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

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HIST 352, Prof. X. Zhang
1 December 1995

"Obviously, there is serious negligence here." – Emperor Wanli

Ray Huang's 1587, A Year of No Significance is an in-depth analysis of the traditional Chinese court ^{politics} during the Ming Dynasty. It focuses on Emperor Wanli and his various Grand Secretaries, their lives, and the controversies surrounding court life. Each chapter centers on one man and moves through how they interact with the court and especially the emperor. Underlying the whole book, though, are the actions and reactions of the massive Chinese bureaucracy and how they manipulate the entire Chinese political process. It is apparent that the Ming emperor was not the ultimate power; he was obviously subject to the collective will of the Civil Service.

It is the constant conflict between the throne and the bureaucracy that is the thrust of Huang's book. He attests that "the essence of the business in the imperial court was the management of personnel" (51), a problem that plagues the dynasty apparently from its inception. The bureaucrats, success stories of the civil service system, are almost totally obsessed with propriety and appearances. It seems as if the actual management of Chinese governmental life is not as important as how it appears the bureaucrats are managing governmental life.

The book itself is very readable. Huang has crafted more than just a historical record of the Ming Dynasty. By focusing on the lives of seven individual men and their intertwining stories he has written a book that is both entertaining and informative. Enough biographical background is present for each figure to take on three dimensions

and come across as more than just a cog in the Chinese bureaucratic wheel. Huang separates quite clearly fact from conjecture; his insights into what the various people might have been thinking at the time are valuable to understanding the personalities involved. The only distracting aspect of the book is his references to "our empire"; it has the effect of undermining his objectivity by assuming his connection to the ancient empire. Other than that, he is very adept at explaining each aspect of any of a number of situations presented in the book.

The organization of the book is effective as well. He starts with the emperor, Wanli, and deals with the boy's life, marriage, and some initial controversies in his administration. He moves on to Shen Shih-hsing, one of the First Grand Secretaries who is the topic of two separate chapters. One deals with his life and the other deals with the later effects of his political machinations. The chapter on Chang Chucheng is interesting in that the events described in it all occur after the Grand Preceptor died. That chapter in particular is quite interesting; it delves deeply into the profound effect Chang had on all those around and below him. Hai Jui, Ch'i Chikuang, and Li Chih are all subjects of separate chapters, each described in detail from their first emergence into public life through to the end of their more than functional careers.

Wanli came under the influence of this bureaucracy at the very beginning of his official life, even before he ascended to the throne at age nine. Since he had to be

prepared to be emperor from a very early age, he was given a tutor. Chang Chucheng filled this position and through the years gained the trust, respect, and ear of the emperor. At this time in Wanli's life, a eunuch named Feng Pao but called Big Companion was also very important to Wanli. Even though the emperor was very young and could in no way be expected to be good at his new job right away, criticism of his policies started soon after he ascended.

The first conflict was between some members of the Civil Service and Chang Chucheng. The Civil Servants believed Chang was an obstacle between the emperor and the public and sent several memorials to Wanli detailing this. What happened in the next few days is a common snapshot of government proceedings. The annoyed servants sent the memorials to Wanli. Wanli received them and was quite disturbed. Most of the memorials criticized only Chang, as an impostor trying to secure imperial favor for selfish reasons; one directly criticized Wanli and it was this memorial that brought the situation to a head. Chang dutifully submitted his resignation; Wanli rejected Chang's resignation and meted out punishment as he saw fit.

Chang submitting his resignation was a common occurrence; not necessarily Chang's in particular, but of his position and those of similar rank. It was apparently expected of any high official that came under criticism. It does not seem to matter if the criticism is true or false, well-meaning or destructive; the official was duty bound to resign

just to escape the humiliation of being accused. Naturally, Wanli saw no reason for Chang to be humiliated and rejected the resignation. By his willingness to offer his own resignation, Chang was trying to show that he did indeed hold the interests of the empire above his own. It was merely a gesture, however, which becomes even more obvious after Chang's death and the exposure of the depth of his corruption. This back-and-forth action was common to more than just resignations. When the time came for Wanli to ascend the throne, he was forced by tradition to refuse several times before he accepted. After rejecting Chang's resignation, Wanli decided to punish those who had criticized him most severely and they were stripped of their rank. Chang interceded on his critics' behalf and saved them from a savage beating, however.

After Chang died, Wanli discovered that his tutor was a corrupt man, having taken advantage of his position for material gain. This came as a terrible blow to the emperor, to find his most trusted friend had been corrupt to a large extent. Doubt was cast on everything Chang had ever done in his official life and immediately everything he had ever done well or for the empire was considered to be bad. His students were taken off the fast track to high positions and his critics were seen in a new, more positive light. Perhaps what damaged the emperor the most was that, "despite his endless lectures on frugality, had for all those years lived to a great extent in luxury." (33) This exposed something very important about Chang: although he himself was corrupt to a large

extent, he held very dear the importance of teaching the emperor proper conduct and values. It is a hypocritical argument to be sure, but one that shows the esteem Chang held for the emperor.

Corruption was a major sticking point in the Chinese bureaucracy. Since the Civil Service officials received very little in the way of payment for their services, they were forced to look elsewhere for income. One thing that helped was that local municipalities were required, as part of their tax payments, to feed, house, and conduct officials through their jurisdictions. Over the years, however, this practice became greatly abused. Gifts were often a large portion of this nearly officially sanctioned corruption. One official spoke out quite vociferously against this official corruption— Hai Jui.

Hai Jui held several official positions, the highest of which was censor-in-chief in Nanking. To place him in the context of the book, Hai died in November 1587. Hai "simultaneously personified the best and the worst features of government by moral principle." (130) He did his best to live simply on the meager imperial stipend he received and did not abuse his travel and lodging privileges. He also tried to force other officials into living the same way. Though Hai was largely unsuccessful at this, he did manage to protect his own jurisdiction from official excesses.

Hai's situation, that of an uncorrupted official, makes the actions and motivations of corrupt officials all the more obvious and offensive. To be sure, every official saw as his

right the travel and lodging privileges extended to him and most likely did not consider slight abuses of these privileges to be corruption. In a government ruled by strict Confucian moral codes, however, any abuse should have been considered corrupt and immoral behavior. That men like Chang Chucheng were considered corrupt and men like Yen Mouch'ing were not is itself a hypocritical situation.

Yen was on official business and had circulated an expected humble letter proclaiming his desire for simplicity in his accommodations. In fact, sparse accommodations would have brought down Yen's ire, for he really expected accommodations in accordance with the importance of his mission, which was reorganizing the salt gabelle of the southern provinces. Hai felt it necessary to urge Yen to stop his excesses, reported back by Hai's agents, and warned him that accepting favors could be seen as an exchange for future political considerations. Hai's moral stand on official behavior eventually led him to script a memorial to Emperor Chia Ching, Wanli's grandfather, dressing him down for failures as a monarch, father, and husband, condoning widespread official corruption, and excessively high taxes.

Hai's problem was that "he would not accept the dual character of the yin and yang" and that he "could be counted on to force his standards on his superiors as well as his subordinates." (136) The Civil Service did not like having a practicing moral theoretician among them pointing out their various failures and shortcomings; in due

time Hai was promoted to a position in which it was thought he could do no harm. Hai had a very black and white view of governmental procedure that did not mesh with the majority of his colleagues. Hai became the victim of a hypocritical system that preached and taught morality but exerted authoritarian and social pressure on its officials in the place of true justice.

The bureaucracy is what is really on trial. The Civil Service system as it existed in the Ming era is terribly ponderous. The memorial method of legislation resembles more a system of inter-office memorandums than a method of governance. The classical Confucian education of every Civil Service official constructed what Huang refers to as a "literary bureaucracy" (131) that was not able to reconcile their education with existing legal codes and was therefore inadequate to run the empire. Huang identifies that Hai's own writings indicated the inability of the bureaucracy to "adequately dispense justice to millions of peasants" and calls this fact "an intrinsic weakness of the system." (148) The inadequacy of the bureaucracy stemmed from their adherence to the morals taught in the *Four Books* and their subsequent unwillingness to veer from the paths they had learned. Because of their education, they knew that "the essence of government is compassion" (55); because of their positions, however, they were bound by a different set of unwritten rules.

One of the qualities of a good official was obeying precedents. Unfortunately, adhering to precedent handicapped their ability to govern effectively in the present. The bulk of their precedents came from the 2000 year old *Four Books* and a rash of inefficient previous administrations. For example, under Emperor Hungwu, a land tax was established quite fairly, taxing the rich more heavily than the poor. Service obligations were also levied, and consisted of horses, food, lodging, and the like for passing officials. With this system in place, most governmental offices began operating on fixed budgets that usually consisted of grain supplies as salaries.

Due to the following of precedent, however, this efficient taxation system became firmly entrenched within a few generations. Also due to the following of precedent, officials were severely handicapped in trying to update the economic system. So a taxation plan that had worked very well for a few decades and was clearly out of date by the time of Wanli was next to impossible to revamp. The contemporary officials were unable to stimulate new avenues of the economy because they were forced by propriety to maintain the out of date agrarian-based economic plans. Had they been able to change the taxation system, however, it would have caused a different difficulty. By focusing on a non-agrarian system, the Civil Service would have been forced to change their own system, adjust their philosophical base, write new and rewrite old laws, and update their

organizational methods to embrace the new economy. Clearly, this kind of radical change in basic principles was impossible in the face of adhering to precedent.

On an intellectual level, the most telling insights into the mentality of the Ming Dynasty come in the form of two Appendices. Both are transcripts of audiences between Emperor Wanli and First Grand Secretary Shen Shih-hsing. They show much more than the respect paid between these two men, whether it is official ritual or honest personal respect or not. In the first transcript, of an audience on 5 February 1590, Wanli is very agitated over a memorial that accuses him of being, among other things, an alcoholic and a womanizer. Shen spends the majority of this audience trying to calm Wanli and assuring him that no harsh disciplinary methods need to be leveled against the offending Civil Service official.

Later in the February transcript, Shen skillfully steers the conversation around to the issue of designating an heir apparent, an especially touchy topic with Wanli. According to the precedents, the First Son should have been designated as such at a very early age. He was not. Later, Wanli wanted to name his Third Son (the Second Son having died) as heir apparent, in order to honor Lady Cheng, the child's mother and Wanli's true love. To his credit, Wanli did not mean any disrespect to Lady Wang, the mother of the First Son. Wanli was trying to exert some kind of control over his own life and thought that he might be able to do it through naming his successor. What it did

manage to do was turn the bureaucracy against him and make Wanli virtually abscond from official decisions for many of the last years of his rule.

The second transcript, from 25 August 1590, is centered on a discussion of border raids just past the Great Wall. It is odd that the topic came up, since the value of the military was held so low. For an administrative system that treated its military officers so poorly, one would think they had no military concerns, especially since the Mongols had been conquered and were now paying tribute to China. This transcript, however, shows that protecting their borders is on their minds, and occasionally very much so. There is some difficulty here between Shen and Wanli; neither seem willing to accept the burden of responsibility for a decision about policy for the borderlands. Shen tries to convince Wanli that he needs to form policy. Wanli counters that Shen is much more well-versed in this kind of policy and should therefore be the one making the decision. The conversation seems typical of the difficulties between the emperor and his Civil Service officials.

One thing Huang definitely proves in 1587 is that it was a year of significance, lending a sarcastic tone to the title. His assertion that nothing of grand importance happened in 1587 is accurate; however, events that occurred in the preceding years of Wanli's and even back to his grandfather's administration culminated in the beginning of the end of the Ming Dynasty. Wanli was basically powerless to make change in the

empire; he was even unable to choose his successor, a problem that rankled him and caused a massive controversy in the court. By Wanli's time, the emperor was a figurehead—honorable and revered by his subjects, but nevertheless a cultural figurehead with no real power.

The level of honesty or corruption in the Civil Service was irrelevant. The abilities of the Grand Secretaries were unimportant. The moral character of the emperor was immaterial. All that mattered by 1587 was that the government appeared to be running in a moral and efficient manner, and even the definitions of moral and efficient were amorphous and hard to determine. The failure of the imperial government in 1587 is the real significance of the Year of the Pig. The intricate web of the Ming Dynasty converged on Wanli and events conspired to prevent him from being able to untangle it. After 1587, all Wanli and his subjects had to do was wait for the Manchu soldiers to come and radically change their lives.

Excellent!
Well written & well argued.
Some in-depth analysis.