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With *The Price of Collapse,* Timothy Brook, an eminent scholar of the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) and one of history's great storytellers, sets out on two interrelated tasks: a social history of prices and a price history of climate change. For much of the book, Brook returns to questions about economic culture previously addressed in his 1998 *The Confusions of Pleasure: Commerce and Culture in Ming China* but with an intensified focus on prices: what they tell us about social values, living standards, and the collapse of the political order. But in addition to using prices to construct a rich social history, Brook proposes to use them to tell a story about climate, again building on several of his previously published works.[1] *The Price of Collapse* is highly successful at the first task, using both individual anecdotes and an astonishingly broad collection of price data to do what Brook does best: telling individual stories that elucidate a broader social context. It is provocative but less definitively successful at the second task: turning this history of prices into a history of climate.

Brook opens with “The Tale of Chen Qide.” Chen Qide was a “local schoolteacher of no noteworthy accomplishment” whose famine memoir intersperses descriptions of social and environmental disaster with prices that indicate the degree of the dearth (p. 1). As Brook notes, we “also share the habit of tracking our fortunes through the prices we have to pay,” asking that we consider his book “an extended footnote to Chen’s account of the disasters of 1640-42” (p. 10). Brook ends the chapter by laying out the intertwined tasks of the book: understanding how Ming people understood prices, how prices set the “limits of the possible,” and how they might function as climate proxies by tracing the effects of changing solar energy on the availability of grain on the market (p. 12).

Chapter 2, “Halcyon Days? The Wanli Price Regime,” uses the accounts of several county magis-
brates, a Spaniard in Canton, and various other sources to develop a baseline for prices before the disasters of the 1630s and '40s. Brook tells us what could be bought for a cent (six hundred grams of vegetables or a wicker basket); a mace, ten cents (a large fish or a parasol); or a full tael of silver (a piglet, firearm, or boy singer). He estimates the annual cost of living (fourteen taels for a family at subsistence level, twenty-three for a more respectable one); the annual wages of low-skill (five to twelve taels) and higher-skilled workers (fourteen to twenty-two taels); and prices in the luxury sector (p. 57). As Brook himself concludes, this is the closest he comes to empirical certainty in the book.

In chapter 3, “Silver, Prices, and Maritime Trade,” Brook turns to several interrelated questions about maritime trade, for which he again reconstructs several extraordinarily useful sets of price data. The key question here is whether or not the global flow of silver into China was enough to destabilize prices: a theory that some scholars present as a decisive factor in the fall of the Ming. Ultimately, Brook concludes that “the Ming economy was large enough ... to absorb the arriving silver into its systems of commercial exchange” (p. 104). In other words, “global climate, not global trade, drove Ming grain prices to crippling levels” (p. 105).

The first three chapters establish an important baseline, while the next two chapters, “The Famine Price of Grain” and “The Chongzhen Price Surge,” are the heart of Brook’s argument about how climate affected the price of grain. Chapter 4 traces price reports, widely recorded during times of dearth from the 1450s onward, to “quantify the intensity of famine,” as well as records of climate anomaly, which he classifies into “six sloughs”: multiyear periods when severe climate abnormalities coincided with documentary reports of environmental crisis or famine (p. 114). In rough terms, Brook suggests that the “standard” famine price of grain increased over the course of the dynasty, largely in response to cool or dry conditions, but provided no precedent for the acute crisis of the 1630s and '40s. Chapter 5 turns to the worst of these sloughs, coinciding with the Maunder Minimum, the coldest phase of the Little Ice Age, as well as with an unprecedented surge in grain prices. What, Brook asks, can explain this price surge? Once again, he considers the evidence for a more general price inflation caused either by the influx of silver or intrinsic economic cycles, before concluding that the price crisis that precipitated the fall of the Ming can only be understood as a product of the changing climate.

The Price of Collapse would be a useful book if it provided nothing beyond a compilation of price data and disaster narratives, but it does far more. In his well-established style, Brook uses seemingly banal data points to reveal the inner and outer worlds of Ming subjects and their global points of contact. On the question of climate, however, this book leaves more to be explored. While Brook shows that the crisis of the 1630s and 1640s must be understood in light of the Maunder Minimum, an unprecedented period of global cooling and regional drought, he does not fully demonstrate how or to what degree climate precipitated this episode, let alone the relationship between climate and grain prices in earlier periods. As Brook clearly recognizes, the data on both prices and climate are highly flawed. However, several analytic choices further muddy the waters. The intuitive move to delineate six multiyear sloughs by combining price and climate data risks “painting bull’s eyes around bullet holes,” a hazard that Geoffrey Parker warns against in his global history of the Little Ice Age.[2] Price data also incorporate a huge array of confounding factors, a shortcoming best overcome by analyzing them alongside other proxies.[3] Despite these shortcomings, The Price of Collapse is a vital provocation: the fall of Ming China can no longer be understood purely through theories of social decadence or silver supply disruptions; it was at least in part an outcome of changing climate. It remains to future scholar-
ship to assign a more precise relationship between these overlapping factors.

Notes


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