

Chinese politics & policy

Tale of emperor whose ineptitude ended his dynasty unnerves Chinese censors

History book disappears from shops and online searches are blocked as Beijing strengthens control of information flows



Emperor Chongzhen, 17th ruler of the Ming Dynasty © History/Universal Images Group/Getty Images

Joe Leahy in Beijing YESTERDAY

A Chinese reprint of a book about an emperor who ran his realm into the ground before committing suicide nearly 400 years ago has abruptly disappeared from book shelves in China and searches for it have been censored online.

The Book *Chongzhen: the Diligent Emperor of a Failed Dynasty*, republished last month, recounts how the last emperor of the 1368-1644 Ming dynasty purged senior officials and mismanaged his kingdom before finally hanging himself on a tree outside the Forbidden City as rebels closed in on Beijing.

The blurb on the book's cover declares that the harder Chongzhen worked, the faster he brought about the collapse of the empire. "A series of foolish measures [and] every step a mistake, the more diligent [he was] the faster the downfall," it says.

China has long censored anything that could be used to draw parallels with current leaders.

Control of information has also increased under Xi Jinping, who has abolished presidential term limits and in March began an unprecedented third five-year stint in office.

But the disappearance of a reprint of a previously published book, which would have

been vetted by state propagandists before publication, is not common, publishers say.

This year, Beijing has become [particularly sensitive](#) about negative reports on its stewardship of the economy, which is still struggling to recover from Xi's severe Covid-zero policy during the pandemic that critics argue hit consumers and small businesses particularly hard.

The book on the former emperor is a reprint of a 2016 publication, which carried the less provocative title: *The Past of Chongzhen: The Final Scene of the Ming Empire* and was authored by the late historian Chen Wutong.

Searches for the reprint were censored on China's popular Weibo app.

Some users reviewing the original edition on a reading app, WeRead, complained about the move. "What exactly is there to fear? What's wrong with taking history as a lesson?" said one commentator in a post.

The cover art features a noose around the first character in Chongzhen's two-character name — a reference to his suicide.

China has a long history of trying to draw lessons from the stories of its emperors and Xi takes the study of the past very seriously himself, peppering his speeches with references to it, analysts say.

"I think he believes history has a pattern and it's meaningful and people have to get the right idea from it," said Kerry Brown, professor of Chinese studies and director of the Lau China Institute at King's College, London.

He said some people also drew certain parallels between Xi and the emperors of the past. "This fact that he's an imperial kind of figure and one of the ways of attacking him is through historic parallels," he said.

But he said the censorship of a relatively obscure history book, whose main problem was the blurb on the cover, probably was more of an indication of nervousness in the Communist party system at this moment as cadres tried to prove their loyalty.

"The functionaries quite low down, their default is go for the most cautious kind of response," he said. "You need a lot of knowledge to work out what was the sensitivity of this."

China's censors quickly remove anything that could be perceived as a slight to Xi, in 2017 even [blocking searches for Winnie the Pooh](#), the portly bear created by the English author AA Milne that some joked bore a resemblance to the Chinese leader.

The Financial Times visited chain bookstores in Beijing, including state-owned Xinhua bookstore, and several independent bookshops and was informed the book was unavailable in every branch. It is also unavailable on all online booksellers.

Employees at the headquarters of Sanlian Taofeng Bookhouse, one of the most renowned bookstores in China, told the FT no copies had been available since October 17.

The recalling of a recently released book is rare in China because of the stringent process publishers have to go through to get a title published, including repeated checking by censors.

The book's privately owned publisher, Dookbook, and its state-owned publisher, Wen Hui Publishing, did not respond to requests for comment.

The ministry of foreign affairs did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

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