



# 1587: A Year of No Significance: The Ming Dynasty in Decline

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1587, a Year of No Significance: The Ming Dynasty in Decline (Chinese: 1587, 一个没有意义的年份; pinyin: Wanli Shiwanian) is Chinese historian Ray Huang's most famous work. First published by Yale University Press in 1981,[1] it examines how a number of seemingly insignificant events in 1587 might have caused the downfall of the Ming empire. The views expressed in the book follow the macro history perspective.

## 1587: A Year of No Significance: The Ming Dynasty in Decline Details

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## Stone says

This book somehow reminds me sections of Gibbon's *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* as both Huang and Gibbon seems to attribute the downfall of their respective empire to the malfunction of the moral system, though in subtly different ways. In this review, I shouldn't be dealing with anything unrelated, so I will stick with Huang's analysis.

The entire volume is basically six stories of six people, whose seemingly diverse life patterns all point to the same dead end. An aspiring reformer, a conventional minister, a young and energetic Emperor, a high-minded official, a capable general, and an insightful philosopher -- six strings of narratives converging into one result: failure. The book sought to understand why, despite tremendous efforts, all these people end their lives in failure.

The reasons were obviously not individual but systematic, the bureaucratic system of Ming Dynasty that was built on a shaky and unrealistic moral base was near a total collapse. Morality itself wasn't the problem, the problem was the overplaying of it. A central argument of the entire book was that the lack of the rule of law and overindulgence of the rule of man in Ming China essentially caused all the subsequent systematic failures.

One must admit that it takes a great amount of courage for someone to condemn morality for all the failures in a system -- people often condemn the degradation of morality (for example, Gibbon on the fall of Rome) but seldom morality itself. But with a calm mind, one has to agree with Huang, for all six people described previously were victims of a malfunctioning moral system. The ambitious reformer met great resistance not of methodological but ethical kind and was defamed after death; the conformist minister tried to cool everyone down, only to cool himself out; the energetic Emperor was restricted by ethical codes each and every minute and eventually chose to close his mind and hide deep in the palace; the high-minded official was despised by colleagues, alienated by superiors, and eventually died in depression; the capable general, with all his great plans, had to be dismissed and marginalized until death; the perceptive thinker was accused of heresy and committed suicide in prison. But should we really put all the blames on the excess of morality? Moreover, is the rigid moral system a cause or a result of the already declining Chinese empire? I feel this is a typical chicken and egg problem, which means answers can be found in both directions.

Last but not least, I want to briefly talk about Huang's methodology as expressed in the book. Huang tended to look at Chinese history (but not limited to) from a spatiotemporally comprehensive perspective, meaning that his analyses were never simple inferences deduced from one person, one event, or one historical period. He focused on the rationality and necessity of history -- that is, everything happened due to a reasonable causal process which involved complex elements from social, economic, cultural, and religious backgrounds of that particular period. This methodology seems a bit historical-determinist to me, but I do feel it is reasonable on multiple grounds because I personally use this method all the time. In a nutshell, Huang's way of looking at history was quite a groundbreaking innovation in a time when most historians were still preoccupied with their old methods.

Overall I would highly recommend this book to anyone who is interested in that particular period of history, as well as anyone who's curious about the reasons behind China's downfall as an economic and cultural superpower while Europe rose to greatness in the meantime. The book is a relaxing read and does not require

too much extra knowledge in Chinese history.

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### **Sana Krasikov says**

When this history was first published no one in academia knew what to do with it -- at once totally deadpan and novelistic. A hidden gem.

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### **??? says**

It's my first time writing Book Review on Internet, and first time writing in English. Well, it worth for me doing so, but forgive my poor English level, as well as many logical mistakes in this comment. After I closing the book eventually, all of contents gather with a sentence emerging in my heart "the Ming dynasty fell for poor practical laws with little maneuverability, relying on ethics and morality excessively." Chinese tradition culture usually confuse foreigners as well as Morden Chinese especially people living in western culture because of deep gap in many aspects such as values, economical policy, method of development and so on. But we can generalize some essential or integral factors that are dominated in generating differences. The book offer us a angle to analyze the invisible reasons resulting in the consequence behind visible events in history in Ming dynasty. The author cited many ancient books to prove his opinions in the book.

It can be first step for people who want to research the dynasty of Ming or people who are interested in history of Ming. Furthermore, the book can also help dispel some misunderstanding or confusion for Chinese traditions history.

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### **Jeb says**

I have to preface this book by saying it's not a joke. That's the real title and it's a real look at the social history of China's Ming Dynasty.

I read this in college and it still sticks with me. It's like reading the diary of someone who is not important but is very detail oriented. If you get past some of the tedious aspects of this book, you can capture very interesting tidbits of the daily life of the Chinese 422 years ago.

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### **Harry Barnett says**

Peter Hessler recommended 1587, A Year of No Significance: The Ming Dynasty in Decline at the end of his book River Town: Two Years on the Yangtze. I enjoyed River Town so much I thought 1587 would also be interesting.

The structure of the book 1587 is good enough. Ray Huang selects one year during the Ming Dynasty and tells us its history by describing the lives of several significant players at the time: the young emperor, a general, a bureaucrat, a philosopher etc. The problem is Ray Huang is not much of a writer and as a result the book just plods along.

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## **Nick says**

"Part of Wan-li's failure was that he was too intelligent and sensitive to occupy the dragon seat. The more he gained an insight into its apparatus the more skeptical he became. He began to realize that he was less the Ruler of All Men than a prisoner of the Forbidden City." Pg. 93

This sums up the tragedy of this book. Huang offers profiles of not only the Wan-li emperor, but several office-holders as well. In each case, he assesses their failures, not necessarily as causes of the fall of the Ming Dynasty, but certainly indicative of it. He criticizes the traditionalism of the literary bureaucracy, particularly in that it was incapable of addressing any real problems facing the empire, too concerned were they with maintaining the facade of moral leadership. He paints this faceless mass he calls the "officials" as an entity forever spewing petty memoranda and petitions for breaches of decorum.

It must be said that his prose is dreadful. The writing, especially regarding the officials, plods along as if you too are captive right alongside Wan-li. I think it would have done with a touch of the vermilion brush. But that aside, there are some very interesting characters, especially Ch'i Chi-Kuang, the energetic general who helped stave off the pirate invasions that no one else seemed capable of confronting. Also Hai Jui, who was a moralist whipping boy for the rest of the literati because of his "eccentricity", here defined as refusing to take money on the side and lobbying for reforms protecting peasants. That officials so often said one thing and did another was the frustration of all the profiled figures. The emperor was a miserable man of wasted ability, the general was disdained as part of a military culture that officials would do everything to keep down, even as Mongols, pirates, and bandits held sway over the provinces, and Hai, who reminded me of Cato the Younger, was a truly devout Confucian -- a little TOO devout. There are other figures, though these three stood out by far the most, all of which are touched by the ghost of Chang Chu-Cheng, the morally ambiguous first grand secretary.

Don't read this expecting any glimmers of hope. It felt as Huang himself was very personally invested in the failings of the last great dynasty (he doesn't seem to count the Qing), and as I read it I couldn't help but feel that same bitterness and anger about a system held up only by its own dull inertia.

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## **Veronika Wang says**

The fragments of 1587 made the turning point of Ming Dynasty. Irreversible

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## **Silencut says**

One of the most insightful pieces on Ming Dynasty.

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## **S. says**

This book gets extra points for its marvelous title. This really is about 1587, a year during the Ming Dynasty.

It is thorough and sometimes tedious but of interest to Chinese history scholar.

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## Hadrian says

The first subtitle of this book seems like a lie, but it's more likely a joke. Of course this year is significant. Every year is, whether historians say it is or not.

The year 1587, The Year of the Pig, 24th in the 60 year cycle and the fifteenth year of the reign of the Wanli Emperor, is a setting for future dramas, but also of more focused internal conflicts. It might be tempting to call it a year of 'no significance', as there are no major battles here, no imperial downfalls, no natural disasters. But there are things here which are subtler and take much more to notice. Though it was still decades away from its fall in 1644, the political system was already unstable and unprepared for the problems of just continuing governance, let alone any local crisis.

Huang frames his discussion through biographical essays on six important persons in the late-Ming period. These men - they were all men, as the social status of women had fallen far from the relative high point of the Tang Dynasty - are the focal points for Huang's analysis. From these disconnected points he draws out trends and patterns.

Take the emperor himself. He took the throne in 1572 at age 9 and would hold it until his death in 1620. His life is then a part of a system of absolute monarchy. He is the symbol of the nation, the embodiment of its virtue, the target of religious adoration. Huang makes this life out to be a gilded hell. Every morning was spent in hours of elaborate ritual where he could not even cross his legs or cough while the officials recited their effusive praise. He could seldom get anything *done*. Huang takes an alternate approach to the emperor's reputation, long since tarnished. His scorn of court ritual, often interpreted as negligence, could also mean his deliberate resignation from the exhausting process of rule. The transcripts in the appendix which date from near 1600 which show his utter exhaustion and how much the officials kowtow.

Beneath him, there are the contrasting studies of Zhang Juzheng and Shen Shixing, two major court officials. Their attempts to manage the government and maintain power read like attempts to capture and tame a wild animal. Zhang Juzheng forced strict austerity measures on the government itself to prevent corruption measures, but he was brought down by his own moral failures. By contrast, Shen Shixing viewed himself as a negotiator and compromiser, but still did not recognize his actions perpetuated the system's abuses.

In contrast to both of these is Hai Rui - the 'honest official', who campaigned against local corruption, criticized a past emperor, and was almost executed because of it. His story represents the failures of the judicial system and its incapability to adapt.

Another chapter is devoted to the general Qi Jiguang. He was placed in command of the eastern coastal regions and reformed the army in defense against Japanese and other pirate raids, and he is still held up today as a folk hero. But his story was an exception to the rule of the Ming military - the decentralization of power - meant to prevent any one interest from getting too powerful, but also prevented any coordination on major issues.

The last story is Li Zhi, a philosopher who often enjoyed speaking with the Jesuits about comparative religion. He also criticized the materialist Chengzhu school of Neo-Confucianism. Unfortunately for him, that was the ideology which was officially ordained by those in power, and he was imprisoned for it. He slit

his own throat in jail. His story represents what happens when only one official religious or philosophical ideology is tolerated, although Huang seems to treat him less sympathetically than the others.

In fact, Huang does not blame a single individual for the failings of China's government. Rather, it was an adherence to Confucian ideals, vague ethical precepts, and the inability to develop a more consistent legal system which impaired the ability of officials to react to any problem. He places the beginning of the Decline of the Ming Dynasty in this period, and these problems would only worsen, leading to the collapse in less than a century. Though Confucianism's role is still a point of contention among other historians, there still are points for his other points - finance reform, business law, legal reform, use of contemporary technology, and so on.

This is a fine book, and convincingly told - I could recommend it to any casual observer who wishes to know more about the period. The main problem with the book is that it uses the old Wade-Giles transliteration and doesn't have a dictionary of Chinese characters for any of the used terms. But aside from that, it is a useful and accessible history.

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### **Grace Tjan says**

In 1987, I went to China and visited, among other places, the tomb of the Wanli Emperor near Beijing. It was the only royal tomb open to the public in the Ming Tombs complex at that time. Our Chinese guide led us down a ramp into a subterranean, vaulted chamber clad in white marble. Inside there were thrones carved with dragons and phoenixes, also of the same white marble, and huge blue-and-white porcelain urns. The chamber led into other chambers, just as massive and cold. One contained numerous lacquered boxes of all sizes containing grave-good treasures. The main chamber held the enormous coffins of the emperor himself and two of his consorts. Our guide stopped in front of the royal coffin and told us that the man whose remains it held was 'the most venal emperor in Chinese history' and also that his 'feudal excesses had bled the Chinese people dry'. No doubt he was parroting the official party line at that time, but he made me curious about the Wanli Emperor.

The interesting thing is that he began his almost five-decade reign (one of the longest in Chinese history) as a conscientious young sovereign. Raised by top Mandarins according to strict Confucian principles, the intelligent and sensitive young man was prepared to devote his life to being a model ruler, guided by grand-secretary Chang Chu Cheng. However, Huang tells us, he gradually grew disillusioned with the hypocritical and impersonal nature of the administration that he was the titular head of. By about halfway through his reign, he stopped attending court functions, letting important posts stay vacant and otherwise engaged in a passive-aggressive war against his own ministers.

China's vast bureaucracy was infinitely more ancient than the emperor and the dynasty that he represented. It was unique in that it was more or less a meritocracy, and that it governed by moral principle. The latter, according to Huang, is the very factor that ultimately led to its collapse. On the one hand, Confucian principles expected the mandarins to serve the people selflessly, to live simply on subsistence wages. On the other hand, the wages were so ridiculously low that most officials had to supplement their incomes by taking advantage of their position. The opportunity for graft and corruption was virtually endless. Huang argues that the most successful officials were not the most honest ones --- who most often than not created more problems because of their overzealousness --- but the ones who could balance the two opposing directions. Shackled to Confucian moral tenets, the judicial system remained ineffective and arbitrary. The army was not organized according to proper military practices and was helpless against Japanese pirates and nomadic

marauders. All of these factors eventually led to the collapse of the Ming dynasty in the 17th century. Wanli was not the cause of it but he was a part of a dysfunctional system that was tottering towards its demise.

I wonder if other historians are as lenient to the Wanli Emperor.

## David says

This is a tour de force of concentrated historical writing, and among the most original in any field of history that I can think of. Equivalents of the same vintage (1980s) and comparable method (micro history) that come to mind are Carlo Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms*, or Robert Darnton's *The Great Cat Massacre*. *Without being monumental in size, 1587 nonetheless achieves a sort of monumental significance, aiming for nothing short of an explanation of the decline of one of China's most splendid dynasties in little more than 200 pages. Instead of an abstract, bloodless survey, or a monograph of overwhelming detail, 1587 makes its argument within the framework of six biographical sketches, all intersecting around the pivotal year 1587. That it does this in elegant prose that effortlessly merges individual human experience with abstract historical forces, is all the more impressive. Huang sets up the lives of six late Ming notables, from the Wan-Li Emperor himself to the emperor's generals, grand secretaries, and renegade literati, in such a way that the frustrations experienced by each in attempting to fulfill their official responsibilities help to illustrate the limitations of the entire Ming social order. And these frustrations, which Huang attributes to the nature of the imperial bureaucracy itself and its inability to adapt to ever more complex social circumstances, point not only to the fall of the Ming, which is Huang's explicit concern, but to the eventual eclipse of China by the western powers. A beautiful, sophisticated book that looks at the way the best human talent can be stymied by the arrangement of inherited institutions, it is also not without relevance to anyone interested in how a society can chose to adapt, or be frustrated in adapting, to radically new challenges.*

## Adei says

From the book I learn that the Ming dynasty did not perish soon not because it operated according to the wills of Heaven. It lasted merely for lack of alternative.

## Sunshinezeng says

[illegible]



## **Fred Goh says**

Ray Huang's account of Ming China is a refreshing read with pockets of insights throughout. It is, for me, very much a parable of the path of decline a complex civilization traces through when its institutions and processes fail to keep up with the increasing complexity & range of possible behaviours of its inhabitants. At times, the anecdotes in this book paint an exaggerated caricature of a society obsessed with style over substance, but that is perhaps only with the benefit of hindsight and historical context. To the inhabitants of Ming China, especially the scholar and gentry class, such a state of affairs was normal.

While not trying to sound trite, this book has driven home the point that effective and principled governance is difficult, even for a widely agrarian society like Ming China. Perhaps decades of dynastic rule by absolute monarchs have bred complacency such that no effort was made to invest in proper institutions and making them responsive to governance challenges on the ground. Instead, faith was misplaced in the Chinese classics, eschewing pragmatism in favor of tradition and ideology.

Although centuries away, this book holds lessons for people interested in politics, economics and governance today. The gridlocked state of American politics today is no different in substance from Wan Li's boycott of the civil bureaucracy in 1587. For me, the key lesson is that for complex societies, ideology and philosophy are luxuries. These should be left to university departments. For people who are in the business of governance, being pragmatic and ensuring that institutions are anti-fragile and responsive to change should probably guide most, if not all decision-making.

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