

Four Seasons: A Ming Emperor and His Grand Secretaries in Sixteenth-Century China

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Aaron Throness

Department of History, The University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC, Canada V6T 1Z1
E-mail: aaronthroness@alumni.ubc.ca

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It was on January 23, 1567 that the Jiajing Emperor, who had ruled Ming China for 45 years, died. His reign had been a troubled one – from intense ritual disputes and frontier conflicts to bureaucratic discord and controversial officials, the political atmosphere was stifling. Jiajing’s withdrawal from public life, use of harsh punishments, and interest in Daoist alchemy provoked much criticism during his lifetime and marred his reputation in the minds of contemporary and later historians. Particularly in western sinology, Jiajing and his reign have long been cast unfavorably. The *Dictionary of Ming Biography* was markedly pessimistic, with Lienche Tu Fang describing Jiajing’s struggle in the Great Ritual Controversy and commitment to Daoism as destroying official careers and depleting dynastic fortunes (1976, p. 315). The late Frederick W. Mote (1922–2005) inveighed that Jiajing was “one of the most perverse and unpleasant men ever to occupy the Chinese throne” (1999; rpt. 2015, p. 668). The above sufficed as standard readings of Jiajing’s reign, which was given scant attention until the publication of the work under review. In 2016, John W. Dardess (1937–2020) revisited the Jiajing Emperor and his government in *Four Seasons: A Ming Emperor and His Grand Secretaries in Sixteenth-Century China*. The volume explores how Jiajing governed the Ming realm in cooperation with four different Chief Grand Secretaries and explores the pressing political, ritual, and military affairs of their times. It offers close views into the lives and careers of its subjects and allows for a reassessment of Jiajing, his reign, and the Grand Secretaries who served him.

The Grand Secretariat had by Jiajing’s time become a fixed institution in the Ming court. The Grand Secretariat emerged in the aftermath of the Hongwu Emperor’s (r. 1368–1398) decision to abolish the Prime Minister’s office in 1380, a decision which concentrated executive responsibilities overwhelmingly in the emperor’s hands. As the singular coordinator of civil and military institutions, Hongwu eventually sought to alleviate his onerous responsibilities and thus secured the secretarial assistance of Hanlin scholars. Hongwu’s successors also recognized that these responsibilities were far too burdensome for a single man to bear and, beginning in the Yongle reign (r. 1403–1424), increasingly relied upon Hanlin Academicians for secretarial aid. As the years went by, the Grand Secretariat and its Grand Secretaries became further regularized out of this arrangement and assumed a variety of critical governmental functions. These included conferring with and counseling the emperor on matters of state policy, screening memorials and documents intended for the emperor, drafting imperial rescripts in response to official petitions, and generally operating as intermediaries between the Ming throne and the bureaucracy. Under normal circumstances between three and four men would concurrently serve as Grand Secretaries; eventually their activities came to be overseen and coordinated by a single Chief Grand Secretary (*shoufu* 首輔) (Hucker 1995, pp. 72–73). In effect, by virtue of their proximity to the throne officials in the Grand Secretariat could exert a significant impact on both the emperor and the management of Ming government – no less was this the case during Jiajing’s reign. The officials who served Jiajing in these unique capacities drive Dardess’ narrative in *Four Seasons*.

Dardess’ volume follows the passage of four “seasons” – spring, summer, autumn, and winter – each representing a shift in the nature of Jiajing’s rule, the arrival of a different Chief Grand

Secretary, and the corresponding changes in their cooperative relationships as they managed Ming government. Dardess' coverage throughout includes the Chief Grand Secretaries' careers prior to their promotions, though, and is not limited exclusively to their incumbencies as Chief Grand Secretaries. This produces substantial temporal overlap between the chapters as they shift between the four bureaucrats and their paths to prominence.

Four Seasons opens with a chapter summarizing the circumstances which led to Jiajing's enthronement and the subsequent Great Ritual Controversy that engulfed the Ming court. At stake was whether or not Jiajing, who succeeded his heirless cousin Zhengde (r. 1506–1521), would induct himself into the Hongzhi Emperor's (r. 1488–1505) defunct line of descent. This path as set for him by officialdom required that he renounce ritual ties with his own parents. Jiajing gradually built up a base of support for his wish to maintain ritual ties with his natal parents, to the chagrin of officialdom at large, and crushed bureaucratic opposition in 1524. Readers interested in a more exhaustive investigation of these events and their ritual dimensions may turn to Carney T. Fisher's study *The Chosen One* (1990) as well as Chu Hung-lam's thorough review of Fisher's text (1994).

Zhang Fujing's 張孚敬 service in the Grand Secretariat between 1527 and 1535 marked the "spring" phase of Jiajing's reign. It was during this time that Jiajing energetically spearheaded comprehensive reforms of Ming China's ritual systems. Of particular note in this chapter is Dardess' portrayal of Jiajing: despite having defeated his opposition at the crest of the Great Ritual Controversy, Dardess shows the young emperor as being emotionally insecure, deeply committed to filial piety, and reliant on Zhang Fujing's support in governmental and family affairs. Dardess exploits private correspondence to illustrate their relationship as well as the informal functions required of the Chief Grand Secretary: "Zhang's role was to serve not just as a policy advisor, but also as Jiajing's writing instructor, life coach, and even his doctor and psychotherapist. Jiajing felt free to expose his ignorance, fears, and vulnerabilities to Zhang's gaze" (p. 50). Even so, Zhang's position was tenuous and his relationship with Jiajing sometimes strained, for he was dismissed and recalled on three separate occasions. Readers will find this chapter to be of particular interest, for Dardess reveals previously neglected aspects of the emperor's personality and adds a humanizing dimension to the highest echelons of Ming government.

The "summer" phase coincided with Xia Yan's 夏言 tenure in the Grand Secretariat between 1537 and 1548, which like Zhang's was punctuated by recurring cycles of dismissal and reappointment. Dardess shows that by this time Jiajing had stayed the emotional insecurities of his youth and mastered the instruments of rulership. As a mature man and experienced ruler, Jiajing demanded diligence and loyalty in the men that served him in the Grand Secretariat. Even as he retreated to West Park in the aftermath of a failed assassination attempt in 1542, Jiajing remained attentive to his executive responsibilities. As for Xia, he was a detail-oriented technocrat who excelled in ritual reform, military administration, and foreign relations. His aptitude for composing Daoist prayers (*qingci* 青詞) further impressed the emperor, whose devotion to Daoism deepened during the "summer" phase. And yet, Xia's increasing arrogance following his appointment to the Grand Secretariat in 1537 strained his relationship with the emperor. His neglecting of Jiajing's needs, careless conduct, and inability to find an interest in his position resulted in a series of dismissals and reappointments in 1539, 1541, and 1542, and despite his being redeemed Xia failed to mend his ways (pp. 124–28). And when plans to recover the Ordos region collapsed without warning in 1548, Jiajing showed Xia no mercy. Xia Yan was executed on November 1, 1548, thereby bringing an end to Jiajing's "summer" era.

Yan Song's 嚴嵩 promotion to Chief Grand Secretary, a post he held from 1548 to 1562, designated the "autumn" phase of Jiajing's reign. Ming government during this period experienced several important developments: first, Jiajing's deepening devotion to Daoism and its alchemy, as well as his intensifying brutality; second, the worsening of military crises along the southeastern seaboard and the northern frontier; and third, bureaucratic acrimony provoked by Yan Song's supposed tyranny and corruption. During his tenure in the Grand Secretariat, Yan has been depicted as enriching himself through bureaucratic corruption, usurping Jiajing's power, engineering the murder of his enemies, and poisoning the morale of Ming government. Dardess recounts the many indictments, of varying

quality and reliability, with which Yan and his son were charged and from which Jiajing shielded them. He finds Yan to have been a competent if corrupt administrator who enjoyed the emperor's confidence and shows that it was not Jiajing's contempt for him, but rather his son, which brought about their downfall. As for how Ming China survived 14 years of Jiajing's intensified cruelty and bureaucratic strife, Dardess argues that "a regime that tolerates corruption and suppresses dissent creates stability, not over the long term, but over the medium term" (pp. 219–20). This claim raises important questions: how detrimental an impact did Yan actually have on the Ming political system, then? How should we evaluate received historiographical interpretations of this period more broadly? Dardess' treatment of Yan's career encourages readers to reconsider traditional assessments of the man and his tenure.

The final season of Jiajing's rule, "winter," coincided with Xu Jie's 徐階 replacing of Yan Song and the revitalization of Ming government between 1562 and 1567. This was not the work of Jiajing, but rather of Xu. Jiajing was beset with misery during the final years of his life, and on several occasions wished to abdicate the throne. Xu, aside from staying Jiajing's spells of melancholy, restored decision-making powers in Jiajing's hands, released the Six Ministries from the Grand Secretariat's oversight, and opened the long-suppressed "avenue of speech" (*yanlu* 言路) in Ming government; he was respected by both ruler and bureaucracy. Readers interested in a more exhaustive account of Xu's political career are advised to read Dardess' book-length biography of him, *A Political Life in Ming China* (2013), as *Four Seasons'* coverage of Xu's Chief Grand Secretaryship is not thoroughly developed.

In ways explicit and implicit, Dardess illustrates the role of Chief Grand Secretary in Jiajing's reign as being fraught with political and personal tension. The complex demands of their position lay most clearly in their being caught between the throne and the outer bureaucracy, albeit without the institutional security of a Prime Minister: at once they had to impose the imperial will upon officialdom while also advocating officialdom's interests to the throne. This was a delicate balancing act, for allying with the outer bureaucracy could rouse the distrust of the emperor, resulting in dismissal or worse; allying with the throne could rouse the distrust of the outer bureaucracy, which could ruin the careers of those they opposed through impeachment and harassment. Seldom were Jiajing's Chief Grand Secretaries able to manage these competing interests, owing not only to inconvenient political realities, but also to their personalities, priorities, and preferred allegiances. Variables like these, as *Four Seasons* demonstrates, had a direct bearing on whether they succeeded or failed.

Zhang, a severe ideologue, tended diligently to Jiajing's political demands and emotional needs, even in spite of the rifts which occasioned his short-lived dismissals. Zhang's loyalty to Jiajing and attritional relationship with the outer court, however, made him many enemies in the bureaucracy, who went to great lengths to destroy him (pp. 73, 137). His successor Xia Yan excelled in detail-oriented administration and was a respected technocrat. Despite the inevitable conflicts that one would expect a Grand Secretary to encounter, arguably because of his lack of brazen factional convictions Xia was able to avoid many of the perils of partisan politics in the outer bureaucracy. However, his careless and offensive conduct exasperated Jiajing, who in turn ordered his execution during the throes of the Ordos controversy (pp. 137–38). As for Yan Song, he mollified Jiajing's needs and thereby secured his affection and protection. Yet, his corruption and perceived usurpation of imperial power aroused the hatred of many colleagues in the outer court, who persisted in their efforts to ruin him. Arguably, the stories of these three Chief Grand Secretaries are telling in that their failure to appease both throne and bureaucracy greatly strained their careers. In contrast to his predecessors, Xu Jie was the most effective at balancing these competing loyalties and thus appears to have enjoyed the most successful tenure. Xu's hosting of popular "group lectures" (*jiangxue* 講學); sustaining of ethical integrity by "extending the good conscience" (*zhi liangzhi* 致良知) in his personal and political life; and opening the "avenue of speech" allowed him to cultivate goodwill in the bureaucracy before and during his tenure in the Grand Secretariat. He was also attentive to Jiajing's needs, allowing him to secure his ruler's trust and respect (pp. 229–37, 260–69).

In sum, *Four Seasons* shows that during the Jiajing reign, Chief Grand Secretaries were captive to both the ruler they served and the bureaucracy they represented; more often than not, it was a combination of political acumen, emotional sensitivity, and the harmonizing of dual loyalties that decided

whether they succeeded or failed. That only Xu was able to succeed in these respects is telling of how challenging their task was. As Zhang Fujing himself lamented, among Grand Secretaries of earlier times “there were seldom any who were able to complete their lives without suffering disaster” 鮮有能善終者。¹ Jiajing’s reign did not prove to be much different.

One of *Four Seasons*’ strengths is Dardess’ overall circumspect treatment of Yan Song, who stands as one of the most reviled figures in Ming political history. Dardess acknowledges that trying to understand Yan as an individual “is not easy to do, given the hatred he came to provoke and the posthumous condemnation (for ‘villainy,’ *jian*) that was imposed upon him” (p. 146). In spite of the documentary distortions that have irreversibly scarred Yan’s reputation and frustrated attempts to ascertain his true character, Dardess has produced a thoughtful account of Yan’s activities in the Ming court and the Grand Secretariat. He shows Yan to have been a diligent and competent minister whose aversion to radicalism and preference for compromise characterized much of his career. Although Dardess does conclude that Yan (and his son, Yan Shifan 嚴世蕃) was indeed corrupt, he warns that “unfounded and dubious charges” were commonplace in the impeachments he accumulated (p. 205). He furthermore writes that the charge of treasonous conspiracy which brought down Yan Shifan, and which in turn ruined a disgraced Yan Song, appears unlikely and exaggerated at best (pp. 218–19). Yan Song’s reputation for villainy, and Dardess’ careful analysis, remind us of the caution that must be exercised in studying controversial Ming figures and the sources that malign them.

Dardess did not, however, leverage this opportunity to discuss Yan Song’s broader historiographical standing in western sinology. For instance, absent from *Four Seasons* are the works of the late Ming historian Kwan-wai So 蘇均燁 (1919–2005), who published a sympathetic biography for Yan in the *Dictionary of Ming Biography* as well as a comprehensive reassessment of the man in 1982. In the former text, So calls into question the veracity of primary sources like the *Ming Veritable Records* (*Ming shilu* 明實錄) that condemn Yan, given that they were authored by his political enemies. He also claims that Yan’s reputation fell victim to the general increase in Chief Grand Secretaries’ power during Jiajing’s reign, which invited the contempt of the bureaucracy. He attributes Yan and his son’s corruption to being common practice during their day and age, as well (1976, pp. 1586–591). So arrived at similar conclusions in the latter text, in which he argued that Yan likely exercised only limited power and was not culpable for the deaths of supposedly righteous officials, among other matters (1982, pp. 1–39). Kwan-wai So’s revisionist accounts of Yan Song, in essence, challenge the charges that have long tarnished the Chief Grand Secretary’s reputation, and instead portray Yan and his legacy as victims of partisan politics. At a basic level, Dardess and So’s findings agree in that Yan Song was competent and that allegations of corruption are problematic, even though So’s account is decidedly more sympathetic; however, in neglecting to include, assess, or further scrutinize So’s conclusions, *Four Seasons* overlooks an opportunity to further discussion of how the field should understand this controversial figure.

Four Seasons contributes a revision of the emperor himself, who has been the subject of consistent maligning in western sinology for his personal defects and methods of governance. Frederick W. Mote, beyond describing Jiajing as perverse, also argued that following his promising start he displayed neither interest nor respect for government, became consumed by his Daoist predilections, and overall stands as an “exemplar” of the “long procession of delinquent Ming emperors” (1999; rpt. 2015, pp. 663–68). Dardess himself, in an earlier work, similarly wrote that Jiajing “was not a good ruler” and that “it says something about the resilience of the Ming system that it somehow endured...forty-five years of cruel mismanagement by one of the most self-centered, self-indulgent, short-tempered, and humorless autocrats in the country’s history” (2012, p. 49). Kathlene Baldanza, citing these works in a recent monograph, remarked that following the rites controversy Jiajing “continued to be disengaged, vindictive, preoccupied with his personal pursuit of immortality, and a general pain to be around” (2016, pp. 91–92). In a word, western sinology has portrayed Jiajing as cruel and callous, being politically ineffectual and blinded by religious delusion. *Four Seasons* produces a more complex portrait that complicates these characterizations.

¹Sun Chengze 孫承澤, *Chunming mengyu lu* 春明夢餘錄 (1777), 23.28b.

To be sure, neither Dardess (p. 271) nor the present author seek to apologize for Jiajing's genuinely abusive excesses; conventional assessments are not without their merits. Nevertheless, *Four Seasons* allows for the complication of previous reductive treatments. As mentioned earlier, during Jiajing's early years on the throne, Dardess uses Zhang Fujing's confidential correspondence with the emperor to show the latter as being devoted to good governance, wary of dissipation, and emotionally insecure (pp. 47–57). Dardess also tempers Jiajing's reputation for despotism, showing him to have been reluctant to undertake thorough purges in the wake of political controversies (pp. 28, 174, 179). Moreover, a later encounter with his Grand Secretaries in 1540 shows a mature Jiajing to have been emotionally and physically exhausted by his imperial duties, and as being desperate to temporarily step down from the throne (pp. 181–82). And rather than deride Jiajing's devotion to Daoism, Dardess instead observes that said devotion seems to have been “deeply felt and genuine” and was attributable to his lifelong sensitivity to natural and supernatural forces. His Daoist engagements moreover touched on government matters, rather than the pursuit of immortality exclusively (p. 195). Distracting and costly as it was, Jiajing's Daoism was not insincere and thus should not be summarily dismissed. Finally, *Four Seasons* shows Jiajing during the final years of his reign as being wracked by despondency, again wishing to abdicate the throne. What Dardess accomplishes throughout this volume is not necessarily the complete rejection of former scholars' findings, but rather the contribution of multi-dimensional humanity to a misunderstood individual.

An exhortation Jonathan Spence offered to Qing scholars decades ago not only resonates with Dardess' treatment of Jiajing in *Four Seasons*, but also underscores the continued need for Ming historians to examine emperors as human individuals rather than impersonal extensions of the imperial institution. Biographies (*nianpu* 年譜), Spence wrote,

should show Chinese emperors, like their subjects, as mortals, trapped in time, as creatures of flesh and blood who had their physical and intellectual limitations, and had to function to the best of their abilities within a limited geographical area, using the tools presented to them and such further tools as their imagination might contrive (1967, p. 205).

Scholars like Ray Huang (1918–2000) have followed similar lines of reasoning to revise and humanize traditional accounts of the similarly maligned Wanli Emperor (r. 1573–1620), revisions which are now generally accepted in the field. *Four Seasons* takes another step forward in this direction, and will hopefully encourage students and scholars to continue where Dardess left off.

To conclude, *Four Seasons* is a welcome addition to the field of Ming political history. It intertwines the lives of Chief Grand Secretaries alongside that of the emperor they served, and situates them within a primary source-driven narrative that acquaints readers with how those in the highest levels of the Ming court managed their obligations. Its blending of psycho-analytical biography with politics pushes Ming history beyond impersonal abstraction and one-dimensional stereotypes; it further shows how forces of personality impacted careers and shaped Ming government through four and a half decades. Although it addresses with inconsistent depth matters of historiographical and analytical interest, *Four Seasons* will engage students and stimulate scholars. The field would benefit from further studies examining Ming emperors, their Grand Secretaries, and the seasons of government through which they passed.

Conflict of interest. The author declares none.

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The Belt and Road Initiative and the Future of Regional Order in the Indo-Pacific

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Kristin Waage and Petter Y. Lindgren

Norwegian Defence Research Establishment (FFI), Kjeller, Norway

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The rise of China is, perhaps, the single most significant development in world politics the past few decades. Its vast population, large economy, technological prowess, and military might make China only second to the United States. China's growing position changes the distribution of power in the international system, and therefore, the relatively stable and peaceful regional order in the Indo-Pacific is under serious strains. The old order was characterized by military dominance of the United States, a silent acceptance among all Indo-Pacific countries about this reality, and the symbiosis between security and economics. The enormous growth in China's economic, financial, and military capacities upsets this order.

China uses its fresh economic and financial muscles to increase its influence in the region and globally. One of the most notable manifestations of China's interest in shaping the Indo-Pacific region is the ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) – Xi Jinping's signature policy program. The BRI is predominantly a collection of infrastructure projects that radically expands China's connections westward to Central Asia on land and Southeast Asia, South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East along the sea. In fact, the BRI may end up being the largest attempt of connecting people, goods, services, and capital in human history, strengthening China's commercial and physical presence in continental and maritime Asia and reducing its maritime vulnerability. This massive infrastructure project spurs the questions of how neighbors and other countries present in the region will respond to China's investment activities and what the future of the regional order ultimately will look like.

In the anthology *The Belt and Road Initiative and the Future of Regional Order in the Indo-Pacific*, editors Michael Clarke, Matthew Sussex, and Nick Bisley with co-authors attempt to answer these questions. In a comprehensive and timely assessment of the BRI, the various positions and responses by the regional neighbors to the ambitious Chinese initiative, and its broader implications for the