



## **The Weather Factor** **Another Perspective on the Yuan and Ming Dynasties**

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**Timothy Brook gives a new insight into Yuan and Ming history thanks to a broad historical view enriched by climate analyses, which allows him to highlight continuities between the conventionally opposed Mongol and Han dynasties.**

Reviewed: Timothy Brook, *The Troubled Empire: China in the Yuan and Ming Dynasties*, Cambridge, MA and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010, 329 p.

Timothy Brook's new history of the Yuan (c. 1271-1368) and Ming (1368-1644) dynasties is a comprehensive introduction to a critical period in Chinese history. Using the overarching theme of climactic shifts, Brook provides the reader with a new filter through which to experience China of the 13<sup>th</sup> through 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. Rather than treating the transition from the Yuan to Ming as a major rupture, as it is traditionally, Brook takes the view that there was in many ways continuity between the two dynasties. A thorough primer for the non-specialist, *The Troubled Empire* also provides Chinese historians with a fresh approach to some of the most fascinating centuries in Chinese history.

### **Weather and Dragons**

Brook's justification for approaching the Yuan and Ming as a continuous period is rooted in the fact that the four hundred years that constitute the two dynasties were, in fact, a little Ice Age. The impact this meteorological shift had on the reigns of certain emperors may be more important than has been previously acknowledged. Irregularities in seasonal temperatures have a clear effect on agricultural production and the national economy, and while Brook is careful not to place the blame for all disasters during the Yuan and Ming entirely on the weather, he makes a convincing argument for it playing a major role in such times. Talk of the rapidly shifting climate of course resonates with the contemporary reader, and gives the problems faced by rulers of pre-modern China new relevance. As for dragons, sightings of these terrifying creatures have traditionally gone hand in hand with weather anomalies in China, rising from the sea during typhoons, or appearing from clouds during a particularly violent storm. Dragon sightings may be grouped under the broader heading of "omens," both positive and negative portents often reflecting the moral climate of the realm, and recorded at least as early as the Western Han dynasty (206 BCE-9 CE) and continuing through the Qing dynasty (1644-1911) – Brook notes that the last recorded dragon sighting occurred in 1905. Brook argues that

these are historically relevant to a study of the Yuan and Ming both because officials and historians of those dynasties treated them seriously, and for their deep psychological effect on the general populace.

Brook divides up the four hundred years of the Yuan and Ming into what he terms “The Nine Sloughs,” nine weather-related calamities that lasted from a few months to several years. These periods of trouble provide the backdrop, and sometimes explanation, for certain historical events throughout both dynasties. Variations in seasonal weather could be read as indicative of a ruler’s poor conduct, which could undermine the reign of an emperor. More concretely, it often had devastating effects on the population at large. Small crop yields could starve large portions of the population, and temperature extremes could be equally lethal; such massive fatality rates often play a crucial role in destabilizing the government in power. Brook also shows how human actions exacerbated an already unpredictable natural environment. For example, the deforestation of north China, especially during the Ming, led to an increase in dust storms and extinction of certain animal species in China. The revelation that human actions even in the pre-modern era could have such disastrous ecological effects again gives contemporary relevance to many of the problems faced by emperors and their government hundreds of years ago.

### **A New Approach**

In taking climate as the overarching theme of this history, Brook clearly aims to reevaluate conventional approaches to the Yuan and Ming. These dynasties are not traditionally assessed as a unit unless it is to emphasize the contrast between the Mongol-ruled Yuan and the restoration of “true” Chinese rule in the Ming. By taking a broader view, Brook is able to both highlight how the Ming built upon certain systems instituted by the Yuan (such as the practice of employing non-Chinese bureaucrats in administrative posts, and institutions such as the Hui hui [Muslim] Bureau of Astronomy), and how they differed in certain administrative and economic approaches.

Along with providing a general history of the various emperors of both dynasties, Brook also paints a meticulous picture of the changing economic, cultural, religious, and social conditions of the 13<sup>th</sup> through 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. In order to do this, the author has consulted a wide variety of primary-source documents that give the reader a notion of both official and private experiences in various domains. In addition to official histories and gazetteers, Brook consults less conventional sources such as “commonplace books” (miscellanies compiled by individuals), census data, and even tombstones. In doing so, the narrative moves from events that took place at the imperial court to the mundane happenings of common men and women. For instance, the tombstone in question was found by Brook at an antiques store in Toronto and provides a jumping off point for a case study of a particular family, which in turn allows him to introduce the importance of kinship matrixes and gender during the Ming. By weaving such narratives into the broader history, Brook animates what might otherwise be a dry explanation of social, economic, and political systems.

### **China and the Modern World**

In keeping with the overall theme of a broad historical view, throughout the book the reader is reminded of China's place in the larger narrative of world history. The Yuan and Ming coincide with the Renaissance and Baroque periods in Western Europe, and the implicit question in *The Troubled Empire* is whether China, especially during the Ming, could be considered to be part of the larger early modern world.

During the Yuan dynasty, the Mongols ruled over a multi-ethnic population with connections both via land and sea routes to Central Asia and Europe. In addition to merchants such as Marco Polo, a number of Franciscan missionaries made the trip to China. Several major foreign communities were established in China's coastal cities with the most substantial of these composed of Persians, Arabs, and Europeans. The territory that the Ming ruled over was reduced in size, the ethnic diversity of China's population relatively diminished, and the government policy considerably more xenophobic and protectionist. Nonetheless, the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries saw a flourishing of Chinese maritime exploration, and a new spate of European missionaries (Jesuits, this time) made their way to the Chinese capital, Beijing.

The foreign groups that probably had the most impact on Mongol governmental organization and acquisition of knowledge hailed from Central Asia and the Persian cultural sphere. The Ming, however, had much more fruitful exchanges with the Jesuits, who, more successfully than their Franciscan predecessors, introduced Christianity to China along with certain aspects of western cosmology and science, though granted they were looked upon with suspicion from many quarters. In addition, Portuguese and Dutch traders impressed the Chinese with their strange physical bearing and accurate weapons. Maritime exchange during this time was hardly unidirectional; the early Ming was after all the era of Admiral Zheng He (1371-1433), who led maritime expeditions to Southeast and South Asia, the Middle East, and the east African coast. However, as had been the case in the Yuan, Europeans were far more interested in China than China was in Europe. Nonetheless, Brook shows that China had an undeniable, while perhaps grudgingly accepted, role in the early modern world economy and cultural exchange.

### **China Under Foreign Rule**

*The Troubled Empire* opens with the Yuan dynasty, the first time in which a nomadic group ruled all of China, and ends with the Ming falling to the Manchu-ruled Qing dynasty. Chinese historians have often emphasized the Ming's status of the last "Chinese" dynasty. Here, Brook focuses both on the debt the Ming owed the Yuan in terms of their own rule (such as the institutions and administrative techniques mentioned above), and the nearly constant threat that nomadic groups posed to China's northern border and the impact it had on Ming policy. Indeed, if one more theme can be discerned, it is how China dealt with the specter of the northern nomads. The desired isolationism of the Ming in the wake of expelling the Mongols back to the steppe was in part a response to this threat, and the need to balance northern border defenses with control of Chinese ports and overseas trade was perhaps the major foreign policy issue of the entire dynasty. Brook's emphasis on the difficulties experienced by both dynasties (especially the Ming) because of factors lying largely outside their control, casts their achievement of preserving the dynasty over several centuries into sharp relief. Nonetheless, Brook keeps

a neutral eye, evaluating the imperfections and successes of both dynasties in such a way that the reader finishes the book not only with a grasp on China of these four centuries but also aware of the importance of questioning the traditional approaches to history more generally.

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