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A YEAR OF NO SIGNIFICANCE: THE MING DYNASTY IN DECLINE

RAY HUANG

NEW HAVEN AND LONDON : YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS

The Meridian Gate (Wu Men), main entrance to the Forbidden City.

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Over the last fifteen years I have seldom written anything without asking L. Carrington Goodrich to review the manuscript before I submitted it to a publisher. Fu Hsien-sheng always performed this task for me with personal concern and patience. In the case of *1587, A Year of No Significance*, he not only read the entire manuscript, but also sat down with me on several occasions to help me iron out the rough spots. Those occasions were not only to my benefit but were also a source of enjoyment. I have been particularly impressed by his broadmindedness, as this book contains a number of variations in detail from his own *Dictionary of Ming Biography*, among them my harsh indictment of Chang Chü-cheng which, however, does reflect the opinion of his contemporaries.

I am grateful to Frederick W. Mote for his encouragement and his advice about style. I also wish to thank the group of young scholars working under his direction, among them Jim Geiss, Tom Bartlett, and Ellen Soulliere.

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Another scholar who supported my early proposal to write a description of Late Imperial China was Arthur F. Wright. I do not claim that he and I always agreed in our ideas about this period of history. But this fact never prevented us from having productive discussions of what we agreed or disagreed about. It is in the spirit of friendship that I remember him here.

The theories expressed in this book had their origin in an article written by me and Joseph Needham in 1974. I wish to remind my readers, however, that as early as 1944 Needham had argued against adopting a moralistic attitude toward historical conflicts of great complexity and advocated a synthetic approach that gives just weight to all the elements involved. This I have attempted to do.

Inevitably, in the course of the writing this study I have encountered many technical problems. I am grateful to the friends and colleagues who helped me with these details. Henry Serruys identified the Mongol leader

referred to in the Chinese sources as "Huo-lo-ch'ih" as Qulaci. Hon H. Ho found for me a picture of the plant known as *tu-ching (Vitex cannabifolia)* that was used to make the "whipping clubs" frequently mentioned in the text. Gianni Azzi read me passages from the Italian version of Ricci's journal. L. Carrington Goodrich supplied me with eleven pages of handwritten notes taken from a partial English translation of Antonio de Gouveia's journal by J. M. Braga of the National Library of Australia. Following Braga's practice, I have referred to him as Gouveia rather than de Gouveia.

I also want to thank George C. Potter and Chui-chun Lee for their tireless efforts in solving my bibliographical problems—George especially for locating the portrait of Shen Shih-hsing. I am indebted to Edward L. Farmer for sending me xeroxed materials concerning Hung-wu's ruling on imperial succession.

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R. H.

FOREWORD

Ray Huang's concentration on a single year near the end of the Ming dynasty gives the reader a remarkable glimpse into the workings of the Chinese leadership of that time. But this account must not persuade us that the bitter sufferings of the Chinese people in general, both then and since, have all been a huge mistake—that from now on China must discard her entire past experience and imitate the West in whatever way possible to make up for lost time. This is not the author's message. To indict China's bureaucratic system is not to negate the whole range of Chinese culture. A balanced view is essential; there is much to conserve. Historians may re-examine the mistakes of the past in the hope of providing warnings for the future but at the same time caution their readers to preserve what is of value. Presumably, for China the experiences of both East and West must be drawn upon. It is essential that the historian lay everything on the table. This is what Ray Huang has done.

With confidence I believe that this work will contribute to a general understanding of China's modern history. As the first reader to have examined the manuscript with considerable care, I sent word to the author at once, giving my impression of it. I see no reason why my words to him may not be reproduced here to conclude this foreword: "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

Spuyten Duyvil, New York City
May 2, 1980

1 THE WAN-LI EMPEROR

Really, nothing of great significance happened in 1587, the Year of the Pig. China was not facing a foreign invasion, nor was the country engulfed in a civil war. Even though the capital district did not have sufficient rain during the summer and epidemics broke out in those months, and though drought was reported in Shantung, and flood in South Chihli, and earthquakes took place in Shansi in the autumn, none of these disasters occurred in alarming proportions. For an empire as immense as ours, such minor incidents and setbacks can only be expected. On the whole, the Year of the Pig would go down in history as an indifferent one.

Can we therefore omit that year from history books?

Not quite.

During the year preceding the defeat of the Armada in the Western world, many seemingly unimportant events took place in China that were closely linked to both her past and her future. At the time it was hard to say for certain whether any isolated incident was merely a passing episode or a crucial turning point, but in fact these interlinking events made history. Moreover, it is precisely those commonplace occurrences which historians have been inclined to overlook that often reflected the true character of our empire.

Let me begin my account with what happened on March 2, 1587, an ordinary working day.

It was a sunny day. The trees in Peking were still leafless. The ground on the unpaved streets, after intermittent snow in past months, remained frozen. The air was not terribly cold, but it was not yet warm enough to make outdoor work comfortable.

Around lunchtime hundreds of governmental functionaries, civil officials as well as army officers on duty with the capital garrison, raced toward the imperial palace. Word had spread that the emperor was to meet his court at noon. The message caught everyone unprepared. The privileged few riding in sedan chairs still had time to tidy their belts and robes during the journey; but the majority, on foot, were too exhausted from the one-

mile dash between their offices and the palace to pay attention to such details.

It was unclear how the guards at the Gate of Greater Brilliance came to allow the crowds to enter. Perhaps seeing the swarms of silk-robed officials, they too were convinced that an important state function was at hand. But once past the gate, the crowd entered the Imperial City. By then they must have realized that the courtyard was too quiet for the occasion. No preparations seemed to have been made on and below the towers of the Meridian Gate. The imperial furniture was not on display. There was no bell-ringing or drum-beating. There were not even any extra guards and officials to serve as marshals. Could all this be a mistake?

Apparently someone made an inquiry of the palace eunuchs inside. It was confirmed that indeed the emperor had never ordered the audience. The crowd began to disperse, relieved yet still excited. They could not help spending a good part of that afternoon and evening discussing the ridiculous false summons; but no one could explain why he himself had been so credulous.[1]

The emperor may have found this little disturbance not at all unamusing. But as sovereign he had to take serious action. Soon his verbal orders were passed to the eunuchs on duty, committed to writing, and directed to the Ministry of Rites and the Court of State Ceremonial. These two offices were in charge of ritualistic proceedings, the former for designing them to conform with the cosmic spirit and historical precedents, and the latter for actual coordination. They should have known that an imperial audience had not been held at noon for 160 years and that there was no existing procedural code for it. How could the session have been called for without either preparation or rehearsal? When the rumor of the audience was circulated, members of these two offices should have helped to clarify the situation and stopped the stampede. For their failure to do so, all of them were to forfeit their salaries for two months. Moreover, an investigation was to be conducted promptly to find out who had first circulated the false message.

The investigation turned out to be inconclusive. The court reported that the whole thing had started with a large number of people simultaneously running toward the palace; it was therefore impossible to pin down the responsibility. Upon receiving this report, the emperor extended the suspension of salary to all governmental functionaries in the capital.

How severe this punishment was might not have been fully realized by the emperor. He had suspended salaries before to penalize officials for dereliction of duty and for submitting irritating memorials to the throne,

but such a measure had been applied only to individuals. The group penalty covering the entire body of capital officials was unprecedented. Indeed, because emoluments for the bureaucracy authorized by the dynasty were fixed at very low levels, many officials, especially those in the higher echelons, did not live on their regular pay. A minister, rank 2a, was entitled to an annual salary of 152 ounces of silver; in practice he might receive cash gifts from provincial governors of ten times that amount on a single occasion. Aware of this custom, the emperor may have imagined that all officials received such perquisites. There was no evidence that he understood the difficulties of the office-holders in the lower ranks, who extended their personal resources to accumulate seniority and wait for provincial assignments, meanwhile often languishing in debt. For a secretary in a ministry, rank 6a, the annual compensation of thirty-five ounces of silver had to be counted as an essential item in the household budget, even though it might not pay the rent. So the harsh punishment must have brought distress to many such households.[2]

The action taken by the throne was nevertheless considered to be just and final. With all its pomp and grandeur, the imperial court was supposed to preserve its impeccable and meticulous manners as an inspiration to the nation. It was absolutely unbecoming for the entire court to run chaotically toward a wrong destination at a wrong time. Both the sovereign and his bureaucrats realized that to fulfill their functions they had to do well in two areas: personnel management and ceremonial procedure. Of course, not many practical problems could be solved this way, but it was essential to managing an immense empire from one center. There was a limit to the number of practical problems that could be perceived, understood, analyzed, and discharged by our literary bureaucracy that governed many millions of peasants. So discipline and decorum had to be emphasized; the example set by the emperor's court became paramount. Rewards and punishments remained effective means to underline this emphasis.

The Wan-li emperor, now turning twenty-four, was himself a veteran of ceremonial proceedings. By March 1587 he had been the Son of Heaven for almost fifteen years. Even before his enthronement, when not yet nine years old, he had gone through the ritual of capping, which prematurely ushered in his manhood. Thereafter he was no longer considered a child, at least not in public.

Wan-li still remembered that winter day when he was led into a screened cubicle temporarily erected in the courtyard, from which he emerged three times, always clad in a new set of garments. Each time he was crowned with a different hat. The assortment of headgear and robes was the regalia

designated for various ceremonial functions into which he, as heir apparent, must be initiated. Between the changes in wardrobe, he was instructed to kneel down, stand up, turn around, hold a scepter, and drink wine from a special cup—all to the accompaniment of music and the chanting of ceremonial officials. The proceedings took the whole morning. The next day the boy sat stiffly to receive the formal congratulations of the court officials.[3]

Several months later came the death of his father, the Lung-ch'ing emperor. As heir designate he met the imperial court in mourning. The assembly of officials had prepared polished pieces of literature declaiming the urgent reasons why he must now take over the vacant throne. Twice Wan-li, who had been carefully coached, declined on the ground that he was too grief-stricken. Only to the third round of persuasion did he give his assent. From that moment on ceremonies became inseparable from his life.

During the past fifteen years the emperor had sacrificed to heaven and earth, performed ritual motions of farming, and celebrated New Year's Day and the ferry boat festival that fell on the fifth day of the fifth lunar month. He had sacrificed to imperial mausoleums and the family temple and meticulously observed the birthdays and dates of death of all preceding emperors and empresses of the dynasty. He received missions from foreign tributaries and retiring officials who bade him farewell. He reviewed troops, issued battle banners, and accepted prisoners of war after the imperial army's major and minor battles.

The disposal of war prisoners was usually one of the most awe-inspiring occasions of the emperor's court. He sat on the tower atop the Meridian Gate overlooking the granite-paved courtyard, flanked by general officers who held noble titles. Lined up next to them was a full battalion of imperial guards, soldiers of gigantic stature clad in shiny armor and helmets adorned with red tassels. Down below, while thousands of court officials and soldiers watched, the prisoners, in chains and red cloth with holes cut out for their necks, were forced to kneel on the stone pavement. Then the minister of justice came forward to read aloud a list of the crimes those prisoners had committed against humanity. Upon completion of the charges, he petitioned the emperor that the prisoners be executed in the marketplace. The reply from the throne—"Take them there; be it so ordered"—could not have been heard by all present. The order, however, was repeated by the two nobles standing immediately next to the sovereign and then echoed in succession by four, eight, sixteen, and thirty-two guardsmen, until it touched off a thundering shout of the same order by the entire battalion of soldiers, their chests inflated.[4]

Every year, in the eleventh lunar month, the emperor received the following year's calendar and proclaimed it to the populace, so that they would know when to plant their seeds for food and when to sweep their family graves. With the same degree of solemnity he received all important literary works compiled by the Han-lin Academy. Every work accepted by the throne was made official writ. It was placed on a portable lectern and carried through all the ceremonial gates and the entire length of the courtyard, accompanied by academicians and musicians and escorted by porters who carried burning incense.[5]

With full formality, the emperor granted princely ranks to his cousins and remote relatives, authorized their weddings, and bestowed honors upon their wives. He had, upon his succession, named his principal mother, the former empress, the August Empress Dowager Jen-sheng, and his natural mother, formerly the imperial consort, the August Empress Dowager Tz'u-sheng. The latter was particularly important to him, perhaps the only person in the world who had given him the kind of love due to a child.[6] Many years later, on her birthday in the eleventh lunar month, he still went to the Imperial Polar Gate to accept the good wishes of his courtiers on her behalf, even though by that time he had discontinued many ceremonial proceedings.

But ever since his capping Wan-li had become a public personality. When he constructed a palace building for her, the dowager's appreciation was not expressed orally but was incorporated into a letter of thanks solemnly read to him while he lay prostrate on the ground. The letter was then kept in an imperial archive as a state paper. When Wan-li entertained his two mothers with stage plays by a palace troupe, he had to kneel in the courtyard awaiting their arrival, rising only when the empresses dowager had dismounted from their sedan chairs.

Thus, in becoming emperor, Wan-li lost much of his personal identity and had little private life. Even when he moved about inside the palace compound, he was accompanied by a large retinue led by eunuchs who cleared the path with whips.

When he decided to elevate his favorite concubine, Lady Cheng, to the position of imperial consort, the proceedings were announced beforehand so that the ceremony might be prepared. This act caused a supervising secretary to protest on the ground that the honor should go to Lady Wang, who had given birth to the emperor's first son, whereas Lady Cheng was the mother of only his third son. This objection started a controversy that was to alienate the monarch from his court and rock the dynasty for the rest of its duration. At the time, however, the ceremony proceeded as

planned. The sovereign did not personally hand out the honor. As tradition prescribed, he commissioned his deputies to do so. With credential and patent they conferred the title upon the designated woman. The emperor sanctified the first haircuts of his infant sons and ritualistically gave them their names.

In performing these functions the Wan-li emperor found that he had to change clothes often, sometimes several times a day. Ming emperors wore no metal crowns. The most formal hat worn by the sovereign was a rectangular black mortarboard, with the shorter edges facing front and rear. Dangling from each of the two edges were twelve strings of beads. The curtainlike beads in front of his eyes and behind the nape of his neck must have made the wearer uncomfortable, compelling him to remain solemn and steady and to move very deliberately. To match the mortarboard the emperor wore a black jacket and a yellow skirt, both elaborately embroidered. Over the skirt was an apronlike knitted band. Along with two tassels, the band was hung on a jade belt. Red socks and red ankle-boots completed his attire.

Garments of the second degree of formality were red; they could be considered the emperor's military uniform. The headgear was a shell-like helmet, complete with chin strings in accordance with military tradition. But in place of the metal studs on the headpieces worn by soldiers, the emperor's red helmet was lined with leather and decorated with rows of jewels. The yellow dragon robe that was conventionally regarded as the emperor's standard costume, because he wore it so often, was in fact for occasions of even lesser degrees of formality. When retiring from public functions, the emperor changed into a black dragon robe with green borders.

The symbolic value of the office of the monarchy was amply illustrated by the ritualistic farming performed by the emperor every spring in front of the Altar of Earth. About two hundred farmers were called in from the two counties surrounding Peking to form an assembly. Actors dressed up as deities of wind, clouds, thunder, and rain. Two officials led an ox; two older farmers held a plow. Other peasants carried farm implements and barrels for human fertilizer. The emperor, however, touched neither the tools nor the draft animal. His left hand holding a whip and his right hand a ceremonial plow carved with a dragon and painted in gold, he was flanked by two elders. The procession marched across the field three times. Then the ruler retired to the tent to watch his courtiers, led by the minister of revenue, repeat the process. Seeding was performed by the prefect of

Shun-t'ien and his staff. No sooner was the soil covered than actors in peasant clothing presented five principal grains to the emperor, simulating a good harvest. The sovereign was then congratulated by all present.[7]

Most other state functions were less interesting; they could be very tiresome indeed. The daily audience with the court, for instance, was loathed even by the most diligent statesmen. It was a chore that several predecessors of the present emperor had found unbearable. Although now much simplified, the procedure still remained a heavy burden on Wan-li.

In order to attend the audience, even before daybreak all civil officials and all army officers in the capital and the members of the local government within the metropolitan district had gathered outside the palace. The gates were opened after drum-beating and bell-ringing. The participants assembled in the courtyard in front of the ceremonial hall. Civil officials faced west; military officers faced east. Four imperial historians were posted around the emperor to record the proceedings. Censors acting as marshals took the roll and wrote down the names of those who coughed, spat, stumbled, or dropped their ceremonial tablets. Whips were cracked to call the ceremony to order. At the chanting of the master of ceremonies, the assembly turned around, bowed to the emperor once, and kowtowed three times. The chief minister of State Ceremonials announced the names of those officials who were about to leave the capital for retirement and provincial assignments; these dignitaries then paid the sovereign special homage in farewell. Then officials ranked 4b and above filed into the ceremonial hall. The various departments and ministries made reports to the emperor; at times he asked questions and gave oral instructions. All proceedings were expected to be completed before dawn.

In the early years of the dynasty the court audience was repeated at noon and in the evening. There were 185 kinds of official business that could and must be reported to the emperor in person. Until the end of the fifteenth century at least, the morning audience had been very seriously regarded. When the sixth emperor, Cheng-t'ung, ascended the throne at the age of nine, a new rule was put into effect to limit the oral report to eight items of business a day, those having been brought to His Majesty's attention in advance in writing. But the audience was never postponed because of rain or snow. On those days officials were permitted to wear raincoats over their silk robes. A regulation of 1477 further permitted umbrella-carriers to accompany officials to the courtyard. Only very rarely were senior statesmen, men over seventy years old, excused from attendance. Even emperors could not easily excuse themselves from the daily event. Once in 1498 the

ninth emperor, Hung-chih, virtually begged his senior grand-secretary to call off the morning audience at the last minute for just one day. The night before there had been a palace fire; because of loss of sleep the sovereign did not feel physically fit to go through the proceedings. The morning audience was suspended only from one to three days upon the death of a relative of the emperor or an important statesman. Even then, while the emperor temporarily absented himself, the court officials were still required to proceed to the Meridian Gate to bow to the throne. During the period of state mourning the emperor and his court changed into somber-colored robes for the ceremony, omitting the gold and silver and ivory dress belts.[8]

The first to break with this tradition was Cheng-te, the tenth Ming emperor and the present emperor's granduncle. Conscious of his ability to assert himself, Cheng-te was determined to carry out his own concept of monarchy rather than that of his courtiers. After 1517 he frequently absented himself from the capital for prolonged periods. As the bureaucrats refused to cooperate, he gathered around himself a staff of eunuchs. During his absences the office of the grand-secretary was maintained by him mainly as a center for transmitting messages, and he made little use of civil officials for decision-making. When he returned to Peking he put forth many bizarre proposals, such as that court audiences be held late at night followed by state banquets. Such suggestions seemed to the bureaucracy merely provocative.

It would be difficult to imagine what would have happened had these conditions continued, but Cheng-te died without issue in 1521. He was succeeded by the Wan-li emperor's grandfather, the Chia-ching emperor. The succession marked the first time in the dynasty's history that a prince from a lateral branch of the imperial family had ascended the throne. The courtiers took advantage of the opportunity to terminate the influence of the eunuchs; the most notorious ones were put to death. For about twenty years Chia-ching attended to his office conscientiously; he even instituted many revisions in court rituals, which he considered to be closer to the classical model. But when approaching middle age, he grew tired of public life. Withdrawing to a villa inside the Imperial City, he became infatuated with Taoist formulas for manufacturing elixirs. Another twenty years passed and the court audience was virtually abandoned. Unfortunately for the dynasty, Chia-ching's reign was the longest until that of the present emperor; it lasted almost forty-five years.

The Wan-li emperor's father, Lung-ch'ing, left a colorless record in history. He ruled for less than six years. For the first year after his enthronement the morning audience was held regularly. But the emperor merely sat there, cold and numb. Even the routine utterances were made by his grand-secretaries on his behalf. Then, in the next four and a half years, even this lifeless performance was suspended, or held very sporadically.[9]

In 1572, at the accession of the present emperor Wan-li, Grand-Secretary Chang Chü-cheng arranged to have the morning audience with the court held on the third, sixth, and ninth days of every ten-day cycle; other days the young emperor devoted to his schooling.[10] Now, almost fifteen years later, the routines had not been completely abandoned, but the cancellation of both the morning ceremony and the study sessions had been more frequent in past months. The offering of a sacrifice was usually presided over by appointed representatives. Under these conditions the false alert for an audience at noon sounded even more ridiculous.

The morning audience held by the Wan-li emperor was in fact an abridged form. Very rarely did the court move into the ceremonial hall. Except for special occasions it avoided even the Meridian Gate. The proceedings took place at the Gate of Brightening Administration because of its unpretentious surroundings and simple effect. The horses and elephants that usually manifested imperial grandeur were absent. The oral report by officials was no more than a formality. Among the items of business submitted in advance to the emperor, only those issues requiring public attention were selectively presented.

Ever since his enthronement the Wan-li emperor had impressed his courtiers with his majestic countenance. His voice was deep, his pronouncements clear and loud, ending in powerful tones which "seemingly came from his diaphragm." More than once this had been cited as an invaluable asset for the occupant of the throne, especially when he was a child emperor.[11] Anyone could see that Wan-li was precocious. Some years later he himself disclosed that at the age of five by Chinese count—which put his actual age between three and four—he had already learned to read.[12]

In the early years of his reign, when he was instructed to refer to a slip of paper on his sleeve that reminded him how to respond to various requests and proposals, Wan-li had only a vague idea of what he was doing. He knew that he had to do these things because he was emperor; and for the same reason nearly everyone had to kowtow to him. In his world he had yet to meet an equal. He liked his brother Prince Lu, but the child was five years younger than he. Beyond that, there was not even a playmate at court except for a handful of eunuch attendants. Two persons he had learned to respect: Tutor Chang and Big Companion Feng. Both seemed to

be good men, well regarded even by Empress Dowager Tz'u-sheng. Their conjunction with Wan-li's life was an act of destiny bound deeply to affect a nation of many millions.

Chang Chü-cheng, with his wide-set eyebrows and long beard, was always a source of authority and wisdom. Always well-groomed, he seemed to wear a new robe every day, with its creases well kept.[13] His mind was just as sharp and meticulous as his clothing and manners. Whenever he said something it always hit the mark—clear, definite, and incisive.

The Wan-li emperor and his two dowager mothers had a particular reason to feel grateful to Tutor Chang, whom Wan-li sometimes referred to as the "Senior Counsellor." When the Lung-ch'ing emperor died, the first grand-secretary had been Kao Kung. Having handled public affairs for Lung-ch'ing for some time, Kao took it for granted that he was still in command. He was overbearing enough that the first time he was approached by the emperor's messenger he questioned in public how a nine-year-old could actually assume that he was master. If Kao Kung were allowed to behave so arrogantly, what else would he be capable of? And if the Son of Heaven was treated by him like any other nine-year-old, did he have any respect for the two empresses dowager? It was under Chang Chü-cheng's confidential advice that the problem was quickly dealt with and solved for good. On that summer day of 1572, all officials were called to assemble in front of the palace at short notice. A eunuch arrived with a piece of yellow paper signed by the two empresses dowager and the emperor. When it was read in front of the kneeling officials, Kao Kung was shaken and lost countenance. The imperial order stripped him of his rank and position, and commanded him to return to his home region that very day. Thereafter he was to remain under the surveillance of the magistrate of the district for life. Thus, the imperial family felt that Tutor Chang had secured the throne for the young emperor at a difficult time. With Kao Kung dismissed, Chang's succession became a matter of course; he had more than earned the position of first grand-secretary.

But in addition to being the chief counsellor, Chang Chü-cheng was also in charge of the emperor's education. Wan-li's five lecturers, two calligraphy instructors, and one academician attendant were all appointed by him. Tutor Chang supervised their instruction personally, sometimes took over the lecture himself, and supplemented the textbooks with his own writings.

Ever since the autumn of 1572, Wan-li's schoolday had consisted of three separate periods devoted to basic Confucian classics, calligraphy, and history. During the rest period he retired to his lounge and the instructors to theirs within the same building. Between the first and second periods, however, Big Companion Feng Pao and other eunuchs would bring to the throne the day's memorials awaiting the emperor's approval, with attached rescripts already drafted by the grand-secretaries. During that hour, Wan-li exercised his sovereign right by wielding a vermilion brush on the state papers, always assisted by a half-dozen eunuchs under Feng Pao's direction; all civil officials, including even Tutor Chang, had to stay away unless called for questioning.[14]

The emperor completed his studies and the day's work at noon. He ate his lunch in the library and had the afternoon free, except that he must further practice his handwriting in his spare time, and learn the verses in the classics and the dates, names, and events in history by heart. These lessons Wan-li never took lightly because he knew that the next morning Tutor Chang might ask for a recitation. If the emperor had prepared his lessons well, the grand-secretary was ready to kneel and murmur that the dynasty was blessed to have such an enlightened sovereign; but he was equally capable of casting a pair of fiercely inquisitive eyes on the lonely and helpless pupil if he had not.

Until his wedding in 1578, Wan-li had shared his palace quarters with Empress Dowager Tz'u-sheng. She was very much involved in her son's duties and functions as emperor. On the days he was supposed to meet his court, it was she who woke him in the morning. His conduct and education were always important to her. Feng Pao, the eunuch who had taken care of her son for many years, remained her contact outside the palace. As a young prince Wan-li had ridden on Feng's shoulders and started calling him "Big Companion." Now promoted to Director of Ceremonies, Feng was the head of the palace staff. His direct access to the empress dowager transformed Wan-li's affection for him into awe, as a bad report from him could prompt Tz'u-sheng to order him, even as emperor, to kneel for long periods of time.[15]

Under such strict discipline and guidance Wan-li progressed well with his studies. He had learned that the primary duties of the ruler were to venerate heaven and to follow the precedents established by his ancestors. Less than four months after his accession, a supernova later known as "Anno 1572" suddenly appeared in the sky, the size of a saucer and orange in color.[16] Before it dimmed its light in early 1573 and vanished a year later, the heaven-sent portent made a strong impression on Wan-li. On the advice of Tutor Chang, he fully examined himself for bad thoughts, speech, and

conduct. Since even the regularity of the universe depended upon the young emperor's character and wisdom, he had no choice but to be thrifty, diligent, sincere, and courteous on all occasions.

The children's game that Wan-li played with eunuch attendants was regarded as unbecoming for the emperor; thus any crowd had to disperse at the approach of the footsteps of the Big Companion. Now the emperor had developed an intense interest in calligraphy, which was also the favorite hobby of Mother Tz'u-sheng and of Feng Pao. In early 1574, barely ten, Wan-li was able to execute characters one foot high. On several occasions he asked Tutor Chang and other grand-secretaries to watch him work with the brush and gave them his long sheets of artistry as souvenirs. Chang Chü-cheng accepted his with thanks; but the next day he came to admonish the young emperor to the effect that His Majesty's brushwork had already exceeded expectation. Calligraphy, he further argued, was after all a minor art which in itself added nothing to the empire's well-being. Sage rulers in Chinese history excelled only in virtue, not in aesthetic skills. One should keep in mind that Ch'eng-ti of Han, Yüan-ti of Liang, Hou-chu of Ch'en, Yang-ti of Sui, and Hui-tsung of Sung were accomplished musicians, painters, poets, and writers. Yet, with all their talents, none of them escaped dynastic decadence and tragic ends. The moral of this lecture was that even harmless hobbies could develop into undesirable distractions that sent rulers to their ruin. To stress this point, by the end of 1578 Chang had eliminated calligraphy from Wan-li's curriculum.[17]

The practice of frugality started with palace expenditure. At Tutor Chang's suggestion, the lantern decorations and fireworks that had illuminated the imperial gardens and buildings after every new year over the past century were discontinued. The emperor had ordered the redecoration of two palace buildings as the new living quarters of his two mothers. The order was rescinded because of Chang Chü-cheng, who decided that the conditions of the two buildings were good enough as they were. At one time Wan-li complained that numerous palace women around him all loved self-adornment and he did not have enough jewels to give them. The grand-secretary urged him to think first of food and clothing for the populace: emperors should never be preoccupied with pearls and precious stones, as they can in no way dispel cold and hunger.[18]

Yet, the fundamental problem of the enormous expenditure of the imperial household was its size. The Forbidden City, an area of a quarter of a square mile, was covered with blocks of glaze-tiled palatial buildings and ceremonial halls and gates, marble terraces, and endless painted galleries.

It was surrounded by the Imperial City, an area of no less than three square miles, also closed to the public. Within the enclosure were numerous avenues and several artificial lakes. In addition to imperial villas, temples, and residences of eunuch officials inside the compound, there were also supply depots and material-processing plants. Among them was the Court of Imperial Entertainments, which had the capacity to serve banquets for up to 15,000 men on short notice. Next to the bakery, distillery, and confectionery were the emperor's stable, armory, printing-office, and book depository.

In sum, the palace was completely self-sufficient; all materials needed to support the Forbidden City were either deposited or being manufactured in this huge maintenance area, whose parklike surroundings were also used for sports and recreation. Moreover, certain articles consumed at sacrificial services and distributed to the personnel outside the palace, including wax and incense, as well as cotton cloth and cotton wadding for making the uniforms of the capital garrison, were also stored in the warehouses within the Imperial City. With few exceptions, all those supply depots and installations were supervised by eunuchs, who were organized into twenty-four departments.[19] During the early years of Wan-li, there were close to 20,000 eunuchs, counting those holding official ranks on a par with top bureaucrats down to messengers and household attendants; the number was still increasing steadily. The palace staff also included 3,000 women.[20]

To make things worse, this huge staff, like the bureaucracy, was grossly underpaid. This situation reflected the system established by the dynastic founders. Since the emperor owned all that was within the Four Seas, there was no need for him to maintain substantial estates. Instead, he derived from tax proceeds large quantities of material and manufactured goods—from silk to metal ingots and from lumber to sesame seeds—and these were deposited immediately next to his palatial quarters, what was then the largest logistical base in the world. Officials, who were expected to live in extreme austerity, were from time to time handed out some of the goods set aside by the emperor, either as a bonus after a sacrificial ceremony or as outright bestowals from the throne.

But by the sixteenth century officialdom no longer lived in austerity. The top-ranking eunuchs carried on a life style differing little from that of the top bureaucrats. Feared and venerated, they too kept magnificent mansions within the Imperial City, staffed with household managers, personal secretaries, and domestic servants. By custom, palace women lived with them as if they were married. Although obviously without offspring, they patronized adopted sons, nephews, and sometimes junior eunuchs.[21] Their

methods of gaining irregular income also resembled conventional bureaucratic practices.

For the rank-and-file palace attendants, a major source of personal gain was their control of supply depots. Every month delivery agents from the provinces would arrive with assorted materials in lieu of tax payments. Unless these were found to fulfill specifications, the cargo would not be accepted and the deliverers, unable to discharge their responsibility, would be stranded in Peking. This quality control could, however, be drastically modified by paying a fee. Usually the delivery agent would approach an intermediary, who received the money and guaranteed acceptance of the cargo in question. During Wan-li's reign, the most influential intermediary agent operating around the supply depots was Li Wei, earl of Wu-ch'ing, Tz'u-sheng's own father—or, to put it bluntly, in private life the reigning emperor's maternal grandfather.

As the earl, in collaboration with the palace eunuchs, continued to turn in substandard materials for profit, the army personnel became angry, for the cotton cloth thus checked in was issued to them for their uniforms. In 1577, the young emperor was persuaded to take one bolt of the inferior cloth and complain to Tz'u-sheng. Humiliated, the empress dowager wanted the case settled by law. At this point Tutor Chang interceded. Instead of going to court, Li Wei was summoned to stand in front of the palace to receive a reprimand. After the event Chang Chü-cheng was jubilant. He seized the opportunity to place dozens of eunuchs in charge of the supply depots; the demand for "cushion money" at those installations came to a halt. Throughout the maneuver Chang had the cooperation of Director of Ceremonies Feng Pao. Nevertheless, this heroic act was to have repercussions later.[22]

Affairs of state in the first decade of Wan-li's reign, from 1572 to 1582, showed a remarkable improvement over the conditions of the previous hundred years. Nomadic invasions no longer threatened the northern frontier. Pirates disappeared from the eastern coasts. After a prolonged period of peace, imperial coffers were well stocked with silver bullion, thanks to Chang Chü-cheng's administration. This was more than a boy emperor and his secluded mother could have hoped for. No wonder that when Tutor Chang had a minor stomach disorder, Wan-li volunteered to fix him a bowl of noodle soup! Tz'u-sheng's deference to the grand-secretary was even more complete. A very religious person, she had made up her mind to contribute from her own purse to the construction of a temple in honor of a certain goddess; it was at Chang Chü-cheng's advice that the project was

abandoned. The alternate plan of constructing a stone bridge outside Peking with the same money was presented to her without prior consultation. Similarly, when Wan-li caught the measles, the empress dowager promised to offer upon his recovery an altar for masses in thanks for Buddha's mercy. Because of Chang's objection, this promise was never fulfilled either. More than once Tz'u-sheng wished to have the annual autumn execution of prisoners suspended in the name of mercy; Chang Chü-cheng argued that such extreme leniency had no genuine basis in Buddhist teaching. Not all such rulings had been easy for the empress dowager to accept, especially in 1574, when, after her intercession failed, more than thirty prisoners were beheaded the next day.[23]

On an ordinary working day the emperor acted upon two to three dozen documents that were brought to his attention. Each was written on a long sheet of paper folded screen-fashion to form a pamphlet of four, eight, twelve, or more pages. The documents differed from one another in format, according to their classification, the number of characters on each page, and style of writing. But in general they fell into two major categories. Those submitted by capital officials in the name of their offices, along with reports and petitions from the provinces, carried imprints of official seals; they had to go through the Office of Transmission. When they reached the palace, duplicates had already been delivered to the Office of Supervising Secretaries at the two wings of the Meridian Gate. Very rarely would such public documents cause serious disturbances in the emperor's court. Capital officials, however, were entitled to submit memorials to the emperor as individuals, sometimes delivered by the writers themselves and received by palace eunuchs at the Gate of Polar Convergence. Without duplicates until the emperor's rescript was attached and sent to the supervising secretaries for publication, these personal petitions and their contents remained confidential, unknown even to the writers' superiors. Many a controversy was caused by papers in the latter category.

When Wan-li was in his early teens, he merely followed Big Companion Feng's instructions, affixing his own rescripts in vermilion ink on certain papers to make official the drafts in black submitted by Tutor Chang's office. The documents that he personally worked on involved simple replies such as *Approved* and *Acknowledged.* When the rescripts required complicated phraseology, the work was, as a rule, delegated to Feng Pao's squad of assistants. These proceedings were completely in agreement with the dynasty's established practice. An instruction written in red in the

emperor's presence carried the authority of the throne. On the other hand, any unauthorized use of the vermilion brush constituted falsification of imperial order, a crime subject to the mandatory death penalty.

It must have been some time before the young emperor grasped the mechanics of the institutional process, of which he himself was the central figure. There is no evidence, for instance, that, when in those early days he carried out his official duty in a way not fundamentally different from taking calligraphy lessons, he fully understood the import of his own rescript *Acknowledged*, which really meant that the suggestion or request expressed in the paper had been politely rejected, and that, considering the noncontroversial nature of the proposal, no action would be taken against the writer of the paper or others mentioned therein. One duty Wan-li could not delegate had to do with his power of appointment. The problem was solved in this way: whenever there was a vacancy in a high office, Tutor Chang and the ministers always submitted more than one candidate for the emperor's selection. When he circled one name with his vermilion brush, that person was appointed, and the emperor had ostensibly made a decision of his own. However, he had early been indoctrinated to believe that the person whose name topped the list was best qualified.[24]

Until Wan-li reached his adolescence, about the time, in 1575, when he performed the ceremony to report to his ancestors that thereafter he was to wear his hair long, his understanding of his own role was limited to several simple notions: that he had become emperor not by merit but owing to the will of Heaven; that this will would continue to hold true as long as he kept the populace content and happy and the world in harmony; that in order to do so he must put good men in office and get rid of evil ones; and that in all these areas Tutor Chang's advice must be followed because he always knew best. It must therefore have been a shock to Wan-li when, soon after his long-hair ceremony, he began to receive memorials naming Chang Chü-cheng an impostor and criticizing him for meting out penalties to others, not in the interests of the empire but to suit his own selfish designs. The most disturbing fact was that one of those remonstrating papers put the blame on the emperor himself. The three years' reign of His Majesty, the memorialist claimed, was noted for harshness toward those who worked tirelessly for the throne. This was contrary to the teaching of the ancient sages, who had repeatedly stressed that moral leadership starts from kindness and gentleness, that only through forgiveness will the good feelings under Heaven be nurtured and promoted. The present state of affairs indicated that the emperor was under the influence of evil counsel.

Faced with direct attacks and indirect charges, Chang Chü-cheng turned in his resignation to comply with the principle that, be the criticism just or unjust, a public figure with self-esteem should never cling to his position when being criticized. After all, his usefulness had already been nullified when he was openly proclaimed an obstacle between the imperial throne and public confidence. But the emperor absolutely refused to listen to these arguments. He was predisposed, rather, to punish the critics. A confidential meeting with Tutor Chang and the Big Companion further confirmed his suspicion that the memorialists were destructive and malicious. At this point Chang Chü-cheng pointed out that anyone working immediately under His Majesty was obliged to mete out punishments, call them what one wished. Good men must be rewarded and evil men punished. Otherwise how could state affairs be managed?

Thus the imperial decision was made. The first official who had raised the question of Tutor Chang's ill management was deprived of his rank and discharged from the Civil Service. The second challenger, knowing the likelihood of imperial displeasure over the remonstrance yet obstinately persisting in his argument, had in fact committed an act disrespectful to the throne. It was ordered that he be arrested, stripped of his robe before the Meridian Gate, and beaten with whipping clubs for a hundred strokes. A standard instrument for chastising insubordination, these clubs, with their rough sectional joints, had claimed many lives and left permanent scars on the thighs and hips of those who survived.[25]

But Chang Chü-cheng had no intention of letting the emperor go to such extremes. He interceded by petitioning the sovereign to omit the beating. The offender was exiled to the frontier instead. At this point the Wan-li emperor was much impressed by the magnanimity of his tutor, who would even beg for clemency on behalf of someone who had unjustly criticized him. He did not know, yet at least, that a person who gave offense to Chang Chü-cheng had to endure all kinds of harassments at the hands of numerous governmental functionaries, who believed that any additional injury they could inflict on the victim would ingratiate themselves with the grand-secretary, someone who could really deal out punishments. Only much later did the emperor learn that this second offender, though he escaped beating at the Meridian Gate, was tormented by everyone on his way to his exile and eventually died at the frontier post under most mysterious circumstances.

As time went by, however, Wan-li's understanding of his own surroundings was broadened by his study of history. Gradually he realized that

monarchy under the Ming differed from that of previous dynasties. In any other period when the emperor was a minor, a regency would have been established for him. An uncle or a cousin would have acted as prince regent. This was not permitted under the Ming dynasty's constitution. A standing procedure established in the very early years of the dynasty had demanded that all imperial princes, including the emperor's uncles, cousins, younger brothers, and sons except for the heir apparent, be permanently removed from the capital upon reaching maturity. They were given territorial titles, palatial mansions, and annual stipends for life. But, settled in the provinces, they could never enter into politics; and without the emperor's explicit approval they could not even travel. The fundamental idea was to free the monarchy from interference by cadet branches of the imperial family.

A similar preventive measure dictated that imperial consorts must be selected from families of humble origin, not from those of social distinction. Wan-li's own maternal grandfather, Li Wei, had been a commoner of meager means. Only after Tz'u-sheng's elevation from palace woman to imperial consort did Li receive noble titles. Yet even then his earldom gave him no more than an honorific commission in the army with a modest stipend, accompanied by neither land grant nor active service. The only governmental functions in which he took part were ceremonial. It was to supplement his insufficient family income that Li Wei chose to be an intermediary between tax deliverers and palace eunuchs. One of his three sons became a palace eunuch himself.[26]

The dynasty had had only three prime ministers; they were all executed by the dynastic founder. Since the last one had been put to death for treason, no one had ever again been appointed to that position. The employment of grand-secretaries to fill the gap involved a certain ambiguity. A grand-secretary was an accomplished literate, having won high placement at the Civil Service examinations and, as a result of his talents, sent on to the Han-lin Academy for advanced study. Once appointed grand-secretary at the Literary Depth Pavilion, his duties were confined to putting the emperor's declarations and rescripts into an elegant prose style. At the beginning it was never conceived that a grand-secretary would become a policymaker. Because of its long-term continuity, the influence of the office steadily expanded during the middle period of the dynasty. Yet, until the reign of the Chia-ching emperor, the present emperor's grandfather, in their limited capacity of providing counsel to the throne, the three to six grand-secretaries had still worked as a team. The monarch might see a senior grand-

secretary at more frequent intervals, but this did not demote the others to subordinate rank.[27] By the time Chang Chü-cheng became senior grand-secretary, however, he was indeed chief. The appointment of other grand-secretaries, all nominated by him, carried Wan-li's specific instruction to serve under Tutor Chang. This change undoubtedly sparked controversy.[28]

The essence of the constitutional arrangements and practices was that imperial power could not be delegated and in theory never had been delegated. But the principle could never have been enforced to the full, especially while the emperor was still a boy. Many years later Wan-li could laugh at the thought that his courtiers expected him to make his own decisions on numerous state issues when he was only twelve. At that time, if he remembered at all, he merely referred to Tutor Chang those instructions he had received from Big Companion Feng, and to the latter those rescripts drafted by Chang. That was why both of them were so indispensable. It would not have occurred to Wan-li that the close affiliation between the senior grand-secretary and the eunuch director in charge of the palace staff might also raise a controversial issue.

Despite the general misconception, eunuchs in Ming times could not be accurately labeled as domestic servants who rose to meddle in state affairs. It was true that every eunuch had to go through the process of self-castration before being selected to enter the palace, and for this reason eunuchs as a group usually gave an impression of being lowly born. But it would be a gross mistake to believe that none of them had achieved prominence by merit. Even during the reign of the first emperor, Hung-wu, eunuchs were frequently dispatched to tributary states as the sovereign's personal envoys and to the provinces as tax auditors.[29] After the middle period of the dynasty, their service as the emperor's personal secretaries had become essential to the palace operation, as by then several dozen memorials required imperial attention every day. Those papers were as a rule lengthy, with technical discourse mingled with doctrinal polemics. Even with careful reading, it was difficult to grasp the main issues and peripheral subtleties, not to mention the number of administrative terms and long lists of proper names. The Director of Ceremonies, who handled the papers, employed several senior eunuchs to examine these documents before reporting to the throne.

Few of the papers were held inside the palace or acted upon directly. The majority were dispatched to the grand-secretaries at the Literary Depth Pavilion for rescript writing. To sustain this process it was vital that the