



# Review of *The Troubled Empire: China in the Yuan and Ming Dynasties*, by Timothy Brook

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Timothy Brook. *The Troubled Empire: China in the Yuan and Ming Dynasties*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010. Pp. 336. \$35.00 (hardcover). ISBN 9780674046023.

*The Troubled Empire* is Timothy Brook's contribution to the "History of Imperial China" series, of which he is the general editor. The series successfully fills the space between one-volume textbooks of Chinese history and the multi-volume and multi-authored *Cambridge History of China* series, offering readers a single-authored interpretive history of a dynasty-based period (in the case of Mark Edward Lewis's second volume in the series, it is the period between empires, the Northern and Southern Dynasties). I am interested in how Brook accomplishes this in his volume, for it invites us to reflect on how we think about, and teach, China's history.

The Yuan functions as a mirror for the Ming and as one bookend, but the other end is not really the Manchus' Qing Empire, it is the arrival of Europeans and their global view of the world. For Brook these are related: by giving up the Mongol multi-ethnic empire in favor of a smaller state for and of the Chinese/Han population the Ming set itself on a course that militated against accepting the Europeans as sharing in the sameness of a civilized people. The Manchus ultimately followed the Yuan model of multi-ethnic empire in regards to Inner Asia and they tried unsuccessfully to follow the Ming model in coping with the Europeans on the eastern coast.

Ming was troubled in many ways—Brook's account of repeated natural disasters ("The Nine Sloughs"), the diminishing reciprocity between ruler and ministers, the contradiction between the agrarian society-based constitution of Ming and the later commercialization of that society—but it is easy enough to show how Tang, Song, Yuan, and Qing were troubled as well. The real question to my mind is whether we are helped by thinking of Ming as an empire at all, despite the legacy of imperial rhetoric that was part of rulership. The turn away from multi-ethnic empire, whether by choice or necessity, was a return to a conservative view of the civilized state as being necessarily distinct from and exclusive of pastoral and aboriginal peoples, a view articulated by Sima Guang against the expansionist frontier policy of Wang Anshi and his successors in the late eleventh and early twelfth century and continued in Southern Song by Zhu Xi, Ye Shi, and others. When in 1487 Qiu Jun 丘浚 presented *Daxue yanyi bu* 大學衍義補 (*The Supplement to the Elaboration of Meaning of the Great Learning*), he drew at length on both Song literati writings and Ming Taizu's own views in arguing for keeping *Zhong guo* and foreign states separate, and against trying to "make all under heaven one family."<sup>1</sup> Ming's responsibility was for *Zhong guo*, which had its origins in antiquity. Zhu Xi, Qiu asserted, had set out the basic principle: "*Hua xia* is the land of the Central Country civilization (*Huaxia Zhong guo wenming zhi di ye* 華夏中國文明之地也)."<sup>2</sup> Ming was sandwiched temporally between two great multi-ethnic empires and in coping with the European states it confronted something harder to make sense of: economic and cultural expansion tied to state sovereignty in a multi-state world. And yet, as Brook shows in his marvelous discussions of cartography, the evidence that Ming was one state in a multi-state world was cartographically visible well before Ricci arrived with his round-earth map,<sup>3</sup> and in

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<sup>1</sup> Qiu Jun 丘浚, *Da xue yanyi bu* 大學衍義補, ed. Zhou Jifu 周濟夫 (Beijing: Jing hua chubanshe, 1999), chaps. 143-56, "Controlling the Yi di."

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 143.1236. I have not located the passage in Zhu Xi's works.

<sup>3</sup> The Ming founder's view of the world extended into the Pacific Ocean and across Eurasia to the Atlantic, as we know from a giant map (386 cm. x 486 cm) from 1389. Although the cartouches are in Manchu, the case for early Ming is strong. See Cao Wanru 曹婉如 et al., eds., *Zhongguo gudai ditu ji* 中國古代地圖集, vol. II, pls. 1-5.

his fine chapter on the South China Sea and the tensions between tribute and trade he shows that it was economically visible as well. But during the Ming the evidence at hand did not result in a widely-accepted retheorization of the imperial model. It did not in Europe at first either: Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) was still arguing against the divine right of kings based on their descent from Adam in proposing a new definition of sovereignty in *The Leviathan*. His younger contemporary Huang Zongxi (1610-1695) did offer a well thought through alternative in *Mingyi daifang lu* 明夷待訪錄 (*Waiting for the Dawn*) after the Ming collapse, but in vain.

Locating the Great State of Ming in a larger view space and time is one of the ways Brook goes about the task of writing this volume. Space and time also guide his account of what was taking place within Ming borders. Combining space and time brings together the different disciplinary interests of geography and history and of the map and the chronology as, respectively, their most basic tools. This is challenging because geography is weak on change over time, and thus tends to rest content with variation through space at a given moment, whereas history underplays variation through space, and thus tends to fall back on a narrative of central government politics. In representing spatial variation and temporal change cartographers and narrators have to decide on scale—is the most illuminating level of spatial granularity the county, the prefecture, the province? Should we periodize by major events, by reign periods, or some other temporal division?

Brook's "Scale" chapter is about space, more precisely about how the unifying state dealt with a large, diverse territory and the population that was distributed across it (through communications systems, field administration, etc.) and the ways in which regional diversity informed political consciousness (e.g. the north/south division). Brook is somewhat unusual in the attention he has given to geography and spatial knowledge in China's history, but all historians might ask how they would write such a chapter for their own periods. "The Nine Sloughs" shows how natural disasters (cold spells, droughts, floods, epidemics, etc.) may be used to punctuate history.

It is possible to analyze space and time from a perspective that treats the political as a second-order phenomenon. Adopting the physiographic perspective in the "Tribute of Yu" chapter of the *Documents* and G. William Skinner's physiographic macroregions we can conceive of Ming territory as composed of distinct regions, which were unequally developed and unequally represented in government, but which by virtue of their internal physical landscapes had an internal coherence. Physiographic macroregions are autonomous, although they have obvious implications for the development of cores and peripheries (i.e. socioeconomic macroregions) over time; they provide us with a means of thinking about space from the bottom up. We can then see the organization of field administration and the communication system as temporally-specific political responses to this landscape rather than creators of it. Are provinces an expression of a divide-and-conquer strategy or a rational territorial division aimed at maximizing the regional good? From this perspective natural disasters have their consequences most directly for those living within regional systems, and changes in regional economies have consequences for ability of local elites to pursue their transregional interests. However, from a central political perspective it may well be that disasters of similar magnitude that affect different regions are in some sense equal: they are alike in depriving the state of revenue and they create refugee crises and relief costs that effect many levels of government. It is hard to think geographically and politically-historically at the same time. (A GIS file of Skinner's physiographic macroregions

can be downloaded from the China Historical GIS website; they are also viewable together with many other historical datalayers from “ChinaMap” at <http://ec2-184-73-229-41.compute-1.amazonaws.com/chinamap/> at this writing and will be discoverable in the future as a webproduct of Harvard’s Center for Geographic Analysis).

It is inevitable I suspect that a periodization by dynasty encourages a political perspective. Dynasties succeed to the extent their policies respond adequately enough to the contexts in which they are founded and? establish a constitution that enables the political order to weather exogenous shocks from nature, invasion, and rebellion and the evolving consequences of their own institutional choices. Sima Guang held that a dynasty could last a thousand years with correct institutional management, and Brook cites officials who similarly thought that the state of society depended primarily on good administration. I do not think that Brook wants to be a captive of the political perspective, he is too much of a materialist for that, as his chapters on family, beliefs, and the “Business of Things” attest. Every single dynasty in China’s history did collapse, of course, but the confluence of circumstances that overwhelmed the institutional order was arguably unique in each case. But perhaps we should give more thought to the uncertainty of the founding, the time when it was still unclear that the new order would gain true purchase on the often chaotic situation it addressed and would reshape it.

There were important differences between Mongol and Ming rulership, a theme Brook explores in “Khan and Emperor,” but Zhu Yuanzhang and his ministers were also making choices about how they wanted to transform the social order. The narrative arc of Ming history, found in this work and much of Chinese and Japanese scholarship, is a story that begins with an autocratic agrarian state supported by a command economy and ends with a strong society supported by commercial expansion and a state that is trying to catch up. For Brook this is a time when “the economy of the Ming was cumulatively more prosperous than at any earlier time in Chinese history” (p. 128). Was the beginning of this story the result of politics, and thus choices made, or of making do given the world of the fourteenth century? Granting the prosperity of late Ming relative to early Ming, how can we demonstrate that late Ming was more prosperous (I am not sure what the qualification “cumulatively” implies) than any earlier period without first agreeing on the size of the population? And even then would this be true for all regions? Do we generalize from Las Cortes, who found the common people to be very poor in the far south (p. 128), or Fu Yiling and Evelyn Rawski who argued that prosperity trickled down in Jiangnan?

The chapter “Economy and Ecology” makes the argument, based on Yuan and early Ming population figures and grain tax receipts that the Ming doubled tax collection. The conclusion rests on the assumption that the grain tax occupied the same place in the Yuan and Ming fises. But the prosperity of southeastern China in Yuan continued to be driven by commerce, as it had been in Song when the grain tax occupied the lowest proportion of state revenues in all of later imperial history, and Yuan knew how to tax commerce. The commercial core was badly hurt by the late Yuan civil wars but there were still enough well-to-do families that Zhu Yuanzhang thought he could move them to poorer places where they would provide the backbone of the Village Tithing and Tax Captain system. Taken together with the other social policies of the Ming founding which, in my view, legislated self-supervising moral communities of farmers in the countryside, we see a conservative choice for social stability at the expense of the higher social (and political) risks that would come with supporting the revival of commerce in one

region. It does not surprise me that the founder's "Six Maxims" were lifted directly from Zhu Xi's exhortation to villagers on how to manage their lives. How we see evaluate both the early Ming and late Ming depends on our choice of temporal scale.

Some minor points. I would like to have known what implications Brook finds in the advent of publishing women's writings in late Ming, which continued through the Qing, in his discussion of the "lives of women." I would like to see a defense of highlighting Li Zhi in the section on "Moral Autonomy" in the "Beliefs" chapter. To treat Li as being about the "capacity of the individual to find his own way to the truth" assumes that Li believed there was "the truth" to be found. One might better argue that it was the lack of a shareable ethic that placed Li outside of the circle of those who were concerned with morality. If we say, in discussing "gentry society," that "it was just a matter of time until a group of families emerged to dominate local society as they dominated the exam system" (p. 149) do we perhaps beg the question of what kinds of families produced examination candidates? The idea that social space was flatter in Ming than in previous eras strikes me as true, but how does it follow that "to compensate...families sought strength by organizing themselves into larger kinship networks that shared resources" (p. 136)? Flatter space would mean there were fewer super-elite families. How does this explain lineage formation as a pervasive social phenomenon in the south? I know that the translation "colored-eye people" has somehow made its way into the literature on *semu ren* 色目人 but I am fairly sure it was used to mean all those from abroad who were classified in various (ethnic/tribal) categories but were not Mongols, necessary because at first the Mongols limited some position by ethnicity. The four-fold classification (Mongols, *semu*, Han, southerners) appears in texts relating to the examination system, which as Brook notes was relatively unimportant in seeking government employment. McDermott's list of private library collections in Song period Jiangxi lists 47 individuals with holdings of "10,000" *juan* or more, of whom 15 are said to have had more than 10,000 (including, 30, 40, and 50,000). This suggests that we need not agree that "no one in Song could reasonably hope to own 10,000 fascicles" (p. 199).<sup>4</sup>

These quibbles aside this is a book to read both for Ming history and issues of historical conceptualization. Timothy Brook's contributions to the study of China's history are many. I am a great admirer, and continue to benefit from his attention to the geographic and the local, from his interest in the actual lives of people, in the circulation of goods, in social practices, and in justice. He also is possessed of considerable literary gifts, weaving in stories from his extensive reading of Ming commonplace books (*biji* 筆記) that wonderfully illustrate his themes with particular people and events. (My favorites are the dishonest silversmith Guan Fangzhou in the "South China Sea" chapter and Wang Zhen's burial plot case in "Families.") He is always interesting and always informative.

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<sup>4</sup> Joseph P. McDermott, "Book Collecting in Jiangxi During the Song Dynasty," in *Knowledge and Text Production in an Age of Print: China, 900-1400*, eds. Lucille Chia and Hilde De Weerd (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 98-101.