Brush, Seal and Abacus: Troubled Vitality in Late Ming China's Economic Heartland, 1500–1644. By Jie Zhao. Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2018. Pp. xv + 267. $52.00.

Jiangnan 江南 , the lower Yangzi delta region, has proven a magnet for scholars of Ming (1368–1644), particularly late Ming, history. The attraction is not surprising, as the region, home to most sophisticated cities of the day, was the economic powerhouse as well as the cultural centre of the Ming empire. Jiangnan literati dominated the visual and literary arts, Jiangnan merchants the commercial networks, and Jiangnan scholar-officials the major seats of political power of sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century China.

Jie Zhao's *Brush, Seal and Abacus: Troubled Vitality in Late Ming China's Economic Heartland, 1500–1644* is yet another contribution to the very large scholarly literature, in Chinese, Japanese, and Western languages, on Jiangnan. Its primary focus is the elite—that is, the literati, large gentry landowners, wealthy merchants, and scholar-officials—of the region and their involvement, first, in the commercial boom of the late Ming and its social effects and, second, in the political and economic decline of the region (and the empire) that presaged the fall of the dynasty in 1644. As Zhao states, her purpose is "to explain what it was like for the region and its people to live in an age of commercial and cultural vigor, which then descended into distress and despair" (p. 9).

Five of the six chapters of *Brush, Seal and Abacus* are, as promised, set in Jiangnan (or the Six Prefectures 六府—Changzhou 常州, Suzhou 蘇州, Huzhou 湖州, Songjiang 松江, Jiaxing 嘉興, and Hangzhou 杭州—the geographically more restricted area that Zhao defines as the "heartland" of Jiangnan). In "Brush and Abacus: Scholars and Merchants Seek Profit and Place" (Chapter 1), she argues, as many have before her, that literati and scholars, tempted by the profits to be earned from commerce and finding success in the civil service examination system increasingly elusive, turned to trade to make a living or supplement their income from teaching or writing. In the hands of some, writing itself became a commercial activity. Literati as distinguished as Wang Shizhen 王世貞 (1526–1590) might sell their essays for as much as one thousand taels, while "second-rate" writers from the lower-degree holding ranks might live off the profits from churning out tabloid tales of current scandals. Others abandoned the literary arts entirely, as, for example, Hua Linxiang 華麟祥 (*fl.* early sixteenth century), who quit his studies for the examination to trade in water chestnuts and, more profitably, kapok.

At the same time, wealthy merchants were eager to forge ties to literati, as a means of elevating their social status, and to potential officials, as a means of protecting their wealth. The great Huizhou 徽州 merchants in particular were interested

in forming supportive friendships with literati—and in employing them to compose flattering portraits of them, "effectively neutralizing the stereotype of [the Huizhou merchants as] shrewd money-grubbers" (p. 47). Through such portraits, literati "gave a thumbs up to the rising status of merchants and the Way of the Merchant" (p. 49). As a result, the late Ming in Jiangnan was a time of "blurred social boundaries" (p. 49), when merchants—once at the lowest rung of the Confucian social hierarchy—were lifted to "equal footing" with the other ranks (p. 13).

There is certainly no doubt that merchants, particularly very wealthy merchants, enjoyed both higher social prestige and increased access to political power in the late Ming. In light of Zhao's points about the commercialization of writing, however, we must ask how seriously literati essays in praise of merchants should be taken. Were these writers really "validat[ing] 'the Way of the Merchant' (*gudao* 賈道)" (p. 40) or simply pleasing a wealthy customer? Were merchants widely seen as truly on "equal footing" with literati and scholars? It is noteworthy that in these essays merchants are often praised for activities traditionally associated with the "Confucian" gentry—charitable contributions to their communities, filial piety, conflict mediation, etc.—as if their validation relied on their conformity to gentry/literati values and actions. Also worth notice is the fact that many successful merchants made a point of educating a son or sons for the civil service examinations, as if implicitly acknowledging the social and political limitations on merchant status and power in the late Ming. Perhaps it would have been useful, in considering this complex issue, to look back to the Song—another period of rapid economic and social change, when commercial interests in Jiangnan played an increasingly important role in the economy—for some historical context for the interpretation of merchant status in Chinese society.

Zhao moves on to treat the involvement of officials—those literati/scholars who had, largely through success in the examination system, earned political power—in the commercializing economy of the late Ming. "Seal and Abacus: Officials and Their Agents Catch the Fever" (Chapter 2) provides fascinating and detailed accounts of the strategies employed by officials (or men with family ties to officialdom) to amass both personal fortunes and political power. The message here is that, by the late Ming, those two goals were often inextricably linked. By that time official families had come to rely on a variety of strategies, both legitimate and illicit, to achieve them: family connections, marriage alliances, employment of bondservants (who acted as both financial agents and enforcers), and various means of tax evasion.

To illustrate these points, Zhao contrasts cases from two different generations: Wang Yanzhe 王延喆 (1483–1541) of the mid-Ming and Dong Fen 董份 (1510–1595) of the late Ming. Wang, himself not an official, relied on the official status of his father and his father's political alliances (and his own commercial acuity) to amass a fortune. But once he found that these alliances might embroil him in political trouble,

he reduced his ambitions and "adopted the modest lifestyle of a simple scholar" (p. 65). In contrast, Dong Fen, "a relentless pursuer of wealth" (p. 97) with official status, relied on family relationships (as did Wang), but also on clever marriage alliances, his bondservants, bribery, etc. to maintain his vast wealth at the same time that he was able to weather at least one particularly violent political storm (the disgrace of Yan Song 嚴嵩 [1480–1565], whom he had supported). Zhao takes this generational shift in the power of wealth to represent "the severe erosion of institutional and ethical constraints on allowing high-ranking officials to move to the top ranks of money-makers" (p. 98). As she herself suggests, we may wonder how representative either Wang or Dong is—each presents just one case study. It would also be useful to know precisely what institutional constraints on the accumulation of wealth by officials had existed before Dong Fen. Clearly the ethical constraints were not all that compelling during a time of commercial prosperity—what institution(s) had been effective in limiting officials' accumulation of wealth in earlier generations?

In "Tonic or Toxic? Scholars Contest the Implications of Profit" (Chapter 3), Zhao reviews what she categorizes as the three different responses to commercialization and the prosperity and social disorder it brought: defence, hostile critique, and ambivalence. Here, however, even the scholars cited as defenders of economic and social change appear to be somewhat ambivalent; both Lu Ji 陸楫 (1515–1552) and Feng Shike 馮時可 (b. *c.* 1547), introduced as defenders, seem to link commercialization to corruption. Certainly Feng's anxious effort to define what he is morally willing to write for pay and what not suggests that he was oppressively aware of the moral ambiguities of his embrace of writing for profit.

At this point, Zhao's focus on Jiangnan wavers. Chapter 4, "A Roiling Cauldron: Imperial Misrule and Factionalism Fan the Flames" moves to Beijing, the imperial capital, for an examination of the central political problems of the decade from 1583 to 1593 that, according to Zhao, mark the beginning of the end of the Ming dynasty. This chapter provides a detailed account of that decade of imperial history, an account that is pointedly critical of the Wanli 萬曆 emperor and the corrupt and incompetent officials serving him. Zhao here implicitly takes on the interpretation of the late Ming decline presented in Ray Huang's *1587, A Year of No Significance.*[1] She has little sympathy for the Wanli emperor (r. 1572–1620), and pointedly titles one of the sections of the chapter "A Decade of Considerable Significance." This chapter is a useful narrative of the central politics of the decade—and should certainly be read in conjunction with Huang's study—but its relevance to the primary theme of *Brush, Seal and Abacus* is elusive. In the penultimate section of the chapter, "Partisan

[1] Ray Huang, *1587, A Year of No Significance: The Ming Dynasty in Decline* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981).

Divide at Home," Zhao very briefly attempts to link the central conflict to regional Jiangnan politics. But this chapter seems to belong to another book; if more fully conceptualized, it could work as a stand-alone challenge to Ray Huang's interpretation of Ming decline in *1587*.

"Seething Protest: Great Families Provoke Public Outbursts" (Chapter 5) returns the reader to Jiangnan and to three successive cases of protest against exploitation, economic and social, of locally (and often centrally) powerful elites. The first effort was launched by the upright official Hai Rui 海瑞 (1514–1587), who attempted to prosecute wealthy landowners guilty of land encroachment and tax evasion—and failed, in the face of resistance from powerful men like Xu Jie 徐階 (1503–1583). The second, a protest against Dong Fen's effort to seek an imperial eulogy (which would have affirmed his status and helped protect his family after his death) engaged the participation of imperial censors, local and provincial officials, and "the public" (not very clearly defined). An imperial edict supported Dong in the resulting conflict, but he died in humiliation, his family on the verge of decline. One more case concludes the chapter: an account of the riots against the notorious Dong Qichang 董其昌 (1555–1636) and his family. Noted as a talented painter and arbiter of taste, Dong was also the scion of one of the most brutally exploitative elite families of Songjiang prefecture. The quite justified local uprising against his family divided local and provincial officials—and of course enraged and terrified, in equal measure, other powerful gentry families. Zhao concludes that these cases trace an escalation in protests by students, literati, and local officials against powerful Jiangnan families, and provide yet another market of the declining fortunes of the Ming.

The final chapter of *Brush, Seal and Abacus*, "On a Sinking Ship: Gentry Reformers Respond to Crises," examines the desperate efforts of some local gentry and officials—Chen Longzheng 陳龍正 (1585–1645) looms large as an example—to devise means of maintaining local communities in the face of natural disasters and rapid economic decline. Chen and other gentry leaders organized relief efforts in the face of growing poverty and recurring disasters. One local leader, Zhang Dong 張棟 (d. 1605), actually urged tax reform, even though such reform would have hurt his family's landed wealth. Zhu Guozhen 朱國禎 (1557–1632), a grand secretary, desperately tried to get local governments to manage grain transport to the Jiangnan area in the face of disastrous flooding; the failure of his effort ensured that the region was defenceless when repeatedly flooded in the mid-1620s. But these last-ditch attempts to create local communities or even a unified regional community that might bolster Jiangnan against economic disaster (or invasion) faltered as both provincial officials and local power-holders reasserted their faith that "the preservation of the rich was essential to the well-being of the region. In that view, it was totally unacceptable to expropriate the well-to-do: their demise would break the region's backbone" (p. 235).

In an afterword Zhao explains her method in researching and writing *Brush, Seal and Abacus*. It is to "scour the primary sources without theoretical preconceptions . . . to follow wherever the sources go, to unravel the meaning of the text in its context, and to understand the people and society we study on their own terms" (p. 241). This statement reveals both the strength and the weakness of Zhao's study. It is rich in its reliance on primary sources. Zhao relies almost entirely on her expert reading of literary collections, fiction, unofficial histories, *biji* 筆記, and government documents to reconstruct a history of Jiangnan in the late Ming (and of the political machinations of the late Wanli era, particularly the decade from 1583 to 1593). Her copious citation of primary sources enables her, as she explains, to present the actors of her narrative "on their own terms." To be sure, Zhao makes a brief attempt to draw larger conclusions about state-society, specifically state-gentry, relations in the late Ming, but in the end she reaffirms her unease with analytical generalizations: "perhaps it is wise also to be wary of an inclination to compress the complicated human condition into over-arching paradigms" (p. 244).

By piecing together the accounts in her sources, Zhao has created a vivid narrative of the economic and, where relevant, political lives of selected Jiangnan elites. Her reconstruction of the machinations of Dong Fen and his family is a highlight of *Brush, Seal and Abacus*; and she offers many other briefer examples of her skill in identifying the social, economic, and political strategies developed by individual literati and officials and their families to accrue both wealth and political influence in late Ming Jiangnan (and Beijing). Her command of the detail in the narrative of the intrigues within the imperial bureaucracy in "A Roiling Cauldron" (although, as mentioned, somewhat of a departure from her primary subject) is masterful. *Brush, Seal and Abacus* can very usefully be mined for excellent examples of the imperial negligence, bureaucratic infighting, elite networking, and exploitation that weakened late Ming state and society.

But there is little in *Brush, Seal and Abacus* that is new. Most of the general points her examples support are already familiar to students of late imperial China. She draws heavily on Yu Ying-shih's well-known argument about the rise in merchant status in the late Ming.[2] And her discussion of literati and official involvement in commerce and their hand-wringing over the moral implications of this involvement

[2] Yu Yingshi 余英時, "Zhongguo jinshi zongjiao lunli yu shangren jingshen" 中國近世宗教倫理與商人精神, in idem, *Shi yu Zhongguo wenhua* 士與中國文化 (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1987), pp. 441–579. See also Ying-shih Yü, "Confucian Ethics and Capitalism" and "Business Culture and Chinese Traditions: Toward a Study of the Evolution of Merchant Culture in Chinese History," in idem, *Chinese History and Culture*, Vol. 1: *Sixth Century B.C.E. to Seventeenth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), pp. 208–21 and 222–72.

will not be new to a reader of Timothy Brook's *Confusions of Pleasure*;[3] Zhao even relies on some of the sources that Brook cites. Mark Elvin's now very old *Pattern of the Chinese Past*,[4] too, introduces much of the information about the Jiangnan economy presented here.

And, in the end, it is the work of the historian to read primary sources critically and to contextualize, synthesize, *and* interpret them; to allow the players of the day to speak for themselves to be sure, but also to help readers of a much later day understand the larger significance of their words. *Brush, Seal and Abacus* would have benefited from a fuller engagement with both the larger questions that have shaped late Ming history and other scholarly studies of Jiangnan. The reader looks for some effort, for example, to relate the work of Richard von Glahn on the cult of Wutong 五通[5] to the debates over profit in Chapter 3; of Joseph McDermott on bondservants[6] to the description of their role as both commercial agents and local enforcers in Chapters 2 and 5; and of Joanna Handlin on elite charity[7] to the accounts of gentry philanthropy in Chapter 6. Reference to the finely detailed and analytically rigorous studies of Japanese scholars—Saeki Yūichi 佐伯有一 (1918–1996), Sakai Tadao 酒井忠夫 (1912–2010), Fuma Susumu 夫馬進, and Ōki Yasushi 大木康, to name a very few—which form the foundation of our understanding of late Ming society, would also have enriched this study.

Zhao clearly has a masterful grasp of the primary sources for the study of late Ming elite society. Reference to the arguments of scholars such as those mentioned above might have encouraged her to ask fresh questions about her sources and shape them into a more coherent, analytically interesting, and original study. I have already suggested ways in which we might want to qualify assertions about the rise in the status of merchants in the late Ming. To provide another example: How are we to interpret the mass of detail about bureaucratic factionalism during the decade from 1583 to 1593 (Chapter 4)? Zhao clearly finds Huang's analysis of Ming decline faulty, but it is not clear what analytical framework she would employ to replace his emphasis on the deadening effects of court ritual and the lack of a legal constitutional

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[3] Timothy Brook, *The Confusions of Pleasure: Commerce and Culture in Ming China* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998).

[4] Mark Elvin, *The Pattern of the Chinese Past* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1973).

[5] Richard von Glahn, *The Sinister Way: The Divine and the Demonic in Chinese Religious Culture* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004).

[6] Joseph P. McDermott, "Bondservants in the T'ai-hu Basin During the Late Ming: A Case of Mistaken Identities," *Journal of Asian Studies* 40, no. 4 (August 1981), pp. 675–701.

[7] Joanna Handlin Smith, *The Art of Doing Good: Charity in Late Ming China* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2009).

structure defining the roles of emperor and his officials. We might also ask about the nature of the economy that Dong Fen and others were so quick to profit from. He invested in pawnshops and the profits from this business appear to have been used primarily to support a conspicuously luxurious lifestyle. How sustainable was such a business model? What impact did the commercial activities of the great families have on Jiangnan (and, for that matter, the empire)?

In sum, *Brush, Seal and Abacus* does not offer a fresh analysis of either the tensions of Jiangnan society or bureaucratic factionalism in the late Ming. It does provide, however, a vivid series of examples and cases, drawn from close reading of generally well-known primary sources, of elite strategies for enrichment and political influence mongering in late sixteenth-century Jiangnan and the social and moral responses to such strategies in the face of dynastic decline in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.

Cynthia J. Brokaw
Brown University

Civilizing the Chinese, Competing with the West: Study Societies in Late Qing China. By Chen Hon Fai. Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2017. Pp. xxxix + 276. $45.00.

Over the last few decades, much has been written about the chequered history of China's transformation from an empire into a nation-state. From Joseph Levenson's *Confucian China and Its Modern Fate: A Trilogy* to Peter Zarrow's *After Empire: The Conceptual Transformation of the Chinese State, 1885–1924* and Wang Hui's *China from Empire to Nation-State*,[1] readers are repeatedly reminded of the difficulty that China faced in joining the modern global system during the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. The list of China's problems is long, including its ethnocentrism, its Confucian culture, its imperial structure, its restrictive social hierarchy, and, above all, its remarkable diversity of peoples living in a vast land that

[1] Joseph R. Levenson, *Confucian China and Its Modern Fate: A Trilogy* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968); Peter Zarrow, *After Empire: The Conceptual Transformation of the Chinese State, 1885–1924* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012); Wang Hui, *China from Empire to Nation-State*, trans. Michael Gibbs Hill (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).