

Brush, Seal and Abacus: Troubled Vitality in Late Ming China's Economic Heartland, 1500–1644. By JIE ZHAO. Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2018. 267 pp. \$52.00 (cloth).

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The problematic prosperity of the Ming dynasty is an irony that has launched a thousand academic careers and inspired a variety of books detailing the Ming's fall from glory, insignificant watershed years, and confusing pleasures. To this body of work, we must add Jie Zhao's monograph on troubled vitality. *Brush, Seal and Abacus* is an extremely well-researched portrait of the fascinating socio-economic world of the late Ming, which brings the era into the most vivid focus yet.

With the Six Prefectures of Changzhou, Suzhou, Songjiang, Huzhou, Jiaying, and Hangzhou as her main stage (and with occasional side trips to Huizhou and Nanjing), Zhao picks up where Timothy Brook's *Confusions of Pleasure* left off in examining the social amalgamation catalyzed by commerce in the sixteenth century. Identifying scholars, officials, and merchants (represented by the brush, seal, and abacus of the title) as the classes so blended, Zhao provides numerous case studies of individuals transcending their estates. One current of status deviation involved scholars selling their writings. A literary market emerged, in which "prices for essays ranged between one and 100 taels, sometimes more, based on an individual writer's fame and academic status" (29). The profit derived from this trade often outweighed the attraction of further academic advancement, especially via the frustrating examination system (31). Once accustomed to the marketplace, scholars moved into fields like scandalmongering, pettifogging, and the production of false genealogies, the expectation of lucre trumping the taboos against these occupations (34–39). As scholars became more "merchant at heart," they were met halfway by merchants seeking to emulate scholars. In fact, the scholars provided the service of legitimizing the merchants' social ascent, anointing individual businessmen as "merchant by vocation, scholar by avocation" (39–40).

When Zhao turns her attention to "the fusion of seal and abacus"—the participation of officials, as distinct from scholars, in the freewheeling economy—her narrative becomes even juicier. Here, a big part of the story is one of leveraged political influence yielding tremendous returns in money and property. The well-known tactic of official engrossment via tax evasion appears prominently, as Zhao provides a Huizhou writer's observation that "In Suzhou, Songjiang, Jiaying, and Huzhou, only wealthy official families own large tracts of land because they pay no taxes. Families of moderate means evade taxes via commendation to the powerful" (80). Armed with their tax exemptions and other privileges, officials easily beat merchants at their own game. "Today about half of the ranking officials capitalize on their positions to amass fortunes," another Ming writer noted. "After all, a successful merchant is no match for a successful [money-grubbing] official" (123, brackets in original).

Less familiar than officials' exploitation of status is their tendency to employ bondservants in the acquisition of land. The bondservant angle is one of Zhao's sub-specialties, and she uses it to add great detail to what we know about official aggrandizement. It

is a major contribution and one of the chief strengths of the book. Zhao rescues the bondsman from obscurity with a few character sketches, showing how he served his master as administrator and business agent; in one interesting section, she assesses the cash value and relative economic worth of servants (six taels for a man and wife in Songjiang, which, since an essay could sell for ten taels, was probably quite affordable) (72). Of course, Ming bondservants were often thugs who, on behalf of their masters, “organized commendations, forced people to sell their lands and houses at cheap prices, lent money at high interest, ran commercial enterprises, bribed local officials, and harassed whoever stood in their way” (74). With our eyes on the bondservants, we are able to take in much more of the blow-by-blow of Ming land disputes than we were before. To the repertoire of economic warfare strategies, Zhao introduces bondservant betrayal, in which a bondservant would defect from master A to master B, bringing A’s estate with him. She cites a specific case from Suzhou around 1590, in which a crafty bondservant, smarting at his master’s accusations of embezzlement, took his revenge by commending his master’s property—and even his master’s person and family—to a more powerful man named Wu Zhizhen. The enslavement of the former master’s family failed, but Wu’s connections spared him any punishment (74–75). These examples of bondservant betrayal make clear that land consolidators preyed not only on the poor but also on the less-influential rich, whose holdings were sizable enough to covet and whose bondservants constituted a serviceable fifth column. Later in the book, Zhao fleshes out two episodes involving the depredations of powerful families, that of the art connoisseur Dong Qichang (1555–1636) and the less distinguished (and unrelated) Dong Fen (1510–1595). As Zhao shows, both Dongs earned their notoriety through the actions of ruthless bondservants, at least some of whom were betrayers of previous masters (95, 199). Their crimes are recounted with a richness of detail seldom seen in comparable books. In these sections, Zhao makes use of previously under-utilized sources, crowning what is obviously an exhaustive research effort.

Zhao includes a chapter of intellectual history, subtitled “Scholars Contest the Implications of Profit,” which examines Ming writers’ ponderings on the various meanings of commerce. While men like Lu Ji (1515–1552) lauded the redistributive effects of the luxury economy (102–103), others mourned the death of frugality (108–109) and the corruption of every aspect of life by money (113–115). The sharpest criticism was directed at commercialized officialdom, the tendency to exploit public office for private gain (124). This latter skepticism appears justified, given the examples of official exploitation featured throughout Zhao’s book.

Blending less well with the theme of socio-economic change in the Six Prefectures is Zhao’s chapter on faction in the central government. The apparent purpose of Zhao’s detour to Beijing is to place the blame for the despoliation of the Six Prefectures there, where the highest-ranking political protection for the despoilers resided. Zhao singles out the grand secretaries Shen Shixing (1535–1614) and Wang Xijue (1534–1611) as especially culpable. Specifically, she shows both Shen and Wang as enabling the aforementioned Wu Zhizhen in his bondservant-spearheaded attack on his neighbor (75); and they intervened on behalf of Dong Fen as well (183). However, it would have been enough to name Shen and Wang as accomplices without a discussion of the Hongwu emperor (r. 1368–1398), the Wanli emperor (r. 1572–1620), Zhang Juzheng (1525–1582), and the Grand Secretariat, which in the context of the rest of the book feels

digressive and tangential. Zhao has something to add to the political history of the late Ming, but it should probably be presented as a separate book.

Finally, Zhao's book really isn't a study of irony – of how the Ming dynasty perished of its own opulence. As Zhao makes clear in her latter chapters, the Six Prefectures, as well as other regions of Ming China, were devastated by drought, locusts, flood, disease, famine, and high food prices. The vitality of the late Ming was more troubled by these external factors than the Ming was troubled by vitality.

Jie Zhao's *Brush, Seal and Abacus* is the result of meticulous research and is intelligently organized and crisply written. It will bring the late Ming dynasty to life for the general reader, undergraduates, grad students, and specialists. It is a very informative and engaging book.