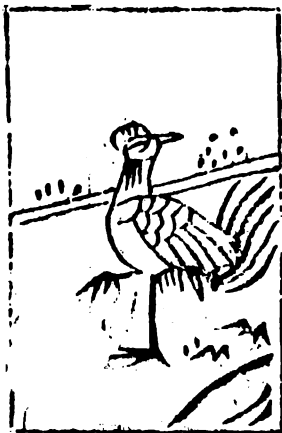


Introduction

Seasons of the Ming

(1609)



The Ming dynasty began with the peace of the winter season. Or so our late-Ming author (we'll leave him nameless for the moment) thought as he stood in the opening decade of the seventeenth century and looked all the way back to the fourteenth. The first half of the dynasty seemed to him the very picture of sensible order and settled life. "Every family was self-sufficient," he was sure, "with a house to live in, land to cultivate, hills from which to cut firewood, gardens in which to grow vegetables. Taxes were collected without harassment and bandits did not appear. Marriages were arranged at the proper times and the villages were secure." Men and women followed the time-honored division of household tasks, men in the fields and women at home weaving. (See figures 1 and 2.) "Deception did not sprout, and litigation did not arise." All as it should be.

A century before his own time, our author declared, the dynasty's winter of repose gave way to the bustle of spring. The sedate certainty of agriculture was edged out by the hotter speculative world of commerce: "Those who went out as merchants became numerous



Figure 1. This mid-Ming image of the classical subsistence ideal of men harvesting rice is contradicted by the presence of a managerial landlord holding a parasol, from whose perspective the picture is composed. The harvesters are not owner-cultivators but tenants or hired laborers (*Bianmin tuzuan*, 1592).

and the ownership of land was no longer esteemed. Men matched wits using their assets, and fortunes rose and fell unpredictably.” Polarizations of capability and class followed, with some families becoming rich and others impoverished. “The balance between the mighty and the lowly was lost as both competed for trifling amounts.” As the prospect of wealth fueled avarice, the moral order that had held society together gave way. “Each exploited the other and every-

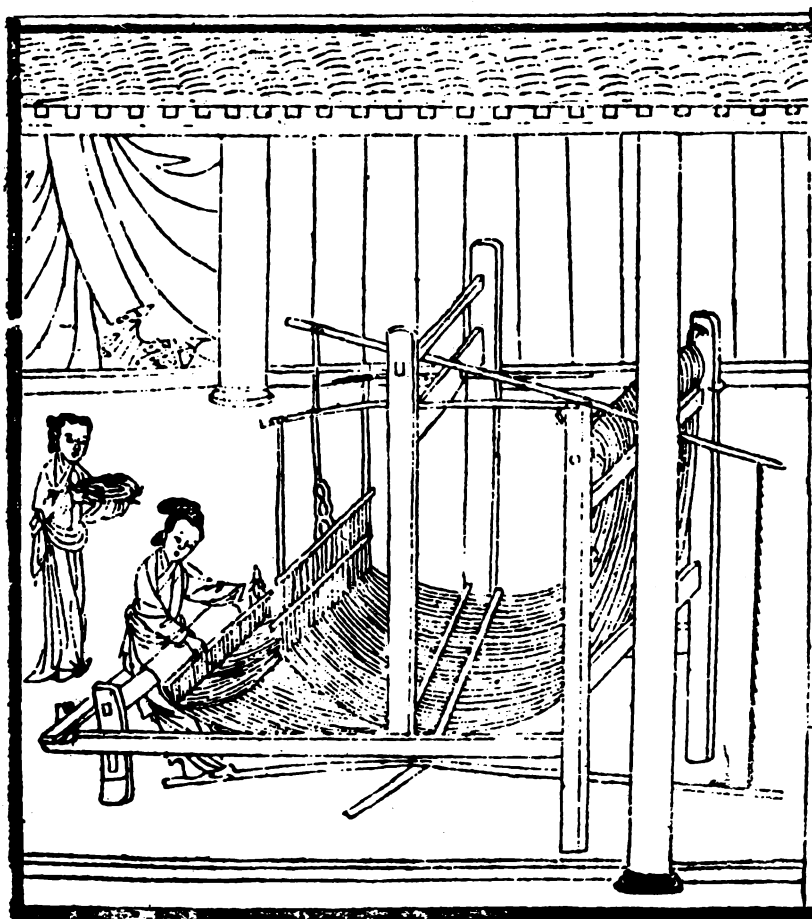


Figure 2. A matching image pictures the ideal of women working at textile production within the home. It too is rendered unreal by the elegant setting in which the weaver and her assistant are placed. The ideal of unity of labor within the household largely disappeared in the Ming as textile production became commoditized (*Bianmin tuzuan*, 1592).

one publicized himself.” In this evil climate, “deception sprouted and litigation arose; purity was sullied and excess overflowed.”

The chaotic growth of the spring season of the Ming proved mild compared to what came after. In the frantic press of the dynasty’s summer starting in the latter half of the sixteenth century, “those who enriched themselves through trade became the majority, and those who enriched themselves through agriculture were few. The

rich became richer and the poor, poorer. Those who rose took over, and those who fell were forced to flee. It was capital that brought power; land was not a permanent prospect." The agricultural base of society was abandoned. In its place "trade proliferated and the tiniest scrap of profit was counted up. Corrupt magnates sowed disorder and wealthy racketeers preyed." As moral rot crept in, "deception reached the level of treachery and litigation led to open fights; purity was completely swept away and excess inundated the world."

Our author completed his narrative of the seasons of the Ming with the world of his own adulthood since the 1570s. The face of Ming society was ravaged in the fall. "One man in a hundred is rich, while nine out of ten are impoverished. The poor cannot stand up to the rich who, though few in number, are able to control the majority. The lord of silver rules heaven and the god of copper cash reigns over the earth," he declared. "Avarice is without limit, flesh injures bone, everything is for personal pleasure, and nothing can be let slip. In dealings with others, everything is recompensed down to the last hair." His vision of descent into actuarial frenzy was apocalyptic. "The demons of treachery stalk," he warned. "Fights have turned to pitched battles; pounding waves wash over the hills; torrents flood the land." The sole remedy for this grim state of affairs was to "establish policies to close the gates and prevent the merchants from traveling about." But our author sensed that this remedy was impossible. All he could do was lapse into despair and offer up the standard sigh of vexation in classical Chinese when everything is going wrong: "*Juefu!*"¹

This account of Ming time comes from the 1609 gazetteer of Sheh county.² Sheh was an inland county perched in the picturesque, hilly region south of Nanjing. Its gazetteer of 1609, a locally produced publication that recorded information concerning the official life and history of the county, was its first. Sheh was slow off the mark to produce a gazetteer. Most Ming counties already had one edition, if not several, by this time. Sheh's backwardness here is striking in light of its enormous reputation as the home of some of the wealthiest merchants of the age; but then, merchants were beyond the social pale of many of the gentry who wrote the gazetteers.

The man wielding the pen was the centrally appointed county magistrate, Zhang Tao. Shortly after arriving in 1607, Zhang opened discussions with the local gentry about compiling a gazetteer.

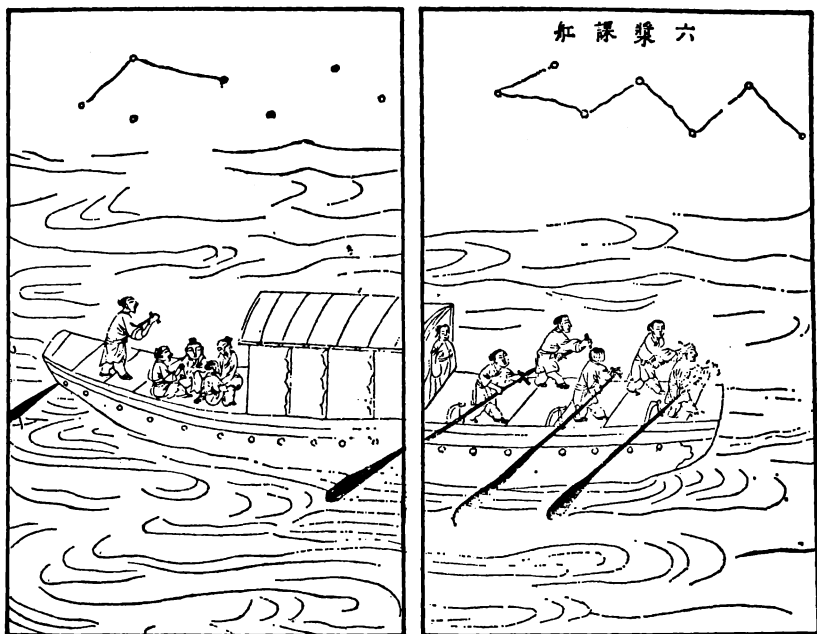


Figure 3. This six-oared river boat is of the type Zhang Tao might have taken down the Yangzi River to reach his post in Sheh county (*Tiangong kaiwu*, 1637).

An editorial board was set up, compilers were commissioned the following year, and by 1609 the manuscript was finished and the woodblocks cut. Although it was conventional to name the magistrate as editor-in-chief, even when he did nothing, the Sheh gazetteer was very much Zhang's book and a record of his personal views. Lest there be any doubt, he marked his editorial comments dotted throughout the gazetteer with the slightly immodest byline, "Master Zhang Tao says." One of these is the essay we have just perused on the seasons of the Ming, which appears as a commentary closing the chapter on "local customs."³ This section was where the compiler could comment on local attitudes and practices and note "whether the people are hard or pliant, lethargic or agitated, . . . what they like and dislike, what they take and discard, whether they move or stay in one place."⁴ Since locals wanted to put the best face on their home county, in this section matters might be raised that were potentially controversial, as we shall see.

Zhang Tao is a minor figure in Ming history. In the bulky official

history of the dynasty his name comes up only once.⁵ But we can piece together something of his story from the gazetteers of Sheh and his home county of Huangpi, some 500 kilometers up the Yangzi River. Huangpi was in the hinterland of Wuchang, the great interior marketing center where the Han River flowed into the Yangzi, yet it was slow to be swept into the commercial stream. Huangpi in the mid-Ming was known as a quiet backwater where "the people all devote themselves to agriculture and sericulture and few go off on commercial travel." Women were almost never seen outside the home but stayed indoors from morning till evening spinning and weaving. In Zhang's youth, however, the county was coming under influences that the local gentry regarded with suspicion. "In recent years," according to the 1591 county gazetteer, "local customs are gradually weakening. A family without as much as an old broom go about in carriages and on oramented mounts and dress themselves up in the hats and clothing of the rich and eminent." Despite the poverty of the region, "in all things style now substitutes for substance."⁶

We cannot say when Zhang Tao was born into this slowly changing world. All we know of his origins is that his father, regarded as a paragon of filial piety, studied medicine to help the local people and provided the poor with free coffins. The first sure date in Zhang's biography is 1586, the year he passed the highest examination in Beijing and gained the title of *jinshi*. Unless he was exceptionally brilliant or lucky, he was probably not much under thirty when he passed his *jinshi*. This would put his birth about 1560 or slightly earlier.

His first posting was a three-year magistracy far up the Yangzi River in Sichuan province. His work there won him a strong promotion to Beijing as a supervising secretary in the Office of Scrutiny for Works. This post invested in him the power to investigate official corruption. Zhang was too outspoken. According to his one appearance in the official history, he joined the chorus of critics who attacked the mild-mannered Chief Grand Secretary Zhao Zhigao (1524-1601). Zhao Zhigao was already in his seventies when he became chief grand secretary and struggled feebly to hold to the power that his great predecessors, like the fiscal reformer Zhang Juzheng (1525-82), had concentrated in the post. Junior officials such as Zhang Tao were dead set on preventing Zhao from wielding the sort of autocratic power his predecessor had so conspicuously enjoyed in the 1570s. The official history does not give the date or

substance of his attack; Zhang Tao is simply a name mentioned in passing. Falling afoul of the power brokers who dominated Beijing politics, Zhang had no choice but to retire to Huangpi. He spent the next fifteen years at home writing and staying out of politics.

When the court reversed the verdicts on the young activists who had spoken out in the 1580s, Zhang was called back to public life. His first assignment in 1607 was the magistracy of Sheh county. The county was in famine when he arrived. Punishing spring rains had washed away crops earlier in the year. Zhang watched the price of rice as a barometer of the disaster, and when it rose to .13 tael (a tael is roughly equivalent to an ounce of silver) per *dou* (10.74 liters), he released grain stocks in the county granary to moderate that price and ordered the wealthy of Sheh to buy grain from elsewhere and sell it below the market rate. As a result of his efforts, no one starved to death. Once the immediate crisis passed, he turned to dike-building to prevent further flooding. The investment proved wise, for rain would inundate the region in the following years without causing major distress in Sheh.⁷

Zhang Tao also invested in symbolic resources. That same year he restored the county's leading academy honoring the great Song philosopher and native son Zhu Xi (1130–1200); he built a pagoda on a hill deemed to have geomantic influence on the success of local sons in the civil examinations; and he restored two shrines, one to virtuous former officials and another to a local paragon of filial devotion. Shrines, academies, and pagodas symbolized the values of self-cultivation, reverence, and virtuous action that Zhang was committed to nurturing in his program of renovating local customs. Zhang also recognized the need for building practical incentives into his moral program and reformed the service levy that furnished the county office with corvée labor for maintaining local infrastructure, particularly the state courier service. His appreciative biography in the 1771 county gazetteer closes with the observation that “over his two years’ residence, styles shifted and customs changed”⁸—precisely what Zhang aspired to achieve. He would have been pleased by this judgment.

As soon as Zhang's work began to take effect in Sheh, he was promoted out of the county and back to Beijing. His career went upward through a succession of posts in the capital and culminated with his appointment as governor of Liaodong, the Ming bridgehead in the northeast that would fall to the Manchus in 1644.⁹ Zhang

held this appointment in the second decade of the seventeenth century, prior to the Manchu annexation of the region in 1621.¹⁰ He then retired from service and spent the remainder of his life at home in Huangpi county, where he enjoyed a local reputation for his wide experience and erudition. He lived at least until the late 1620s.

Zhang Tao was critical of his time, but he was also of his time. When he attacked the chief grand secretary, he acted not as a lone crusader but as someone who shared the commitments of his contemporaries to limit the power of that post. So too, when he attacked commerce in the Sheh county gazetteer, he voiced anxieties that disturbed others in the reform-minded but conservative wing of his generation. What sets Zhang Tao's diatribe against commerce apart from similar texts by his contemporaries is its extreme tone—which is why it caught my attention. I have ended up writing this history of the Ming dynasty in order to understand *his* history of the dynasty and why it made sense to him. By engaging in a dialogue with someone four centuries in the past, I have sought to write in some small part from inside the Ming world, using Zhang Tao as my guide.

Zhang read the history of the Ming as an inexorable fall. The dynasty had descended from the fixed moral order imposed by the dynastic founder, Emperor Taizu of the Hongwu era (r. 1368–98; also called the Hongwu emperor), toward a thoroughly commercial, and, in his eyes, morally debased, society. Commerce—personified in the evil figure of the lord of silver—is fingered as the culprit that reduced a once settled China to a world of anarchic motion where commerce set people traveling, imaginations soaring, and taboos tumbling. By allowing consumption to drive production, commerce disrupted the moral solidarity that Zhang believed obtained in pure agrarian social relations and fueled a competition that dissolved communal norms.

Zhang Tao's interpretation accepted the Hongwu emperor's claim that, by intervening in the lives of his people in thorough and often harsh ways, he was resurrecting the ancient Daoist ideal expressed in the passage from the *Daode jing* quoted on the opening page of this book. The Hongwu emperor believed that closed rural communities ruled by a little elite would restore order to a troubled realm and bring a lasting stability to his dynasty. Having lived through a childhood of intense poverty—he lost his parents in a famine, survived in a monastery until the monks were too poor to

feed him, and then went begging—the Hongwu emperor regarded the idea of living and growing old in one's home village without ever going to the next, only a dog's bark away, as a heaven he had never known. As emperor he would do anything to bring that heaven down to earth. No matter that this ideal was, as we shall see, a nostalgic fiction written onto a reality more mobile and commercialized than either the Hongwu emperor or Zhang Tao was willing to admit. The emperor enjoyed enormous coercive and communicative means to impose his vision of order, and was moderately successful in doing so. His descendants were less energetic in their efforts and ultimately less committed to his goals. By Zhang Tao's time, the Hongwu vision—one part arcadian and two parts draconian—had attenuated to nothing more than a textual memory with little purchase on daily life. For Zhang to reimagine this vision was only to compound his and the emperor's nostalgia.

In terms of Zhang's understanding of what was at stake for Chinese culture, the vision's fictionality doesn't matter. Nor does it matter that he may not have grasped the larger trends that we now see and emphasize in our analysis: that China's population more than doubled through the dynasty; that merchants were drawing producers and consumers into regional and national commercial networks that neither could do without; that exports were luring Japanese and Spanish silver into the Chinese market and helping to lubricate the economy; and that the new wealth was affecting the ways in which information was circulating and knowledge being recorded. Zhang saw only a harrowing contest of rich against poor, traders against plowmen, profit against virtue. The analysis left him powerless, and feeling so. All he could do was lament, and in lamenting give us clues for tracing the contours of his world.

Not everyone at the time agreed with Zhang's grim evaluation of the changes overtaking the Ming. Zhang acknowledges the local unpopularity of his views in a dedicatory text to the City God of Sheh, in which he declares that he wrote the gazetteer with "an upright pen" and carried out the work with "an icy heart and an iron face."¹¹ He implies that he had been pressured to change his text and had refused. What had people objected to? His report to the deity is too tactful to say, though most likely it was his condemnation of the commercial environment of the county. Local unhappiness with Zhang Tao's pronouncements in the 1609 gazetteer meant that a replacement edition appeared in 1624, just fifteen years later

(the customary interval was sixty). The magistrate who edited the 1771 edition of the Sheh gazetteer called the 1624 version “a work of reconciliation.” He conceded that Zhang’s 1609 gazetteer was “in form closest to true history and extremely informative.” But he found the “pronouncements on public affairs strident and discordant.” Zhang’s comments about the lord of silver he regarded as “verging on impropriety and lacking in restraint.”¹² The good merchants of Sheh still rankled from the sting of his words.

Zhang Tao’s attack on silver is prescient. Silver may have been only a symbol for Zhang of the money-madness of his time. Yet silver was indeed flowing into China from Japan and the Spanish mines in South America to pay for Chinese exports just at this time. Its impact was mildly inflationary, stimulating the circulation of commodities and contributing to the social effects that so distressed Zhang. But silver no more explains the growth of Ming commerce than does moral decline. It was but one factor feeding and stimulating an economy that was already well commercialized before Zhang was born, if he had only known it. The lord of silver didn’t just arrive in China unbidden. He was drawn in and absorbed by an economy that had already developed considerable commercial capacity before the Spanish mined the mountain of Potosí and the French sent Nicolet to find a northwest passage.

The Ming became a commercial world, not only despite the restoration of agrarian order that the Hongwu emperor put in place at the start of the dynasty, but as well because of it. The economic purpose of Hongwu’s restrictions on mobility was to increase agricultural production. In this he succeeded. Enhanced production resulted in surplus that went into trade, and the regular circulation of surplus encouraged a move from surplus-production to commodity-production. At the same time, Hongwu’s investments in communicative means to supply his armies and move his personnel (Zhang Tao must have covered at least 20,000 kilometers on official service) contributed to improvements in infrastructure that allowed commodities to circulate more easily. Merchants’ cargoes flowed along the same canals as tax goods, and commercial agents traveled the same roads as government couriers, even with the same printed route guides in their hands. The Ming state provided a push to movements of people and goods—and as well of ideas and statuses—that market pull accelerated. Commercialization was not a simple U-turn from the state-dominated system of communication and

state-sponsored self-sufficiency that Hongwu envisioned, but a consequence of them.

Commerce had distinctive social and cultural effects, for mobility and wealth altered and upset the expectations of most people, especially gentlemen like Zhang Tao. These effects are what interest me, and making sense of them—by following a trail from communication to commerce to culture¹³—is the intention of this book. What you are about to read is therefore a cultural rather than economic history of the Ming. Our knowledge of the economy is still too crude to undertake the latter. We are not yet near deciphering the close shifts and reversals of the sort identified in the economic history of medieval Europe. The broad brushstrokes in this book—tracing what looks like a progressive and unstoppable expansion of commerce from the late fourteenth to the mid-seventeenth century—paint out disruptions, countertrends, and regional variations we have not even learned how to detect. But the larger landscape of relentless commercial intensification and the growing unease it imparted to the people of Ming China is clear enough to let us proceed.

The thoughts that Ming people have left behind in their gazetteers, essays, epitaphs, and letters of the period make possible this account of how the experience of being Chinese changed over the dynasty as the economy excited new desires to consume and to seek pleasure. The excitements and confusions that Ming observers felt may strike us today as merely quaint, as curious cultural footnotes to China's ascent to the natural order of things. But that would be to neglect the claims of history. The reader's task will be to remember that Ming China was another place and time, a world and an era in which our assumptions, whether Chinese or Western, do not obviously apply. Their problems and delights with material civilization may not be ours, and ours may have nothing to do with theirs. We must listen for their fears and expectations, bearing in mind that when men like Zhang Tao complained, they could never have guessed that we would be listening to their despair.

The Ming was not the first time Chinese struggled with the confusions of pleasure. Tension between social stability and economic growth has been for Chinese a recurring anxiety for at least a millennium if not two, and it animates debates within the culture even today. Despite the continuity of concern, some things were different this time around, among them the changes in the world economy. As the Ming economy grew, Europeans were developing both

the technical capacity to sail beyond Europe and the bullion stocks necessary to buy their way into that market. But the world economy was not yet centered on Europe in the sixteenth century. It would be centuries before the West reversed this interaction between Chinese production and European consumption with the power of technology and the drug trade. While it has become conventional to declare that “China under the Ming was losing her autonomy and becoming dependent on a world system not of her making,”¹⁴ I would prefer to put the situation the other way round. Rather than saying that “the Chinese economy was ebbing with the tide of the Atlantic,” we should think of the tide of the Atlantic as being pulled by the Chinese moon. If Europeans were striving to construct a place for themselves in the world economy, it was toward China that they were building.

Zhang Tao was not concerned with cycles beyond his dynasty or worlds beyond his own. His concern was solely with the Ming dynasty, and he pictured its rise and fall as an arc of four seasons. I have adopted his cyclical metaphor in structuring my narrative so as to capture some sense of how Ming Chinese thought about the temporal dimensions of the world they inhabited. They knew nothing of centuries (their larger unit of time reckoning was the sixty-year cycle), nor of the feudal, imperial, or late imperial periods that jostle for academic priority in China studies today.¹⁵ What they did know is that they lived in a dynasty, that dynasties rose and fell, and that their dynasty was just as subject to the cycle of growth and decline as the rule of every other family on the Chinese throne had ever been. The particular alignment Zhang Tao makes between this cycle and the turning of the seasons from winter through fall was not conventional thinking. It was his own way of capturing the swell of change. Having no good reason to quadrisect the Ming, this book makes do with three phases of approximately equal centuries arranged in three long chapters: a beginning (winter), a middle (spring), and an end (summer), with each season starting or ending arbitrarily at midcentury.¹⁶ To complete Zhang’s metaphor, I evoke his final season, autumn, for a brief concluding chapter in which the dynasty is destroyed and the resilience of his claims tested.

In this text, he will fail. Even though Zhang Tao did not survive to witness the collapse of his dynasty, he saw himself at the end of things, trapped in a decadent era with nothing further to do or discover. Many in the late Ming shared Zhang’s keen disappointment at having to live in declining times. Yet the social elite that went

tragically into the crisis of dynastic collapse will be shown at the end of this book to reemerge, resting on broader bases of social power and solidly in control once again, decadence spent and order reimposed. In drawing such conclusions, we may have to cut our cranky guide to the Ming adrift in his nostalgia for an order that had to fade and a time that was never quite as he dreamed it. Until then, we will keep him with us. If the things he detected seemed real enough to him, we must find out why.