

Ian Matthew Miller. *Fir and Empire: The Transformation of Forests in Early Modern China*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2020. 296 pp. \$40.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-295-74734-7.

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Published on H-Environment (May, 2021)

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Fir and Empire is the first English-language monograph on early modern Chinese forestry. Expanding on the work already begun by Chinese and Taiwanese scholars, Ian M. Miller uses a reading of an impressive range of gazetteers and other primary sources to create a work that is of value not only to historians of China, but also to environmental historians writ large. To those of us who happen to inhabit both fields, it is a most welcome addition.

Miller's work details forest management practices in South China from around 1000 to 1700 CE. In so doing, he offers an important corrective to Mark Elvin's *Retreat of the Elephants: An Environmental History of China* (2004). Up until now, this multimillennial survey has provided the dominant narrative for understanding the human impact on Chinese environmental change, in particular with regard to forest cover. Elvin argues that China experienced a "Great Deforestation" over the entirety of its history due to the expansion of human activity. The intensity of this deforestation increased during the medieval period when commercial activity increased, leading to the decimation of suitable woodland habitat for large mammals, such as the Asian elephant, across Chinese territory.

Miller does not dispute this narrative of the loss of old-growth forests, and with it the ele-

phants and rhinoceroses that once inhabited coastal China. However, as Paul S. Sutter's compelling foreword points out, Miller's work shows that China experienced a "Great Reforestation" in its stead (p. x). This reforestation movement was largely the result of independent tree farmers, who took advantage of the Chinese state's retreat from governing woodlands to plant trees that would supply the empire's (and the public's) continual demands for timber. Contrary to what Elvin might have us imagine, southern China was actually lush with woodlands cultivated largely by local entrepreneurs.

This aspect of Miller's argument holds the most interest and relevance to scholars whose focus is outside of China. Academic studies of forest administration in Europe and East Asia have primarily focused on state-directed bureaucratic and scientific management practices. The state is hardly absent from *Fir and Empire*. Yet for most of the time period Miller studies the state does not play the defining role in forest management. The title of this work is quite misleading in this regard.

Chapter 1 states that although there had been "self-conscious forms of forest oversight" as early as the Qin Dynasty (221-207 BCE), Miller finds these ended around the time of the Northern Song's retreat from Jurchen invasion in 1127 CE (pp. 22-23). From the twelfth to the seventeenth

centuries, the “empire” was present as a consumer of timber products, tax collector, tariff levier, and codifier of property rights. In other words, the state was no more of a presence in woodlands than it was in managing other forms of private land use. The rise of a private market that “profited from scarcity” (p. 18) ended up achieving the “Great Reforestation” that made eighteenth-century Western travelers marvel at South China’s greenery (pp. 3-4).

Miller devotes the remaining chapters of *Fir and Empire* to more detailed analyses of the origins and maintenance of this privatized system of woodlands management. Chapters 2 and 3 highlight the ways in which the Song, Yuan, and Ming states actively fostered the transformation of woodlands into a commercial economy. Chapter 2 describes the process by which woodlands went “from open, common-access landscapes into exclusive property” (p. 38) through government land surveys and taxation. Chapter 3 demonstrates that the Yuan and early Ming Dynasties expanded the number of households whose taxable economies under the corvée labor system were devoted to forest labor. This included activities such as hunting and woodcutting. Later in the Ming Dynasty, reforms to this system allowed for the slow but steady transformation of forest labor into commercial labor (p. 19).

Miller begins to describe the exact nature of this commercial economy in chapter 4, which focuses on the innovative practices of Huizhou timber merchants. He finds that by the mid-sixteenth century absentee shareholders held partial stakes in numerous timber plots, thereby diversifying their risk in case any single plot be lost to disease, fire, or theft (p. 86). In other words, not only was timber part of a vibrant commercial economy, but it served as the basis of an early modern stock market.

Chapters 5 through 7 describe the relationship between this vibrant commercial economy and the Song, Yuan, and Ming states. Chapter 5 will be

of special interest to environmental historians of Europe. It details the functioning of the tariff timber system, which worked both to secure each dynasty’s timber supply as well as oversee the market economy. Miller argues that European states such as Spain, France, Holland, and England took an active role in managing domestic timber and gaining logging colonies due to the fragmented nature of European woodlands and trade routes. China, by contrast, had large contiguous forestland and easily navigable waterways, which disincentivized the state from taking a direct managerial role (p. 98). As chapters 6 and 7 show, Chinese states were able to rely on a commercialized economy to undertake large-scale projects, such as the construction of large navies (chapter 6) and palaces (chapter 7). These chapters are accompanied by several striking images, such as a detailed rendering of the individual components of a warship (p. 136) and floating logs traveling through rapids (p. 151).

In short, Ian M. Miller has provided both historians of China and the environment with valuable new perspectives and a wealth of information. I highly recommended it for use by scholars in both fields.

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Citation: Larissa Pitts. Review of Miller, Ian Matthew. *Fir and Empire: The Transformation of Forests in Early Modern China*. H-Environment, H-Net Reviews. May, 2021.

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