

1587 A Year of No Significance The Ming Dynasty in Decline Book Critique

Daniel Stambler

AS.100.347: Early Modern China

Professor William Rowe

March 28th, 2019

Ray Huang's book *1587 A Year of No Significance The Ming Dynasty in Decline* presents great insight into the administrative challenges that the Ming government faced during the late 16th century. Through a brilliant narrative that focuses on five prominent figures, Huang notes several problems that plagued the declining Ming dynasty. In addition, Huang connects his narrative to the year 1587, as the story mainly takes place within a couple decades of that year.

Huang's book describes the story of a declining dynasty during the late 16th century. *1587 A Year of No Significance* commences with the story of the Wan Li Emperor's sheltered upbringing within the walls of the Forbidden City. The author begins his historiography by highlighting the importance of the disgraced First Grand-Secretary Chang Chu-cheng. Chang was a notable grand-secretary that pursued cruel yet effective financial policies.¹ Furthermore, Chang served as one of Wan Li's tutors. However, in contrast to his teachings of frugality, Chang lived a life of luxury and abused his role as an advisor to the emperor.² His unpopular positions on policy and his hypocrisy with regards to money attracted the distrust of his fellow officials in Peking. After Chang's death, the Wan Li Emperor had him posthumously disgraced and held Chang's sons accountable for their father's actions.³

After Chang's death, Shen Shih-hsing, or "Tutor Shen," as Wan Li called him, became the first grand-secretary.⁴ Shen's policies were less forceful than his predecessor's due to Shen's tendency to pursue compromise and due to Shen's fear of being ousted from his position like Chang was. However, this weak approach to governance only deepened the already entrenched problems that were plaguing the Ming dynasty; Shen refused to enact the changes that the

¹ Ray Huang, *1587 A Year of No Significance The Ming Dynasty in Decline*, (New Haven CT, Yale University Press, 1981), 70-71

² Ibid., 32-33

³ Ibid., 35-41

⁴ Ibid., 42

dynasty needed to survive.⁵ At the same time, a succession crisis broke out regarding the emperor's heir which created several factions in Peking.⁶ Compounding these issues was the emperor's attitude towards his role in government. Unlike his predecessors during the height of the Ming Dynasty, Wan Li did not live up to the administrative responsibilities of the emperor. Instead, he spent plenty of time with his harem, and pursuing leisurely activities such as horseback riding and poetry writing.⁷ The remainder of the story focuses on the lives of three other officials and highlights administrative areas where the Ming government was failing.

The greatest strength of *1587 A Year of No Significance*, is the narrative of the historiography. As previously mentioned, Huang's narrative focuses on the lives of five prominent Chinese governmental figures during the late 16th century: The Wan Li Emperor, the emperor's tutor and first grand-secretary, Shen Shih-hsing, the chief censor, Hai Jui, General Ch'I Chi-kuang, and provincial level Confucian instructor Li Chih. Huang begins each chapter by describing the mindset of one of the characters during the year 1587. Huang then tells the story of that character's life until 1587 in chronological order. This allows the author to strengthen his historiography with compelling evidence.

In my opinion, Huang strengthens his historiographies' narrative by highlighting the fact that the events in his book take place around the year 1587. Huang's book can be read as five separate narratives that are tied together by the protagonists' connection to the year 1587 or "the Year of the Pig".⁸ I think Ray Huang chose a "year of no significance" such as 1587 to give the reader a reference point. Furthermore, setting the scene in 1587 allows Huang to explore the mindsets of the emperor and other senior Peking officials; describing past events that shaped that

⁵ Huang, *1587 A Year of No Significance*, 47-57

⁶ *Ibid.*, 75-85

⁷ *Ibid.*, 93-96

⁸ Huang, *1587 A Year of No Significance*, 67

mindset and justifying why the characters took certain actions after 1587. For example, Huang states that during 1587, Shen felt that his job security as first grand-secretary was threatened. Shen, therefore, felt justified in compromising effective government policies in favor of retaining the emperor's trust.⁹

Another strength of Huang's historiography is the presentation of the book's major subject: the failures of the late Ming Dynasty. Huang makes four compelling cases to explain the decline of the Ming: the corrupt bureaucracy, the excessive amounts of responsibility given to the emperor, the influence of the eunuchs, and the outdated and rigid administrative system. Huang makes each case by describing several anecdotes in detail. At certain points in each chapter, the author compares the failings of the current Ming government to the success of the early Ming emperors. A good example is Huang's description of the Hung-wu emperor's land reforms that contrast with the weak reign of the Wan Li Emperor.¹⁰ Furthermore, through this comparison, Huang explains the origin of the structural problems that plagued the late Ming empire.

Furthermore, I believe that *1587 A Year of No Significance* uses strong sources to back up its arguments. Because the story focuses on the lives of prominent Ming figures, Huang can justify using conversations between the emperor and high-ranking officials as primary sources. Huang includes two conversations between Wan Li and Grand-Secretary Shen in his appendices. In the first conversation, Shen voices his concerns with the emperor's refusal to educate his own children.¹¹ Shen also urges the emperor to ignore Lo Yu-Jen's criticism of the emperor's ineffective behavior.¹² The conversation illuminates Huang's arguments that the monarchy gave

⁹ Ibid., 67

¹⁰ Ibid., 88-89

¹¹ Huang, *1587 A Year of No Significance*, 227

¹² Ibid., 224-225

the emperor too much power and responsibility over the mundane tasks of running the empire when Shen states “seeing the mistakes of our predecessors, we wouldn’t dare to take matters into our own hands, so everything is reported to your majesty for decision.”¹³ Here, Shen implies that the effectiveness of the Ming government relied heavily on the willingness of the emperor to rule. Moreover, the reader can infer that Wan Li was an indecisive emperor when he tries to make his grand-secretaries “take charge for [him]” and to “do all the work and bear all the criticism.”¹⁴

Of the reasons that Huang attributes to the decline of the Ming, my favorite is the rigidity of the administrative governmental system. I thoroughly enjoyed reading the three anecdotes that he dedicated to breaking down this issue. By highlighting the life of the Ming government’s remaining effective leaders, Huang conveys to the reader how rigid the Ming governmental structure has become. In addition, Huang mentions certain viewpoints held by bureaucrats that hampered the effectiveness of the government. The most prominent example was the trouble that the Chinese military was having in their fight against Japanese pirates; despite being better equipped and being a part of the most powerful empire in the region.¹⁵ Huang points to Chinese officials and societies’ view of the military as a non-respectable institution to explain this phenomenon.¹⁶ Thus, Huang conveys to the reader that even a great general couldn’t address the challenges facing the Chinese military due to the push back from leaders at the top of the imperial bureaucracy.

Although I think that centering the historiography around the year 1587 benefits the narrative of Huang's work, I do not believe that the story of 1587 offers enough justification for

¹³ Ibid., 226

¹⁴ Ibid., 226

¹⁵ Huang, 1587 A Year of No Significance, 160-161

¹⁶ Ibid., 158

the author to include the stories of all the historical figures mentioned in the book. The author argues that despite being a year without any major historical incidents taking place in China, 1587 was still a significant year for the Ming empire.¹⁷ In essence, Huang tries to show the irony of his historiographies' title. Thus, Huang tries to bring in the stories of several historical figures under his "1587" theme. For example, Huang justifies bringing General Ch'i Chi-kuang into the story because Chi-kuang died at the start of 1588 which was still the year of the pig.¹⁸ Therefore, I believe that Ch'i Chi-kuang's tenuous connection to the year 1587 is not a convincing justification for dedicating a part of the historiography to the general's life.

Overall, *1587 A Year of No Significance* has a strong presentation of the structural and administrative challenges that contributed to the decline of the Ming Dynasty. These arguments are backed by strong primary sources and are presented in the form of a clever narrative. Furthermore, while I think that sometimes the author tried to force certain connections between events, I believe that his use of the year 1587 served his narrative's purpose and convinced the reader that imperial China needed a change in leadership and structure.

¹⁷ Ibid., 221

¹⁸ Ibid., 156

Bibliography

Huang, Ray. 1587 A Year of No Significance The Ming Dynasty in Decline. New Haven, CT:
Yale University Press, 1981.