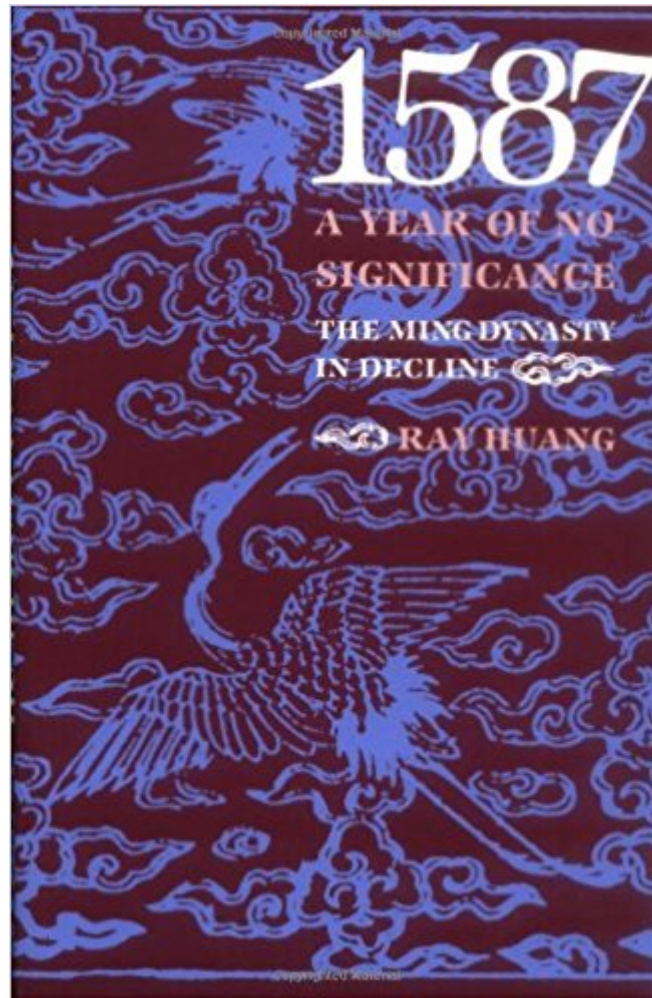




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# 1587, A Year Of No Significance: The Ming Dynasty In Decline



## Synopsis

In 1587, the Year of the Pig, nothing very special happened in China. Yet in the seemingly unspectacular events of this ordinary year, Ray Huang finds exemplified the roots of China's perennial inability to adapt to change. With fascinating accounts of the lives of seven prominent officials, he fashions a remarkably vivid portrayal of the court and the ruling class of late imperial China. In revealing the subtle but inexorable forces that brought about the paralysis and final collapse of the Ming dynasty, Huang offers the reader perspective into the problems China has faced through the centuries.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Unusual and thoughtful. . . . Takes the poet's or the novelist's joy in turning a commonplace detail to the angle at which it reveals its glint of meaning." —David Lattimore, New York Times Book Review "This is a superb book, one that answers many questions about the Chinese, past and present." —Srully Blotnick, Forbes Magazine "1587, A Year of No Significance, for all its scholarship, has the surreal visionary quality of Kafka's beautiful and frustrating story 'The Great Wall of China.'" —John Updike, The New Yorker "Huang uses 1587 as a convenient focus for his study of late Ming developments through the lives of the Wan-li emperor, two of his grand secretaries, a famous official, a leading general, and one of the dynasty's most celebrated iconoclasts. Not all specialists may agree with Huang's conclusion that by 1587 the limit for the Ming dynasty had already been reached and the year stands as a 'chronicle of failure,' but there will be widespread agreement on the

book's impressive achievement in providing vivid biographical and institutional detail within a highly readable text." — Library Journal "If you buy only one work on pre-modern Chinese history this year, make it this one. . . . The author displays great sensitivity in dealing with the tensions and contradictions in late Ming society, and even when one disagrees with his interpretation of certain facts or events, one cannot help but be impressed by the depth of his knowledge and his enviable ability to bring the characters in his story to life. In places, for example, his description of what it was like to be the Wan-li emperor is nothing short of masterly. . . . Will become required reading for anyone interested in this period of Chinese history." — W. S. Atwell, *History* "1587 is immensely rich historical fare that provides great insight into the workings of the late Ming administration. . . . Huang's sensitive and well-informed descriptions of administrative life organized in a bold and readable way make [this] book more significant than the year was. It is essential reading for an understanding of late imperial China." — Tom Fisher, *Journal of Oriental Studies* "Huang shows a mastery of the intricate details of the ritualistic and practical sides of Ming court politics, and an ability to make them comprehensible. His story is cleverly constructed and deliberately paradoxical. If 1587 is, in the long run, a year of no significance, it is nevertheless full of incident, and each incident carries promise of future drama." — Jonathan Spence, *New York Review of Books* "A distinguished scholar has written a remarkable description of political style in the final decades of the Ming dynasty and placed in perspective the mixed motives of its major characters. . . . No other book presents as vividly the atmosphere of traditional Chinese government." — John Meskill, *Asia* "A profoundly helpful book in our understanding of the Chinese tradition." — Eric Widmer, *Brown University, The History Book Club Review* "[An] impressive achievement in providing vivid biographical and institutional detail within a highly readable text." — Focus on Asian Studies "Huang succeeds admirably for the general reader in evoking the atmosphere of 16th-Century China and the colour and tension of court life." — Elizabeth R. Hayford, *Asia Week* "The author, an eminent authority on the period, has supplied a wealth of most valuable information based on original sources. . . . This is a book of significance." — Choice "No book of this kind in any language exists for the entire Chinese history field. Its most remarkable quality is the skill with which it conveys the texture of life, imparting to the reader a sense of having been inside the environment of Chinese politics and of seeing the complexities of another world as immediate and intelligible matters." — Frederick W. Mote, *Princeton University* "It is top-hole, full of information, and a first-rate argumentation as to how China got the way it did. I know of none better." — L. Carrington Goodrich, *Columbia University* "Excellent both as history and as a piece of

literature."•Lien-sheng Yang, Harvard University "Imaginative and resourceful. . . . Informed both by humanistic concern and a broad knowledge of technology and economics."•Edward L. Farmer, University of Minnesota "Analytical and innovative. . . . It will galvanize our thinking for many years to come."•Hoklam Cham, University of Washington

This is a superb book, one that answers many questions about a Chinese, past and present."

I had to read a number of works on late imperial China for a project, and this was by far the most enjoyable, and one of the most illuminating. A group portrait of life in the court of the Wanli emperor, it provides an indelible image of reformers struggling, always in vain, against a tottering, corrupt political bureaucracy that thwarted them at every turn. Huang made me feel like I was peering over the courtiers' shoulders as the imperial system, which had lasted for so many centuries, finally collapsed. The only reason not to give it five stars is that, in organizing each chapter around a single person, Huang necessarily crossed the same ground a number of times, which made the book seem, here and there, a bit repetitious. But this is a fine piece of work, always interesting and often enthralling. I've never read another book like it.

Clean, clear and to the point, Ray Huang provides an extraordinary examination of one of those "turning point" or "watershed" years we tend to recognize only in hindsight. Chinese vocabulary and terms are kept to a minimum, press into service only when it supports the goals of the passage. Though the book is historic in nature, the author forces no judgements but allows the reader to develop their own conclusions about the nature of the events that took place. We could do a lot worse to have more of this sort of writing on what can be a very muddled and turbulent portion of the Human story.

For History buffs only and especially for Chinese History buffs

GOod

I love this!! The price is appropriate and i have been using this for a while, it works very well!!

Non-fiction book lovers have gotten used to it: the odd-but-clever title designed to catch the attention of prospective buyers. In a world looking for something snappy, the title of a book is there

to sell, not describe. Thank goodness for the lowly subtitle. When you want to know what a book is actually about, the subtitle will tell you. And so it is that 1587, A Year of No Significance is really about The Ming Dynasty in Decline. More specifically, it focuses almost entirely on the era of Wan-li, who ruled from 1573 till 1620, and why his empire was in decline during those years. The author, Ray Huang, was especially well-prepared to write this book. Born in Hunan Province, China in 1918, he served as an officer in the Chinese army from 1941 to 1950. Following his discharge, Huang moved to the United States where he studied at the University of Michigan, completing the doctorate there in 1964. From that time until his death in 2000, Huang built a fine academic career in which he taught, contributed chapters to the Cambridge History of China, and authored several books. In 1587, Huang offers a series of compelling vignettes of major political, military and intellectual leaders of the period. His primary thesis is that, for all of their differences, each one was dealing with what was essentially the same intractable problem. At one point, Huang describes it as the "organizational inadequacy" (128) of the empire, a system in which "a literary bureaucracy" was managing "the affairs of the agrarian masses" (131). In another section, he speaks of "a sedentary empire" (186) with an army in which "the new elements had to slow down to keep pace with the old" (187). The strength and the beauty of Huang's presentation is that his book resembles a carefully-researched film in which separate characters reveal a common world from the past. Thus we read about Wan-li, the boy who became emperor and who came of age only to discover that devotion to his public role made no apparent difference. Next, Huang takes up the enigmatic Grand-Secretary Chang Chu-cheng, mentor and advisor to the young Wan-li. It was only after Cheng's death that Wan-li discovered the truth: when faced with the yin and the yang of "the professed moral tone of government" versus the "hidden desires and motivations of bureaucrats" (56), Cheng had become a hypocrite and a fraud. Readers get some relief from the tragic as Huang delightfully tells the story of the special relationship Wan-li had with Lady Cheng, the emperor's favorite wife and the mother of his third son. Lady Cheng was refreshingly different from the hundreds of other women available to Wan-li. Instead of being awed by the presence of his majesty, she recognized his humanity and treated him more like a friend than a god. In this way she fulfilled many of his emotional needs, an unlikely gift for which he deeply appreciated and loved her. Grand-Secretary Chang Chu-cheng was succeeded by the next character in the story, Shen Shih-hsing. Unfortunately, his completely different, subtle style was overshadowed by an early career in which Shen had worked under the then-notorious Chang. In this section, Huang makes clear that neither Chang's hard, top-down administration nor Shen's indirect approach could have ever made a long-term difference. At this point, Huang takes up the story of the Ming emperor who

chose to literally get away from it all, Wan-li's granduncle, Cheng-te. A playboy and a maverick, he avoided the Imperial City for months at a time, chasing women and fighting battles. But for all of the interesting tales he generated, Cheng-te's absence from duty only deepened and reinforced the crisis of the empire. The sick system he ignored only grew worse. No one could have been more different from Cheng-te than Hai Jui, "the most impeccably moral and fearless civil servant of the empire" (141). As the author explains, though, even Hai's zealous campaign against the exploitation of the poor was destined to fail. In order to show why, Huang takes his reader back to the time of emperor Hung-wu and the early days of the Ming Dynasty. He describes how Hung-wu had established agrarian simplicity as the standard for the empire, ignoring the inevitability of commercial development. As a result, there were no established, regulated credit institutions. Without even a simple banking system, small struggling farmers had no one else to go to besides their neighbors who became their creditors. In those early years, a large share of imperial revenue came from those families who had succeeded at farming, lending, and acquisition. But over time, their wealth was transferred from the countryside to the Imperial City. By the late sixteenth century, not only had the imperial bureaucracy more than doubled in size, its 20,000 civil servants controlled a huge portion of the empire's economic power. Huang's description of the imbalance and corruption of the empire provides the backdrop for his last two main characters. Ch'i Chi-kuang was one of the ablest generals in Chinese military history. Although he fought off the Japanese and Chinese pirates who were ravaging the east coast, Ch'i discovered that the contradictions and inconsistencies of his homeland were the toughest foes he would ever face. China's civilian leadership depended on the army for security. But they were also suspicious of strong military leaders. Consequently, in order to combat the enemies of the empire, Ch'i had to first develop and train an army that was always poorly supplied. Huang develops the story to show that, whether winning or losing battles, Ch'i was, from beginning to end, fighting a losing war. Finally, the author turns to a very different sort of character, Li Chih. A proud and stubborn intellectual, he "appointed himself the group conscience of all the literati" (190). Huang portrays Li Chih as having been well-known and widely-read among his contemporaries. But not even a man with his clout and persuasion could succeed in a quest to "coordinate the personal needs and wants of a member of the scholar-gentry class with public morality" (198). The empire had long since become hopelessly conflicted. And so Huang concludes with his thesis: by the seemingly unremarkable year 1587, "the limit for the Ming dynasty had already been reached. It no longer mattered whether the ruler was conscientious or irresponsible, whether his chief counsellor was enterprising or conformist, whether the generals were resourceful or incompetent, whether the civil officials were honest or corrupt, or whether the leading thinkers were

radical or conservative--in the end they all failed to reach fulfillment" (221). An interesting, if sad, story, what might it mean? Part of Huang's own answer may be revealed in an obvious quirk of the book: throughout, he punctuates his descriptions with phrases like "our history" and, especially, "our empire." Before getting used to it, the reader experiences the first few examples like a flash of lightning on an otherwise clear night. Of course, they remind the reader that although Huang had evidently become acclimated to the West by the time he wrote this book, he was first and finally Chinese. Beyond that, it may have been that Huang was using his story as a sort of political parable. He mentions how that those who lectured in the presence of the Wan-li emperor were expected to cite historical events as "a way of comparing past with present, and thus of reiterating the close relationship between ethics and public well-being" (44). Lessons from the past served as analogues to the contemporary scene. In this way, history was understood not only as background but also as prophecy. Did Huang intend for his own work, which was translated into Chinese, to serve in this way? I wonder.

I have long been a student of Chinese history. When I first read this book many years ago, I was stunned and dazzled by its subtle and lasting impact on me. The author has achieved something remarkable here. Using matter-of-fact language in the most unassuming manner, he slowly reveals, like a great detective story, the hidden and deadly tectonic shifts undermining the Ming Dynasty in the late 16th century at the hands of the self-serving imperial bureaucracy. So skillfully does the author perform this magic with his hypnotic technique that the ironic title, '1587, A Year Of No Significance', hides the great surprise that 1587 was in reality a year of shattering significance. But that could only have been perceived at the time by a Nostradamus. Previous reviewers have written how this book remains relevant today. They could not be more right. I have read many history books in my time and this is one of those I would take to a desert island with me.

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