried in the snow and left there until he stopped breathing. Xie’s property was confiscated, and his family was banished to Liaodong in southern Manchuria for several years.

Of the original seven grand secretaries and concurrent instructors of the heir apparent, Hu Yan was probably the luckiest, as he, after only a brief stint in the household of the crown prince, was reassigned to head the National University. During his more than two decades as chancellor there, he devoted his energy and time to higher education and to the publication of almost every major scholarly work of the early Ming, including The Grand Encyclopedia of Yongle and Geography of the World (Tianxia tuzhi). And since he chose to stay away from the treacherous successional politics, he was able to live until 1443, when he died a natural death at the advanced age of 82. But Gaoxu continued to find faults with his elder brother’s other advisors, and several of Hu Yan’s colleagues were victimized in the court intrigues. For instance, early in the autumn of 1414, when Yongle was returning from his northern campaign and
the heir apparent’s entourage was late arriving at the welcome-home ceremony, Gaoxu seized the occasion and urged his father to punish the responsible officials. As a consequence, several instructors in the household of the heir apparent were thrown in jail, including Huang Huai and Yang Shiqi. Huang would be imprisoned for ten long years until the heir apparent ascended the throne in 1424, whereas Yang was released after only a brief incarceration. Both Huang and Yang would continue to serve Yongle’s son, grandson, and even great-grandson until their deaths—Huang at eighty-two sui and Yang at seventy-nine. Yang left a book, *Collections of Imperial Instructions during the Past Three Reigns* (*Sanhao shengyulu*), depicting the intense, secretive working conditions of the Grand Secretariat. Yang’s writings were later collected in *The Four Treasuries* (*Siku quanshu*) by the Qing emperor Qianlong (r. 1736–95) under the title *The Complete Works of Yang Shiqi* (*Dongli quanji*).  

In 1416 the Prince of Han, Zhu Gaoxu, was given a new fief in Qingzhou Prefecture, Shandong, but again he protested. This time it was more than a spat, as Yongle severely rebuked him. The louche and ambitious Gaoxu then assembled a private army of three thousand without the knowledge of the Ministry of War and committed all sorts of abuses and offenses, including the murder of an army commander. Yongle could no longer tolerate such dastardly behavior and was said to have considered stripping Gaoxu of his princely title and demoting him to the status of commoner. But after a tearful appeal by the heir apparent, Yongle ordered the imprisonment of Gaoxu inside the West Flower Gate (Xihuamen) and had several of Gaoxu’s bodyguards and advisors executed. One year later, Yongle banished Gaoxu to Lean, Shandong, and started more methodically to groom the heir apparent. For the next seven years, Gaoxu bit his bullet and waited. In the late summer of 1426, after both his father and his older brother had passed away, the ambitious prince decided that it was time to challenge his nephew, the young emperor Xuande. He was hoping to repeat what his father did to Emperor Jianwen some twenty years before. But the time and circumstances were entirely different, and after only three weeks of action, from August 28 to September 17, 1426, Gaoxu’s rebellion was crushed. He and his sons were stripped of their noble ranks and imprisoned inside the Xi’an Gate until their deaths.  

The person who most helped Emperor Xuande to effectively deal with the Gaoxu rebellion was Grand Secretary Yang Rong. He and the two other grand secretaries, Hu Guang and Jin Youzi, received imperial patronage and enjoyed Yongle’s confidence at one time or another. All of these three men possessed a solid classics background, but each had unique traits and expertise. For example, Hu Guang, who placed first in the doctoral class of 1400, was discreet and
could be trusted with the most sensitive information. Noted also for his polished calligraphic style, he was often asked by Yongle to scribe memorials on stelae. Jin Youzi, on the other hand, was a flexible and modest man. Jin also earned his doctorate in 1400 and was a specialist on *The Spring and Autumn Annals* (Chunqiu), one of the five Confucian classics. He accompanied Yongle on every one of the campaigns against the Mongols and wrote a two-volume book on the subject, *Recording the Northern Expeditions* (*Beizeng lu*).

Finally, Yang Rong, the youngest (nine years’ Yongle’s junior), brightest, and ablest of the brain trust of the Yongle court, had already become a legend. Yang was not as flashy as Xie Jin, but was very sharp and a quick study. It was he who reminded Yongle to visit his father’s grave first before declaring himself the new emperor. He was a consensus-builder by style and a pragmatist by instinct. He radiated good cheer and alacrity in Yongle’s court and always contributed a positive approach toward difficult problems. It is reported that during Yongle’s declining years, whenever the moody emperor saw Yang Rong coming he immediately felt calm and relaxed. Yang loved military science and geography, and also accompanied Yongle in every campaign against the Mongols. In between the campaigns, Yongle would send Yang to Shaanxi, Gansu, and Ningxia to inspect and plan border defense. During Yongle’s northern campaign in 1410, the emperor asked Yang Rong to command three hundred specially trained soldiers, and four years later, when the Ming troops were engaging the Oirat Mongols, Yongle asked his grandson—the future Emperor Xuande—to go along. At the camp, Yang gave regular lectures on history and classics to the young prince. Yongle also made Yang Rong concurrent director of the Seal Office, making sure that “no decrees, orders, banners, insignia, or documents could be issued without first reporting to Yang Rong.” In 1416 Yongle promoted both Jin Youzi and Yang Hanlin chancellors and, two years later, after the death of Hu Guang, made Yang the head of the Hanlin Academy. In 1420 Yang was further promoted to the post of grand secretary of the Literary Erudition Pavilion with concurrent Hanlin chancellorship. Two years later, during another northern campaign, Yongle asked him to take part in “making decisions on all military matters,” virtually appointing Yang general chief of staff. Finally, in 1424, the very year that Yongle weakened and died, he delegated all military matters to Yang, literally making him commander of all Ming forces. During campaigns Yang Rong kept a diary, *Journal of the Northern Expeditions* (*Beizeng ji*), in which he recorded Yongle’s strategic thoughts, generalship, and courage. Like some of his fellow grand secretaries, Yang Rong would become another multigenerational imperial counselor, continuing to serve Yongle’s son, grandson, and great-grandson until 1440, when he died at the age of seventy.
Yongle’s legacy of management is mixed. He demonstrated that he was a shrewd judge of character with the ability to choose many “gentlemen” who were cultivated, attentive, meticulous, and could be trusted with secrets. He was an engaged and indefatigable executive, often rising at dawn and laboring until late in the evening. When otherwise not engaged, Yongle berated himself for idle living. He said of himself,

I get up at 4:00 every morning, put my clothes on, and meditate. At that time, when my head is clear and my spirit good, I ponder over all the matters from the four corners of the empire. I prioritize issues and make big as well as small decisions and then send them out to appropriate ministries and agencies for execution. After the audience with my officials, I never go straight to my private chambers. Instead, I read every memorial and report from the four corners. Those concerning border emergencies, floods, and droughts require my immediate attention, and measures are quickly taken to solve the problems. I generally put off matters of the Inner Court until I’ve finished the matters of the Outer Court. And whenever I can find the time, I read history books and the classics so as to avoid idle living. I constantly remind myself that the world is so vast and state affairs so important that I cannot succumb to laziness and complacency for even a moment. Once one has succumbed to laziness and complacency, everything will become stagnant.62

Since Yongle was alert to the dangers of complacency and indulgence, he trusted only those who had exhibited a combination of talent, profound scholarship, passion for service, and good moral character. He created an emotional environment for elite politics and demanded mutual trust and collegiality among his grand secretaries. Unlike his paranoiac father, Yongle was capable of sustained relationships. In fact, several of his carefully selected advisors ended up serving as multigenerational counselors to his family. Yang Shiqi retained his post in the Grand Secretariat for forty-three years, Yang Rong for thirty-seven years, and Jin Youzi for thirty years. In addition, Jian Yi served thirty-four years as the minister of personnel, while Xia Yuanji headed the Ministry of Revenue for twenty-nine years. These conscientious and righteous men provided for not only the continuity of Yongle’s policy but also the general political stability of the Ming empire in the first half of the fifteenth century.

However, Yongle was also a flawed mortal. In spite of the fact that he appointed several of Jianwen’s officials to top positions, he often lacked magnanimity and tolerance. He roughly handled and ruined several of his outstanding and innocent counselors, such as Huang Fu and Xie Jin. He inherited
his father’s cataclysmic temper and impetuously jailed many of his courtiers, such as Huang Huai and Yang Shiqi, even though there was no complicity in the court. He even put to death several of his hatchet men, including the notorious senior censor-in-chief Chen Ying and the cruel Embroidered-Uniform Guard commander Ji Gang, who were responsible for the deaths of tens of thousands of innocent people. Nevertheless, it is difficult to ascertain whether Yongle’s record of management was more a result of his personality or of his intellectual guidance. One might argue that Yongle’s political philosophy derived as much from legalism (fajia) as it did from Confucian ideology. It is a fact that Yongle would have loved for the whole world to associate with him the Confucian ideal of sage-king instead of the legalist, tyrannical unifier of China, Qin Shihuang (259–210 B.C.E.). But he was prepared intellectually for a different mode of rulership, as he learned not only from his father but from legalist philosophy. Legalists emphasized the role of penalty in government, the supremacy of the ruler in interactions with officials, and control and close monitoring of the bureaucracy. In order to secure his own interests and powers and to advance China in the historic transformation that had begun in 1368 when his father established the dynasty, Yongle knew he had to keep all of his ministers and advisors on a short and tight leash. In the final analysis, Yongle’s brutality and ruthlessness mixed with a moral tone and high ideals would make him the perfect absolutist monarch—a man who believed himself to be the one and only master of the entire world.