SYNOPSIS

The last emperor of the Ming dynasty, Emperor Chong Zhen (1610-1644) was an emperor quite different from last emperors. He was not condemned, as others did, for the loss of his country. Instead, he was sympathized by others, even his enemies, for his famous saying: "the emperor does not deserve to lose his country but the ministers are all that cause the country to fail." Because of the continuous deterioration of the political system since his great grandfathers’ time, the Ming dynasty was close to the brink of collapse. In the seventeen-year reign of Emperor Chong Zhen, he was hard working, thrifty and doing his best for the country. However, he failed eventually and lost his country. It was his bad luck. We would not deny that there are many fallacies in his character. He was over confident, suspicious, non-consultative, impatient and always rash to see immediate results. All these had great impact on his execution of his state policies, especially in the later period of his reign. It partly contributed to the fall of the Ming dynasty. We would say that in certain aspects we would sympathize with him while in other aspects he should receive severe criticism.
In the 350 years since the fall of the Ming dynasty till now, there have been lots of studies on the subject. Scholars on Ming studies would more or less touch on the appraisal of Emperor Chong Zhen. But owing to their studies done from different perspectives, the appraisal on Chong Zhen is still controversial. Some appraised the emperor from the angle of the inevitable objective environment while others held that the emperor’s blemishes in his character led to the fall of the empire. They all overlooked the interactive relation between the environment and the man himself. My thesis is trying to look at the emperor from the perspective of how the environment influenced the emperor, how his character was formed, and how, in turn, his character determined his execution of state policies. In such a way, I can appraise Chong Zhen, as a last emperor, more objectively and comprehensively.