ABSTRACT

Zhang Ju-zheng (1525-1582): the Grand Secretary of Ming dynasty China has always been a subject of controversy. Historians have long disputed over the practical success of his political reforms, but more so over his moral character. This dissertation discusses the controversy in the light of Ming’s Neo-Confucianist political ideal, which holds that only the self-cultivated official can successfully govern the state. The root of the unending controversy over Zhang lies in the contradiction between his successfulness in statesmanship and decadence in morality. The inability of some historians to accept this paradoxical combination in one man led them to side with one aspect, and downplay the other. To critique Zhang accurately, one has to first accept the coexistence of these two seemingly irreconcilable traits in his person, and that the affirmation of one aspect need not lead to a denial of the other.

To balance the current academic inclination towards exalting Zhang’s political accomplishments while hiding or even denying his moral decadence, this dissertation focuses on tracing the moral decay of Zhang’s character through two distinct landmarks in his political career. The first landmark is Zhang maligning Duke Liao of plotting a revolt, an event that is often overlooked by historians of this day. From there, Zhang’s moral decay took the form of sporadic occurrences until the second landmark—the duqing event. This event was both a political and a moral crisis for Zhang. While Zhang managed to resolve the former, he failed completely at the latter. It also marked the watershed of Zhang’s corruption, where Zhang’s actual political administration began to noticeably depart from his original political ideal of a just and fair
system, and leading to widespread corruption across his personal political
network in the last five years of his life. Only when the commendation of
Zhang’s political success is viewed in the light of a rightful attention to
his moral failure can one accurately assess this controversial statesman in
his totality.