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Echoes of the Emperor’s Errors: Addressing Poverty in the Land of Imitators

Dear Emperor Wanli,

Spineless the kingdom slouches into itself, desperately wheezing for an upright breath. In attendance today is your physical presence, but absent is your moral example. The lineage of the poorest citizens’ suffering traces first back to the abundance of greedy, uninspired officials, which then traces back to your relaxation of moral duties. Rectify yourself, and your subjects will find rest.

**Kicking the Lame: Conditions of the Poor**

Do not allow the opulence in the Forbidden City to obscure you from daily suffering of the poor. The peasants do not lack *disposable* resources; they lack *essential* resources, such as food, clothing, and shelter. If you wish to alleviate the suffering of the poorest citizens of the empire, you must ameliorate the primary cause of their destitution: corruption. Currently, the poorest citizens are entangled in a self-affirming cycle of corrupt taxes and ignorance. They are systemically prone to debts, with exorbitant credit rates forcing foreclosures with no possibility of a loan (Huang 147). Tax rates in no way correspond to the realistic capacities of the poorest counties (Huang 61-63). The bureaucracy extends little if any benevolence to their villages. Magistrates ignore civil law and property protection, allowing petty quarrels to devolve into barbarous rivalries (Huang 149-150). These crooked economic conditions exacerbate the realities of their socio-economic status. Born to needy families, they neither learn to read nor understand

the legal and economic systems. Without a compass of knowledge, they become creatures of habit, stranded with no vision beyond survival (Huang 209). In light this misery arises the question: who allows this corruption to take advantage of ignorance and powerlessness?

### **Never Straightened: Inessentials at the Expense of Essentials**

The suffering of the poorest citizens begins with the new, exploitive upper class, but it ends with your self-indulgence.

Today, no longer does the wealthy class consist of profitable landowners, as it did under the Hung-wu reign, but it instead consists of an inflated circle of officials. Although the bureaucracy initially contained 8,000 positions, it has budded up to upwards of 20,000 positions. On its own, the expansion of the Civil Service should not have replaced the upper class. However, along with an expansion of members came a proliferation of lavishness. Antithetical to their subsistence level salaries (Huang 130), the officials simultaneously adopted a publicly-funded extravagance and exempted themselves from service obligations. For their own splendor, they increased taxes and subdued landowners into a posture of mere survival.

Do not consider this whistleblowing a wagging moral finger, but rather a throbbing toe with perceptible bruises. Today, your civil servants indulge themselves to stolen money beyond their allotted salaries. Magistrates add percentages on taxes as “customary fees.” Capital officials collect subsidies as personal monetary gifts (Huang 90). Worst of all, the bureaucracy employs thousands of superfluous officials who perform no meaningful responsibilities, and even these officials indulge themselves at the expense of native merchants (Huang 153-154). This extravagance reaches all the way to the top of the bureaucracy, as you discovered through Tutor Chang who splurged in a profane collection of nonessentials (Huang 64). But greed exists even before a civil career commences. Before they take office, young officials often negotiate early

cash-in deals with money-lenders who look forward to the near-certain late-career wealth in government. The lucrative reputation of Civil Service positions undermines the upright servant model and normalizes self-interest (Huang 57). Self-interest leavens every level of the bureaucracy, as you witnessed first-hand during the office of Chang. Many of the highest-ranking officials dishonestly seize their offices, currying promotional preference through irregularities and personal favors outside the duties of their office (Huang 64).

If the high, often unrealistic taxes set by the officials corresponded to the kingdom's bare necessities, food for the officials and funding for the public institutions, then the solution would be cast in economic terms. You would alleviate the suffering of the poorest citizens through policy changes. However, the populace is paying more than it can afford for more than the empire needs. This depravity is a self-inflicted problem. The officials strictly enforce the spirit of the law on the poor through their corrupt taxes but fail to enforce the spirit of the law on themselves, neglecting their rightful place as modest servants. Their materialistic lifestyles render financial efficacy an impossibility for the poor, who sacrifice dinner rolls to finance the bureaucracy's new linens. In light of this corruption arises a question: who is the inspiration?

### **A Culprit without a Cause: Emperor Wanli**

Son of Heaven, where in this greed can your virtue be found? How long can the Mandate of Heaven abide by a dynasty with conventional covetousness? Search your knowledge for the genesis of this wildfire degeneracy. Recall the teacher's famous analect, "To govern is to correct. If you set an example by being correct, who would dare to remain incorrect?" (Confucius 12.17). The suffering of the poor traces back to you. An apple tree fails to bear fruit when it has faulty roots. If you had set yourself order, your followers would have conformed to servitude, and the poverty would have declined. But your actions standardized moral desertion and pioneered a lack

of remorse. In the long-considered opinion of your grand secretary, the exploitive actions of over 20,000 officials do not compare to the singular culpability deserved by your flaccid moral example. You are responsible for the suffering of the poor, and the only four drastic self-denials will influence your corrupt officials enough to rectify the damage. The following four actions, therefore, provide the solution to alleviating the suffering of the kingdom's poorest citizens.

### **I. Restore the Rituals: The Yawns of an Unmoved Audience**

The administrative corruption wringing out the lower class emanates first from your unimpressive dilution of Ming rituals. If you had properly submitted yourself to the enlightenment of the rites, creating a dynasty-wide precedent for honoring principles in both word and deed, the rites would have tamed the greed for you. Confucius once said, "Guide them by virtue, keep them in line with the rites, and they will, besides having a sense of shame, reform themselves" (Confucius 2.3). You do not have a military to forcefully maintain your authority, nor does your base provide convincing protection from potential uprisings. What settles your moral authority across the empire is the Mandate of Heaven, a divine protection only ensured to emperors who earn the faith of their people (Huang 46-47). Emperor Wanli, your history of neglecting rituals, which are the designated medium for earning the faith of your people, merits extreme public uncertainty. Conveniently, on the morning of the commencement date for new lecture series, you befell "blackouts" and suspended the scheduled ceremonies. In other instances, you reported an unbearable "itching" which had to subside before you could resume your duties. However, you lied to your people. Hindsight has borne that you fabricated these excuses to ride horses, overindulge yourself in women, and drink without remorse (Huang 47). On a separate occasion, you canceled a ceremony for your own deceased mother to play games with eunuchs (Huang 90). Your Majesty, can you think of a man who would "reform himself" in

response to the rituals you perform, or lack thereof? Like the wayward child who abandoned his teacher, the bureaucracy lost touch with the wisdom of the past. The first action the empire can take to rectify the poverty-inducing greed of the officials is to restore purity to its ritualistic proceedings. The restoration of the rites begins with your attendance and ends with your sincerity.

## **II. Install Firstborn as Heir: The Pressure to Be Paternal**

As for problems of your heart, your kingdom neglects your moral authority because of your refusal to appoint your first-born son Chang-Lou as your successor.

Stop disgracing your image through indecisive procrastination. Four times have you switched the defense of your reluctance to appoint. You first claimed that Chang-Lou could not fulfill his ceremonial requirements at such a young age. When that failed, in defiance, you took a principled stand against acting under persuasive compulsion. You then tried to name all your sons as princes in equal standing, and finally excused yourself on the option that you can still have a son with your official empress (Huang 83). A double-minded man suffers a broken rudder and cannot steer himself, even when he has correct navigation. From this indecisiveness, the bureaucracy learns self-justification. They learn to analyze their situations for what they *can* do rather than what they *should* do.

However, the most dangerous lesson they learn from your refusal to name Chang-Lou as the heir is that paradigmatic relationships need not be followed. Countless Analects recite the inerrancy of the superiority of the older over the younger. For example, Confucius noted that “being good as a son and obedient as a young man is, perhaps, the root of a man’s character” (Confucius I.2). A good son must venerate his elders, including both his father and his older brother. By compromising this social order, the kingdom learns to neither respect nor follow the

hierarchy of paradigmatic relationships, and the evidence of this corruption already exists in the behavior of your officials. Their superior-to-inferior relationships do not reflect the reciprocal hierarchies established by Confucius (Gardner 17). The poor people struggle to respect the bureaucracy's authority, but the bureaucracy extends neither benevolence nor paternal affection to them. The officials should see themselves as servants of the commoners, but they instead see the commoners as servants of their extravagant lifestyles. If you name your first-born as your successor, you send a message: the moral compromise of paradigmatic relationships shall cease. The bureaucrats will stop justifying their greedy taxes, and the poor will finally be able to afford their essential needs.

### **III. Depose Lady Cheng: A Siren in Need of Silence**

The officials also learn to feed their materialistic desires from your unreserved surrender to lust, or more specifically, to your imperial consort Lady Cheng. The teacher condemned desirous romantics in one of his Analects when he said, "I have yet to see the man who is as fond of virtue as he is of beauty in women" (Confucius IX.18). His disdainful tone implies that virtue, right relationships according to the Way, take precedence over lust. If even Confucius loathed the parasitic nature of love, then an idler such as yourself is susceptible. Lady Cheng detected this susceptibility and took advantage of you at a vulnerable moment.

To illustrate this, recall that throughout your reign, although you ruled over all of China, in a more real sense, many of your mentors ruled over you. Grand Preceptor Chang dragged you into his self-serving efficiency scheme (Huang 37). The Han-lin academicians vied for every moment of your attention (Huang 22). Your mother unabashedly sent you to public rituals and responsibilities that coincided with her interests (Huang 30-31). Thus, when Lady Cheng entered

the scene, beguiling you with charm and companionate strength, you surrendered yourself to her affection (Huang 30-31).

Your old masters no longer live to subdue you, so Lady Cheng occupies their seat of influence. You wittingly risk your authority every day solely to appease her self-interested desire for her son to become Prince. Regardless of who you name the successor, Lady Cheng poses a threat to every subject of your kingdom. Through her wishes, you rationalize irrational impropriety. As long as you retain her as your imperial consort, she will add requests that force you to compromise on your character. If you are permitted to answer to a woman before a Confucian principle, then why should an official be expected to do the opposite? By deposing Lady Cheng, you will communicate that virtue precedes desire, and you will signal the cleansing of immoral influences.

#### **IV. Dismiss First Grand Secretary Luedke: Right-hand Surgery**

Finally, Your Majesty, just as you influence officials across the kingdom to neglect the Way and take advantage of the poor, your primary counselor continually influences you to indulge your desires at the cost of others. He is not your ally, and he has not proven himself capable of supporting you on a path to moral reformation. Not as a derogatory insult, but as a description, First Grand Secretary Luedke seems to be, in a word, a sycophant. Your Majesty, whereas Lady Cheng awakens your desires, First Grand Secretary Luedke enables them. The relationship between an emperor and his first grand secretary resembles that of a disciple and his instructor (Huang 110). If your instructor possessed even a sliver of loyalty or competence, then he would have reprimanded you with the weight of the 1,500-year-old Confucian tenets. He would have ensured the proper maintenance of your rituals. He would have persuaded you to appoint your first-born son as your successor. He would have isolated Lady Cheng to harmlessness in a distant

lodge. Through acute teachings, he would have galvanized you to the benevolence of an enlightened emperor.

However, your right-hand veritably suffers from faulty tendons, a meek leniency that can neither cling to virtue nor take a fist to iniquity. Numerous examples exist of his poor counsel. In his memorial, he lied in stating that you “have done no wrong in your duties” (Luedke 6), despite your concession that you “admittedly have not been the most focused, dedicated ruler” (Wanli 3). By denying your executive culpability, he skirts the fundamental issue on every topic. He distracts you with “the 22,000 government officials scattered about Your Kingdom” (Luedke 6), offering to change their nature through policies. However, immorality emanates from the ruler and undermines every procedural reform (Confucius XII.17).

You need a First Grand Secretary who can both contend with you and refrain from self-indulgence, but Luedke does not meet these standards. As the most powerful appointed official in the kingdom, the first grand secretary represents the state of the bureaucracy. Therefore, a pronounced transition away from Luedke’s weak leadership would signify a comprehensive bureaucratic reinvention. Recall the analect, “When faced with the opportunity to practice benevolence, do not give precedence even to your teacher” (Confucius 15.36).

### **The Land of Imitators**

From the Kingdom’s wrinkled skin protrude many cancerous sores, bulging destitution and lumpy impropriety. The Ming organism stitched together a morbid hide from the final bullions of its poorest citizens, and now, clothed in the evidence of its pending doom, it cries for a threat on which to fix its ameliorative efforts. Yet in this case, Your Majesty, the virus comes from within, from your infectious moral negligence. If you want to alleviate the suffering of the poorest citizens, you must treat the organism for your own infection. First, you must cleanse the wounds



of the empire by restoring diligence to the rituals. Then, you must feed the empire its medicine by selecting a proper heir. And finally, you must wean the empire off impure tonics deposing Lady Cheng and First Grand Secretary Luedke. Confucius once said, “Poor yet delighting in the Way, wealthy yet observing of the rites” (Confucius 1.15). When an emperor keeps his kingdom aligned with the Way, the dangers of both poverty and wealth are forgotten in favor of something far sweeter. An empire without suffering is likewise an empire with an upright emperor. This is the land of imitators. If you find yourself dissatisfied with the actions of your subjects, perhaps your real dissatisfaction is with the emperor they imitate. Listen to your conscience, see that it lay muddled, and wash your heart anew.

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