
**Reviewed by** Javier Poveda Figueroa (Universitat Autonoma de Barcelona)

**Published on** H-Environment (February, 2022)

**Commissioned by** Daniella McCahey (Texas Tech University)

Meng Zhang has written an interesting book about commerce of timber during the Qing period in the late Chinese Empire. Her book *Timber and Forestry in Qing China: Sustaining the Market* explains the relationship between commerce, the economy, and the environment during the time the Quing dynasty ruled the empire. Zhang’s work explores how the Chinese state related to timber production. Furthermore, the author presents a view that transcends the dichotomy between free market and state regulation. To achieve her purpose, Zhang mixes economic and environmental history, resulting in an original argument about forest management and timber trade in the East Asian region. Zhang’s work is comparable to Conrad Totman’s *Green Archipelago* (1989) and David Fedman’s *Seeds of Control* (2020). While Totman and Fedman studied Japan, Zhang reviews the history of China. To write her five-chapter book, Zhang used several types of documents related to commerce and state institutions such as transit tax documents, regulations enforced by trade associations, and court filings and rulings.

Zhang focuses on the importance of timber for the economy of the Chinese Empire. Timber was the most important resource for construction. For that reason, Zhang makes the analogy between timber and concrete because the latter is used today as the main good for construction. During the time of the empire, timber was used for constructing buildings such as temples, theaters, and guild chambers. In that context, the author seeks to answer two important questions to explain how the imperial timber trade system worked: How did the empire sustain a reliable supply of timber over several centuries, and how did it sustain a business network that spanned more than a thousand miles? Posing these questions enables Zhang to explain the relationships between the public sector and private interests in the process of timber commerce. Furthermore, she analyzes the relationships between ecology and human activity, focusing on the relationship between the market and ecology. Those issues are explained in three topics: the supply chain and the making of the Chinese timber market, resource management, and commerce and government.

The first two chapters of Zhang’s book shows how the Chinese timber market came into existence. Moreover, those chapters explain the timber supply chain system. Zhang notes that timber was an important good since the beginning of the empire. She describes the settlement of several different groups in various parts of Chinese territory
such as Jiangnan. Those settlements required timber for building their cities. For that reason, forests were the places for obtaining the timber necessary to build those cities. The most interesting example of this case is the Ming dynasty because the emperor decided to move the capital of the empire from Nanjing to Beijing. The need for timber to build the new city was problematic because the timber necessary to build the capital produced problems of deforestation. In order to control that problem, the Ming dynasty introduced different rules for controlling the market, practices, and institutions that affected forest management, and laws for managing the economy. The Qing dynasty was heir to the changes introduced during the Ming dynasty, but the Qing dynasty made changes to the laws and practices in order to create a new system of timber trade. The Chinese state bought timber from private merchants. Unfortunately, the system was not perfect because malpractice was prevalent. Some members of the authorities of control were also timber merchants, producing disturbances in the timber trade market.

Rivers were the highways for timber transportation during the Chinese Empire. The Yangzi was the most important route for commerce during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The Yangzi witnessed fierce competition among timber merchants. To control commerce, custom stations were established across long-distance rivers, which collected taxes on different types of commodities. In the case of timber, taxes depended of the type of timber the merchants wanted to sell. The system used for the measurement and pricing of timber was the longquan ma. That system differed from the Western measure system because it was not a linear function, but rather a convex one.

Zhang explains the resource management of the timber trade during the Qing period in chapters 3 and 4. Zhang shows that management of forests was private because land ownership was private during the Qing era. However, certain places were managed by the state, such as the forests surrounding the imperial mausoleum in Zhili, forests that were in process of being privatized, and forests that were open to the public. The latter category was created by the Chinese government in order to be used by the poor. In practice, private owners exploited those forests. In the case of forests that were legally owned by private actors, ownership of those lands was collective or the forest was partitioned among several private owners. In the latter case, mountains were divided by shares.

Even though forest management was private, the Chinese state controlled the timber market indirectly through licensed brokerages. For that reason, the manager of the workers who transported rafts along water routes worked together with the brokers in order to ensure that the process of bringing timber to the market did not have any problems. Therefore, brokers were the nexus between the state and the transactions carried out in the timber market. One of the main problems Zhang mentions was the ethnic tensions between different groups managing the river routes. Violent conflicts between different ethnic groups occurred from 1798 to 1806. Zhang explains that the adoption of Chinese culture by those groups reduced tensions between them, helping the process of creating a single timber market.

The last chapter of Zhang’s book touches on the topic of commerce and government. She explains the differences in trading patterns during the eighteen and nineteenth centuries. While a nexus was established between brokers and individual itinerant traders during the eighteenth century, the situation was different in the next one because trade associations now represented different timber merchants. Those groups negotiated directly with government authorities and institutions. The situation of merchants was a privileged one, but the associations imposed strict rules on
their members, who could be expelled for not following them.

*Timber and Forestry in Qing China: Sustaining the Market* is one of the most interesting books for understanding the Chinese system of timber trade during the Qing era. Zhang's book can be useful to us today because we are living in a time of deforestation of the Amazon, climate change, and problems with the actual economic system. The explanation provided by Zhang might be part of the solution for shaping humanity's common future.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-environment


**URL:** https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=56907

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.