



A Political Life in Ming China: A Grand Secretary and His Times

John W. Dardess

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This fascinating history uncovers the hidden political world of Ming China, exploring how the most powerful man in mid-sixteenth-century China steered the empire through the worst crises it had ever faced. Distinguished scholar John W. Dardess traces the life of Chief Grand Secretary Xu Jie (1503–1583), the leading politician-statesman in the China of his time. Drawing on years of research, Dardess uses Xu Jie's extensive letters to officials in the field and reports of conversations with the emperors he served to show just how difficult it was to defend the empire. His correspondence vividly shows how he organized its defenses and shepherded it through the twin crises of raids along the thousands of miles of continental and maritime frontiers in the 1550s and 1560s. The book traces his origins, his rise to power, and his engagement with the leading Confucian school of his time, that of Wang Yangming and his electrifying ethical teachings. Dardess describes how Xu used those teachings to build a following and leverage his way up the Ming bureaucracy. He shows how Xu was able both to suppress corruption and liberalize bureaucratic procedures. At the same time, the book highlights the psychological strain Xu suffered as a result and the vindictive and nearly lethal attacks directed at him after his retirement. Arguing that Xu was instrumental to the survival of the Ming dynasty through a long period of severe stress, Dardess tells his long-neglected story in rich and engrossing detail.

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