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BOOK REVIEW

# *The Price of Collapse: The Little Ice Age and the Fall of Ming China*

## By Timothy Brook. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023. 256 pp. $29.95 (cloth)

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A decade ago, Geoffrey Parker's massive work *Global Crisis: War, Climate Change, and Catastrophe in the Seventeenth Century* alerted students of world history and of late-imperial China to the probability of "fatal synergy" between unusually cold temperatures and the human-sphere upheavals that often toppled states all across the northern hemisphere. Brook sets out to bring greater specificity and cogency to the relation between severe cold and the Ming demise, especially between the 1640s phase of the Maunder Minimum and the collapses of the Ming northern and southern capitals during the same period. As temperatures were not numerically chronicled in the seventeenth century, he turns to the best-chronicled proxy for severe cold in China's agrarian-based economy (and for the peculiar climatic accompaniment of that in East Asia, severe drought): the upward-leaping price of grain, especially rice. Using a wide variety of sources (mostly local gazetteers, which he has utilized so effectively on other subjects), Brook pursues two main aims in *The Price of Collapse*. One is "to understand what prices meant to the calculations and strategies of the people who had to pay them" (xi); the other is to "offer the [Ming] dynasty's fall … as the closing moment in a two-century-long sequence of subsistence crises" precipitated by climate change (x). The first aim is more satisfyingly fulfilled than the second.

The book begins with a demonstration of Brook's signature talent in giving voice to complex historical conditions through the testimony of actual persons with qualifying perspectives. Here it is Chen Qide, of the minor gentry in Tongxiang County, Zhejiang, who speaks to us of the disastrous price inflations he has experienced, especially during the Chongzhen reign (1628–1644). Brook then "scales up" Chen's observations to the dynastic level, "reconstructing the price regime in which he lived" (17). Chapters 1 and 2 are wonderfully informative in this respect, providing readers (in mercifully readable prose) with discussion of how price history can be constructed—or not—from culturally conditioned late-imperial sources, and with a defense of the correlation between climate fluctuation and price fluctuation. Having traced the gradual rise of prices, attributable largely to economic growth, since the beginning of the dynasty, Brook then focuses on the Wanli reign period (1573–1619) to establish a baseline regime of late-Ming prices from which to gauge the subsequent impact of Chongzhen-period price spikes. Students of Ming history will appreciate the insights provided on the social

significance of prices, that is, on the average prices of things that people in ascending social classes would typically buy, relative to their typical yearly incomes. Brook finds that the Wanli period "stands out from earlier eras in the sheer number of people who were obliged to rely on commercial relations to survive, creating a situation in which prices served vividly to mark the gap between rich and poor" (61).

Chapter 3, "Silver, Prices, and Maritime Trade," examines the question, "Did the silver flowing into the Ming [from Wanli through Chongzhen] so enlarge the supply of money … that it forced prices to rise?" Though digressive, this chapter offers fascinating information on the commodities and intercontinental price differentials that drove the maritime trade in silver bullion. Brook concludes that "the Ming economy was large enough … to absorb the arriving silver into its systems … rather than be destabilized," and that only the market in luxury items was plausibly inflated by the silver influx. It was the "global climate, not global trade," he writes, that "drove Ming grain prices to crippling levels" (104–5).

The last two chapters most seriously bring the "famine price" of grain, particularly during the "Chongzhen Slough" of frigid temperatures, into correlation with the fall of the dynasty. Here and in the Afterword, the book is least satisfying for two reasons: (1) Brook sets up the premodern, moralistic Chinese view of dynastic demise as a straw man against which to pit his argument about the relevance of climate change; and (2) while not asserting climate change as the sole cause of the Ming collapse, Brook tends to brush aside other factors rather than show direct connections between his preferred foci and those factors. Much is asserted by inference rather than by evidence—for instance, that the drought and cold in the northeast persuaded Nurhaci to invade Liaodong, or that the rebels from the northwest were driven by famine (132–33). Brook speculates at one point that the Manchus were better adapted to colder, drier climate (162), without considering that the conquering Qing armies consisted mostly of surrendered Ming soldiers, and that the whole, muggy south of China fell to their juggernaut. The relative paucity of references to extreme cold in primary sources is lightly explained away (160), whereas no mention is made of references to fields left untilled because of tax pressures, tenant revolts, conscription, requisition, rapine, and other insecurities.

While it may be informative for some readers to learn about how sharp deviations from various norms (such as price ranges) were traditionally interpreted as negative judgments from Heaven on the governing powers, arguments posed to present-day historians about dynastic failure must address institutions—ultimately military institutions. After all, the Ming was not a biological organism that died from hypothermia. It was a state system supported by armies which eventually were destroyed by the armies of rival state or proto-state systems, military organizations which somehow repeatedly outperformed those of the Ming under exactly the same climatic and crop conditions. Unless climate-caused grain scarcity can be shown to have undermined Ming military performance in decisive ways that did not apply (or apply as much) to its mortal enemies on the battlefield, we must content ourselves with—and be thankful for—Brook's very ably drawn *inference* that epochal cold and drought were major contributors to the fall of the Ming.