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The Fall of the Ming in the First Person: Jiangnan 1640-1650

First Lecture: **Famine and Bad Omens**

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The fall of the Ming (or more inclusively, the Ming-Qing transition) is not a new or even an original topic. Why the Ming dynasty fell in 1644 has been debated, often passionately, ever since it happened, when Ming loyalists looked for explanations of the catastrophe and Qing conquerors strived to justify their triumph and legitimacy. For their part, modern historians have spent much energy trying to understand the causes of the 1644 disaster, and why it occurred at that particular moment. The arguments are well-known and there is no need to come rehearse them in detail. Still, among the chief explanations, as you know, there is first of all the conjunction of Manchu aggression on the border and popular rebellion in the interior (外禍內亂, as the phrase goes); and, there is, in response to this, the crippling weaknesses of the Ming government, undermined as it was by its financial woes, and above all by an irresponsible polity and by the unending battles between political factions since the Wanli reign. But of course there was also the accumulation of natural disasters, associated with a major fluctuation in climate that in fact encompassed much more than China, as well as the resulting famines, epidemics, and unprecedented rise in food prices that afflicted much of the empire in the years prior to the Manchu invasion. As a matter of fact, what is probably the latest attempt (at the present date) at explaining the fall of the Ming proposes *prices* as one major cause, itself in relation with climate variation: I am referring here to the book by Timothy Brook, published in 2023 and entitled *The Price of Collapse*, the subtitle of which is *The Little Ice Age and the Fall of Ming China*.

Certainly all of these factors—political, military, natural—were at work in the weakening and ultimate demise of the Ming regime, and probably others as well. But my aim in these lectures is not at all to discuss any of this, let alone to propose new causes, or new combinations of causes, that might help us better understand the cataclysmic event of 1644. What I propose to do is very different, and also more modest. It is to bring out some new or overlooked evidence regarding what we can know of how ordinary Chinese experienced that event in their everyday lives, meaning, *locally*, and *in real time*; and, to be more precise, it is to explore what at least some of them were able to say about their limited experience, and *in their own voices*. It is, in short, the Ming-Qing transition seen from the bottom up, as it was

lived by those who were its victims, or witnesses, deprived of any agency. Said otherwise, I'm not dealing here with the well-trodden saga of the change of dynasty, with its emperors, high officials, and generals, with its political and diplomatic intrigue, its tragic heroes and reviled traitors, and so on and so forth—all of which is abundantly discussed in standard Chinese historical sources.

I admit that it is not very original to say that there is more than standard historical sources; and as we know, the Ming-Qing transition, and more generally the seventeenth century, are exceptionally rich in *non-standard* sources, historical or otherwise. Amidst the intellectual and political uncertainties that prevailed at the time—when it was not just chaos and anarchy—a considerable amount of writings were produced that were far removed from the usual formats and styles, or indeed from the conventions of literati discourse in general; of writings, more specifically, that often display an astonishing degree of freedom in their organization, tone, and contents, with remarkably little posturing on the part of the author, and in some cases with a strong tendency for introspection, or even a totally unusual absence of inhibition. And it is in these transition texts, or at least some of them, that we have a chance of hearing of the experiences of people as told, as I said, "in their own voices".

This, then, is the "first person" in the title of my lectures; and before going further it seems to me necessary to characterize, even briefly, the kind of sources that allow us to get an idea of how Chinese in the seventeenth century talked about their daily experiences.

The texts in the first person that concern us here are not simply texts whose author says "I" (*yu* 余); they are also texts whose contents are more or less directly related to the author's own person—and as we shall see, the variety is quite large. The most immediate among such writings are of course the diaries held by individuals who record their experiences day after day—these are authentically real-time testimonies. Then, beyond that, there exists a whole range of first-person testimonies which, instead of being recorded in real time and day after day, are composed at some point afterwards, sometimes much later. Besides the author's remembrances, they may be based on diaries or notes, or any other sort of documents. As long as the author remains the main subject of the text—that the text is centering on him, always speaking in the first person—we can speak of *autobiographies*; and in a way, the seventeenth century can be regarded as a golden age of autobiographical writings in China, of whatever form, from lengthy year-by-year *zizhuan nianpu* 自撰年譜 to fragmentary autobiographical materials inserted in *biji* or other sundry writings.

Now, beyond purely autobiographical writings, there exists a subgenre of which I will introduce some important examples. I like to call it "first-person chronicles". By this I mean private contemporary accounts (often tied to one particular locality) from which the person of the author—always saying "I"—is never absent, even if he is no longer central: he may from time to time talk about what happened to him or what he did, he may voice his opinions, his

reactions to what he is narrating; but these are asides, so to speak: what is central is the society that surrounds him, and the dramatic events this society is going through.

All of this is may sound a little abstract, but it will become much less so with the examples I will introduce along the way in my presentation. Before doing that, however, there is one more thing that it may be useful to recall: namely, that a large proportion of these non-official transition writings (today we would probably say *minjian* 民間 writings), which are my main source, disappeared for a long period of time, for various reasons. Some (and these are often the most interesting) were simply not intended to be made public—like private notes or diaries—and their manuscripts have resurfaced by pure chance and have been published only much later, in the twentieth century. Others, which had been or might have been published, fell victim to the so-called "literary inquisitions" (*wenziyu* 文字獄) of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and survived in clandestinity, only to be gradually revived in the course of the nineteenth century, and even more at the hands of the revolutionary anti-Manchu movement in the last years of the Qing.

Today this literature, which has fascinated me for a very long time, is relatively well-known to historians, thanks in particular to the magistral inventories published by Xie Guozhen 謝國楨, and later by Lynn Struve, and it has been used by many scholars. And among these scholars, one, it seems to me, definitely deserves to be cited here: this is Frederic Wakeman, who in his monumental two-volume work of 1985, *The Great Enterprise*, quotes in abundance from such non-official transition sources. All of this is to say that, with few exceptions, the sources I will introduce today and tomorrow are not, strictly speaking, new.

But there is a difference, however. Most historians—even Wakeman, who is among the most inclined to enjoy a good narrative—tend to use these texts as ancillary sources from which to extract interesting or picturesque details, or striking episodes, or bits of information that support or illustrate their overall account or argument. My own approach is somewhat different. I find it useful to approach these autobiographies and private chronicles each one *as a whole*, to take them as a full-fledged narrative, as independent texts with a beginning and an end, telling stories that are valuable and meaningful by themselves, and written by authors whose background is itself worth taking into consideration, however obscure they usually are.

A last remark is that, contrary to works of history, contemporary testimonies, in particular diaries, were originally written *in ignorance of the future*, of what the next day has in store; they were, so to speak, mired in the present. This is important to emphasize, because diaries are frequently an important source for autobiographies and chronicles, and the *immediacy* that this confers to such texts adds much to our understanding of how the event were experienced day after day. At the same time, we need to remember that this immediacy is also a limitation, in the sense that the authors are focusing on what they have seen and heard (hence the common phrase *jianwen* 見聞 in the titles), on what concerns themselves, directly or

indirectly, or their familiar environment, even if some also allude to events happening elsewhere or even to national developments—to the sort of things which are the object of historical research in its quest for meaning and structure.

Now to come to the gist of my presentation. As you have seen, I have chosen to divide it into two parts, dealing respectively with, today, the years leading to the Qing conquest; and tomorrow, with the conquest and its immediate aftermath. And my focus is on one region, Jiangnan, not only because of its inherent interest and importance, but also because the larger part of the kind of literature I'm interested in was produced in Jiangnan; and as a matter of fact, most of what I will have to say is concentrated on the two famous prefectures of Suzhou and Songjiang.

Speaking of the years that led to the final catastrophe, one thing that the sources I have just been talking about occasionally discuss in terms not often found elsewhere is the emergence of the feeling that the Ming dynasty is indeed approaching its end. Such forebodings are of course expressed in very different ways depending on the date, on the person, and on the place.

In the first example I have encountered of such ominous feelings, they are still implicit and formulated in somewhat vague terms; but they are inescapable, or so it seems to me. They feature in the *Zhenshuai xiansheng xuepu* 真率先生學譜, the autobiography of a certain Xu Rijiu 徐日久, a rather extraordinary text that takes us from its author's success at the *jinshi* examination in 1610 to the eve of his death in 1631; indeed, in my opinion, one of the most spectacular examples of these introspective and freewheeling "new autobiographies", if we can call them so, which make their appearance in the late Ming. It is a printed book, but only one copy of it seems to have survived, and the only mention I have seen of it is a two-page description (somewhat misleading in fact) in Wu Pei-yi's book on late-Ming and early-Qing autobiographies, *The Confucian Progress* (1990). To be sure, Xu Rijiu's autobiography brings us away from Jiangnan (though his first position, in 1611, was magistrate of Shanghai); but it is so rich, and illustrative of late-Ming mentalities, that I cannot refrain from mentioning it. And in a way, one can say that it corresponds to the very first moments of the Ming-Qing transition.

Xu Rijiu's main interests and recognized competences were in finances and in military matters. He became an official in the Ministry of Public Works in 1617, and in the autobiography the first occurrence of an event that is definitely seen as a bad omen for the future of the regime chiefly concerns finances and defense: it is the news of the fall of Fushun 撫順 at the hands of the Manchus, in 1618, which in Beijing threw the court and officials into a panic. It was soon reported that in fact the general who commanded Fushun had surrendered with his troops and equipment without even trying to resist the Manchu assault. In other

words, the Liaodong theater was now in great danger, and there was no money in the government's coffers to organize its defense. And these motifs—military weakness and the financial crisis—keep coming up in Xu Rijiu's narrative. On occasion, his anxieties regarding the dynasty's ability to defend itself are based on direct observation. In the summer of 1623, for example, Xu, who was at the time a secretary at the Ministry of War, was sent on a three-week inspection of the defenses north of Beijing, beyond the Great Wall; he was appalled by their state of complete dereliction—military units with complement of soldiers far below the quotas, lack of funds, poor equipment, demoralized officers, etc. The capital of the empire was simply not defended as it should.

In late 1625 Xu Rijiu was dismissed from officialdom because he had deliberately criticized a protégé of the eunuch-dictator Wei Zhongxian 魏忠賢, and had no other choice but going back to his native Quzhou 衢州 in Zhejiang as a commoner. Yet it did not end there. After the Chongzhen emperor ascended the throne at the end of 1627and Wei Zhongxian committed suicide, Xu Rijiu (together with many other people) was reinstated in his ranks and sent to Fujian as a strategic advisor to the newly appointed Grand Coordinator, Xiong Wencan 熊文燦. Xiong's assignment had been to repress piracy and assert the government's control over the coast. Despite some successes, this proved to be an almost impossible task. The long chapters of Xu's autobiography that recount, at times day by day, the nearly two and a half years he spent in Fujian, travelling up and down the coast and rushing wherever problems arose, provide us with a probably unique description of the terrible situation that prevailed in the region, of the almost daily emergencies, and of the crippling weaknesses of coastal defense. It was close to hopeless, in fact, and at one point Xu confesses to a superior: "The situation in the region is very bad" (地方事壞).

Is this to say that Xu Rijiu and his colleagues in Fujian at the turn of the 1630s had the feeling that China was entering a period of dynastic crisis? It is difficult to say. After all, however impossible to control, Fujian was a peripheral region; and however powerful they were at sea, and obnoxious on the mainland, the pirates and smugglers were not threatening Ming sovereignty, they did not have a political agenda. In this respect it was quite different from the pressure of the Manchus in the North, not that far from the capital of the empire—a problem with which Xu Rijiu was familiar. This is in fact something I will have occasion to return to: the different regions of China were not exposed to the same threats simultaneously, and therefore the sense of crisis certainly did not surface everywhere in the same way and at the same time.

But we can see in Xu Rijiu's autobiography that for the political leaders of Fujian the menace in the North acquired unexpected immediacy when in the last days of 1629, following a few anxious days during which the *Peking Gazette* was no longer being received in Fuzhou, the shocking news arrived that the Manchus were rapidly approaching the walls of Beijing.

They had been able to do so by crossing the Great Wall from Mongolia and walking through the same dilapidated frontier defenses that Xu Rijiu had inspected a few years before. Clearly it was (again) panic in Beijing—and in a way it was panic everywhere, since the government was requesting all the provinces to send troops to help protect the capital.

Incidentally, the Manchu threat to Beijing at the beginning of 1630 is described at some length, and in a somewhat sarcastic tone, in another late-Ming remarkable autobiography—this one the autobiography of the well-known poet Ye Shaoyuan 葉紹袁, entitled *Tianliao zizhuan nianpu* 天寥自撰年譜 (it ends in 1645, three years before Ye's death). At the time Ye Shaoyuan was a secretary at the Ministry of Public Works—the only position he ever held, in fact he hated being an official, even though he does seem to have been a hard-working and responsible one. Ye was much involved in the frantic and somewhat pathetic efforts to protect the city, to which he devotes an unusually long passage of his autobiography, extremely striking and full of arresting details. And at one point, while he is talking about the massive and totally dysfunctional intervention of the eunuchs in everything, he has this comment: "Then I knew that from now on taking care of the affairs was to be extremely difficult for the dynasty" (乃知國家任事今日始甚難). In other words, Ye regards the events he is describing as a turning point, and for the worse.

Still, despite the alarming situation revealed by the Manchus' aggressivity and efficiency and the poor defense of the capital, I do not think that many people around 1630 had come to the conclusion that the Ming dynasty was doomed. When they hear of the Manchus advancing on Beijing, Xu Rijiu and his colleagues try to reassure themselves by reasoning that the Manchus (the "slaves", *lu* 虜, as they call them), are not powerful like the Jin were when they marched on Kaifeng in 1127, and that the country is under the protection of a prudent and vigorous emperor (競競業業). And it is a fact that, by then, the Manchus and their Chinese advisers had not yet built the powerful and well-organized state machine that would support their drive toward conquest in the years to come. In the same way, the mass uprisings that erupted in the Northwest in 1628 were not yet a national danger, as they would rapidly become.

Yet, it did not take long for a sense of doom to spread to various places and various segments of the Chinese population—not just well-informed high officials or generals directly concerned with defense and close to the front. And this is precisely what I am trying to figure out based on first-person accounts; and for this to do I will now be focusing on Jiangnan.

Let me for the moment focus on Suzhou. There is one admirable source to trace the development of such anxieties, and later the reactions to the fall of the Ming in the North and the Manchu conquest of Jiangnan. It is one of those first-person chronicles I mentioned before. Its title is *Qi Zhen jiwen lu* 啟禎記聞錄, which is in fact misleading because the last four

chapters (out of eight) deal with the period posterior to the Tianqi and Chongzhen eras, up to 1653. The text was published for the first time in Shanghai in 1911, in a small *congshu* titled *Tongshi* 痛史, devoted to about twenty works from the Ming-Qing transition that had been censored or concealed during the Qing. In most catalogues and bibliographies the *Qi Zhen jiwen lu* is attributed to Ye Shaoyuan, but this has been proved to be an impossibility; and if there *is* a preface by Ye Shaoyuan (dated 1638), it is in fact the preface to his own autobiography, it has nothing to do with our text. So, we don't know who is the author, even though there definitely *is* an author, who intervenes quite often, always speaking in the first person and making clear that he experienced personally much of what he is describing. All we can say (from internal evidence) is that he was living in Suzhou and that he was a student (a *shengyuan*)—so, a member of that numerous and noisy group of lower gentry to which I will have occasion to come back. He had apparently enough connections to be able to freely go and talk to the local officials. He displays an extremely conservative view of society, though he can also be scathingly critical of the irresponsibility and cowardice of the higher gentry of Suzhou (of the *xiangshen* 鄉紳).

But the *Qi Zhen jiwen lu* is not the portrait of an individual (as an autobiography would be): it is the very lively and contrasted portrait of a *community* over a period of some thirty years—a portrait of Suzhou. It is a text in which Suzhou, the cultural and economic metropolis of Jiangnan, is depicted in all of its social diversity—from the highest gentry and officials to what a French historian has called "the laboring and the dangerous classes" in a famous book on nineteenth-century Paris. Better than that, the sheer accumulation of the incidents recounted in the text—from the most trivial incidents to major crises—provides us with a sense of what I do not hesitate to call an *urban psychology*: not only the sense of community during the festivals and celebrations that succeeded one another during the year, but also the wide circulation of gossips, the way even the most absurd rumors are likely to agitate the populace, the volatility in social relations, a sort of nervousness in everyday life, as well as sudden accesses of panic or outbursts of violence; and in addition to all of this, a universal concern with local politics. Politics is very much present in the *Qi Zhen jiwen lu*: I mean, the popularity (or not) of the many officials in place among the elite and the small folks; how the officials behave, the decisions they make; their dealings with all the influential retired officials who lived in the city; and there is also the often very direct impact of national politics (like the struggle between Wei Zhongxian and the Donglin party, to give an early example); plus, the sometimes quite violent popular demonstrations spurred by political discontent.

What is indeed striking, already in the 1620s, is the underlying violence and sense of danger that seem constantly in the background, both inside the walls of Suzhou and in the surrounding country. The author of the *Qi Zhen jiwen lu* reports a great many incidents and confrontations erupting for a variety of reasons, including, prominently, fiscal pressure and the resulting tensions between landowners and tenants. (Speaking of fiscal pressure, the

military violence, or even criminality, accompanying the collection of the grain tribute as they are depicted in our sources, here and elsewhere in Jiangnan, are truly abominable.) There is in fact in the text a growing accumulation of entries devoted to all sorts of bizarre anecdotes, not to speak of a variety of episodes of brutality, both collective and individual, that suggest an atmosphere of mounting insecurity, over and above a general sense of social, economic, and moral crisis. The feeling that the period is unlike earlier times manifests itself in the narrative by the constant use of the exclamation *yishi* 異事, "an extraordinary occurrence!", or "something one has not seen in the past", on every sort of occasion; and it is exactly the same in other similar texts of the period. It is the way such "exraordinariness" gradually gives way to a sense of imminent disaster that I'm trying to convey here.

As I recalled (and as everybody knows), the two major threats to the survival of the Ming dynasty from the 1630s onward were the Manchus and the so-called peasant rebellions (the "roving bandits", *liukou* 流寇, as they were called at the time). Seen from Suzhou and the lower Yangzi, these were far-away developments. But there was one exception, to wit, the attack of Zhang Xianzhong's 張獻忠 rebel forces on Anhui and the left bank of the Yangzi in 1635, which led them close to Yangzhou. The author of the *Qi Zhen jiwen lu* has only one line on this event, but it is ominous: the roving bandits, he says, "are getting close to the Southern Capital region" (漸逼南畿); and much worse, "they set on fire and destroyed the imperial tomb"—that is, the tomb of Zhu Yuanzhang in Fengyang—and symbolically this was indeed a terrible blow for the Chongzhen emperor.

It is somewhat different with the Manchus threat. To be sure, the Manchus did not approach Jiangnan until 1645; but their forays into North China, the constant pressure they exerted, and more especially the humiliations they inflicted on the Ming house, are regularly mentioned in the text, with comments that become more and more alarmist. The inhabitants of Suzhou knew that there was a serious problem with the Manchus when the raid on the capital in 1630 (which I mentioned earlier) translated into a sharp increase in fiscal brutality, with dire local consequences (大為擾害). In 1635 again the Manchus attacked the imperial tombs near Beijing and withdrew after several months of destroying and plundering, leaving behind ironic inscriptions to the effect that "officials are excused from escorting us" (各官免送); hence the *Qi Zhen jiwen lu* author's lament: "Such is their arrogance! Alas, our magnificent China is unable to severely punish them!" (其恣橫至此，惜堂堂中國，不能大創之者). Then in 1638 it gets closer: after hovering around the capital, but without attacking it, the Manchus advanced south along the Grand Canal and occupied the important city of Linqing (in Shandong) for several months; and there again our author comments: "That they should be able to achieve their aims like that, to freely come and go—there is reason for worrying even more about the future!" (得志若此，且去住自由，將來更足慮矣).

Worrying about the future—not only the future of the reigning dynasty, but also one's own future—and with an increasing sense of urgency, became at the same time more intense and much more widespread during the very last years of the Ming (the early 1640s). And one major reason for this, far more immediate than the fear of the Manchus or the roving bandits, was the sequence of never-seen natural disasters and famines that totally devastated Jiangnan, as well as many other regions, during this period. They seemed to signal a near complete breakdown of the normal functioning of both nature and society.

In Jiangnan the sequence can be consistently followed in the *Qi Zhen jiwen lu*; but as we shall see this particular account, already rather striking by itself, is spectacularly complemented by several first-person testimonies, more localized, and also going much more into detail. It started in 1638 with a major drought that turned out to be only the beginning of a deadly series. There was practically no rain from winter to summer. Even though in the end the peasants in the countryside around Suzhou were able to salvage about half the harvest by pumping water into the ricefields day and night wherever that was possible, the situation was deemed serious enough by the authorities that they decided to put together a major session of sacrifices and prayers in the main Daoist temple in the city, the Xuanmiaoguan 玄妙觀, which was attended by the entire officialdom, in the hope of bringing back the rain.

Then, at the very end of summer, the region was struck by a calamity hitherto totally unknown to its inhabitants—once again, something said to be truly "extraordinary": a massive attack of locusts from north of the Yangzi. It has been shown by scholars that locust invasions south of the river are indeed very unusual; so, the amazement of the Jiangnan population and officials when they did see locusts, in 1638 and again three years later, is only natural. One of the best examples of this might be the striking description offered by the author of the *Qi Zhen jiwen lu* of the enormous swarm of locusts crossing the Yangzi, uninterrupted for several days, hiding the sun and filling the sky, as he could see it from the top of the Jinshan 金山 in Zhenjiang, where he was travelling at the time.

When the locust landed the damage was massive, our author also says. But the consequence of all these calamities that seems to preoccupy him *the most*—even more than the obvious plight of all these people who complain noisily they are losing their means of existence—is the increasingly frequent confrontation between landowners and tenants: the landowners refuse to reduce the rents (because the fiscal pressure and brutality of tribute collection are only intensifying); and the tenants refuse to pay their rents (because of the disaster). And more and more often this confrontation results in spats of violence. The local authorities, whose preoccupation number one is to prevent a social explosion, tend to favor the tenants and to grant rent reductions or postponements; but for our author this is just encouraging the collapse of authority.

The text also offers a rare description of the effects of the drought *in town*: the canals of Suzhou drying up; the lack of drinking water, which must be delivered by peddlers who go get it outside the city and sell it at a very high price; in winter, the fast rise in the price of firewood; the fires that erupt here and there and consume entire blocks of houses; *and* the multiplication of robberies. "This is not a nice situation" (*fei jiajing ye* 非佳景也) our author concludes; and this is the year, I recall, when the news of the Manchu occupation of Linqing make him "worrying even more about the future".

Again, it is the improbable accumulation in the text, month after month and year after year, of facts, events, hearsays, political and military news, and so forth, which it would be much too long to detail here, that provides us with a sense of how, in the perception of one particular observer, the situation in Suzhou and beyond was slowly, and then rapidly, deteriorating in every respect, and with no end in view. Until the terrible end—the collapse of dynastic order—*was* in view. But we are not yet there.

The drought continues in 1639, less severe than the year before, but still threatening enough to spur the governor and officials to go pray for rain and snow, this time in one of Suzhou's main Buddhist monasteries. And what is more disturbing, social tensions (the "sprouts of rebellion" 亂萌, says the text) do not abate. The following year, 1640, is free of any disaster, good harvests are reported in Suzhou and Songjiang; *and yet* the price of grain on the market rises to a level totally unprecedented—according to our author, up to 2 ounces of silver per *shi* of rice. Modern historians have shown that such prices were not so "unprecedented", in fact; but the rising trend is un mistakable, and we can see in numerous sources that very soon this trend would be ways sharper. The point in 1640 Suzhou and Songjiang, however, is that the high prices were a consequence of floods and droughts in neighboring prefectures, hence "no imported grain on the market" (客米不至), as our author says. As we know, Suzhou and Songjiang were in a general way deficient in food grains, for a variety of reasons, such as a high level of urbanization, the development of handicrafts and proto-industry, and a sizable proportion of the arable devoted to commercial crops, notably cotton. In other words, the two prefectures were heavily dependent on imports for their food consumption. So, in 1640, very high prices in the absence of any disaster; and as a consequence, turmoil in the city of Suzhou, riots, attacks on the residences of rich people accused of hoarding and speculating, and the looting of their stores of grain, which apparently could be quite huge.

The author of the *Qi Zhen jiwenlu* also mentions the same sort of rioting and attacks on the rich in other cities in the region and in their countryside. In Wujiang (not far south of Suzhou on the Grand Canal), he says that the violence was such that the governor sent the army and the locals shut themselves in the city—he claims that it "almost resulted in a major rebellion" (幾成大亂). In Qingpu 青浦 (near Songjiang), where he was staying at the time, he could see

the violence with his own eyes. In Wuxi, a former Hanlin academician named Ma Shiqi 馬世奇, who happened to be extremely unpopular with the local populace, refused to sell grain at reduced price, and after his residence had been set on fire he was beaten up by a mob that had first assembled in the Chenghuangmiao 城隍廟 to list his crimes. (It is interesting to note in passing that, whereas in this description Ma Shiqi is a very nasty individual, not only wealthy but also violent and corrupt, in his official biography in the *Mingshi* it is the opposite: he was not only an influential court official, but also a model of integrity, he lived poorly—he is even said to have refused a gift from a local official to help burying his father in Wuxi in 1640, proclaiming that this was a time of famine and that the people of Suzhou needed the money, so, exactly the opposite of what is reported in the *Qi Zhen jiwen lu*! But according to the *Mingshi* he had an honorable end since he committed suicide in Beijing after the death of the Chongzhen emperor.)

The above are as many entries in the *Qi Zhen jiwen lu* under the year 1640, and they do add both detail and immediacy to the terse mentions we can find in standard sources like local gazetteers. And, let me add, they are confirmed, and in fact supplemented, by other first-person sources. At least two such texts describe the same kind of price panic and riots, at exactly the same time (in the middle of the 6th lunar month of 1640). One is Ye Shaoyuan's autobiography, which I have already mentioned. Ye Shaoyuan lived in Wujiang, not in the city but in the countryside, and what he is talking about is what he has seen in the villages around: mobs climbing over the residences of the rich who refuse to sell or to loan grain, or demolishing the gates to get in and plunder, etc. (But Ye does not mention the quasi rebellion in the city of Wujiang.)

The other text I wish to introduce at this point is another first-person chronicle, not unlike the *Qi Zhen jiwen lu*. It is called *Yantang jianwen zaji* 研堂見聞雜記, and like the *Qi Zhen jiwen lu* its manuscript was published for the first time in 1911 in the collection *Tongshi*. The anonymous author has been found to be a certain Wang Jiazhen 王家禎 (whose *zi* was Yantang), who lived in a town of Jiading subprefecture along the Yangzi named Shaxi 沙溪. Internal evidence shows him to have been a late-Ming early-Qing government student (*shengyuan*) with a strong Restoration Society (*fushe* 復社) inclination. The text is almost entirely devoted to post-conquest Jiading, up to the first Kangxi years; but among the three Ming entries at the beginning there is a rather graphic narrative of the 1640 disturbances in Jiading, at exactly the same time as in the other places, spurred by the same sharp rise in food prices, and with the same kind of arson and plundering by famished mobs specifically aiming the residences of the super-rich known for their greed and selfishness (all of them officials, and their names are given in the text).

I should insist that sources like those I'm discussing here offer more than a smattering of exciting vignettes adding local color and interesting details to a story we already know more or less. The way they are recounted, the incidents I have mentioned are explicitly related to a context of extreme social antagonism, exacerbated not only by environmental factors nobody can control, but also—and this is graphically illustrated in our texts—by the irresponsibility of a wealthy and highly commercialized dominant class that will consider helping the victims of famine only under intense pressure from the authorities and when the situation is getting truly explosive. Our authors, who are all members of the gentry (at least the lower gentry), are horrified by the violence and disorder, and they approve of the repression and of the execution of ringleaders by the authorities; but they are conscious that natural disasters and high prices are only exacerbating the dysfunction of late-Ming society. As the author of the *Qi Zhen jiwen lu* says at one point, "reason makes it natural that being rich arouse hatred!" (以富致怨，理固然也).

So, the situation was bad enough—a succession of extremely difficult years, one might say; but what the inhabitants of Jiangnan could not anticipate is that the horrendous famine of the next two years would bring about a near-total collapse of the economic foundations of society—indeed, an absolute tragedy; and of course, they could not anticipate that further on the disappearance of the Ming regime and the Qing invasion would for a short while dissolve the political underpinnings of the social order and create a situation of complete anarchy, as we shall see tomorrow.

In formal historical writings, natural disasters, famine and other calamities are signaled by conventional formulas such as *dahan* 大旱, *dashui* 大水, *daji* 大饑, and so on; and when there is an attempt at description, it is most often resorting to a conventional rhetoric based on well-worn formulas (generally in four characters), like *chidi qianli* 赤地千里, *daojin xiangwang* 道殣相望, *yizi ershi* 易子而食, etc. Official reports, when they have been preserved, may add a layer of detail, for example the proportion of villages or of land struck by the disaster, the percentage (or rather, number of tenths) of losses of production. But none of this—or very little, in my experience—allows us to get a sense of how the people exposed to such events *lived through them*. Here again, the first-person accounts I am using help us better understand how such cataclysms were experienced by their victims.

The *Qi Zhen jiwen lu*, again, has the advantage of providing a consistent account of these terrible two years, 1641 and 1642, as seen and heard from Suzhou; but as we shall see, other authors offer even more gripping and personal narratives, in particular in the Songjiang area, which appears to have been even more badly hit. Anyway, in and around Suzhou the development went on as follows—and I limit myself to the main points.

Social tensions continued and food prices kept rising to new heights during the transition from 1640 to 1641 (the text cites a lot of prices along the way), and despite the administration's efforts to coerce the owners of stores of grain to part with at least a fraction of them, and other preventive measures, the mention of "famine victims" (*jimin* 饑民), of dead people lying by the roads, gets more and more frequent in the text. But the tipping point in 1641 was the loss of the crop of winter wheat due to the near absence of rain throughout the spring and summer; and then a combination of drought, a deadly epidemic, locusts again, cold temperatures—the net result of which, according to this source, was that what could be harvested in the end was less than three or four tenths of normal. (This, in the famine relief regulations codified in the Qing, would signal a major disaster.) And the author concludes: "We do not know how the future will be in the end!" (未知向後竟何如也).

At this point, he still speaks of what we might call a differential impact of the famine: the rich are overburdened with taxes (but can still pay them), the middle class (中人) can hardly feed itself, and the poor have nothing to eat but grass and grain chaff, they do not look like humans any more, and may simply die. But in the following year, 1642, even such distinctions tend to disappear. 1642 was a year of total disaster in Jiangnan. In our text the mortality is now massive, both in the city and in the country, with dead people everywhere, even cannibalism—a thing one had heard of in Henan or Shandong, without being sure it could be true, and now we have it here, under our own eyes, even in town! There are ruined properties everywhere, crowds of beggars; and if things seem to improve in the summer with a promising wheat crop, a new wave of epidemics cripples a significant part of the workforce and prevents the transplantation of the rice.

For the inhabitants of such a favored and prosperous place as Suzhou, such terrible occurrences seemed completely improbable. Indeed, the last major episode of drought in the region went back to 1589: only very old people remembered it, and they said that today it is much worse. The *Qi Zhen jiwen lu* insists many times on such strangeness, and so do several other texts which recount the same things in a way even more personal and striking, and which I'd like to briefly introduce. They mostly concern Songjiang prefecture, which seems to have suffered even more, and especially Shanghai.

One of the most remarkable among these testimonies comes from an author whose way of recording things is, one might say, refreshingly devoid of rhetoric. This is Yao Tinglin 姚廷遴, at the time of the famine a somewhat difficult and unhappy teenager aged 14. He belonged to a wealthy official family of Shanghai that would go bankrupt and disperse soon after the conquest. Some twenty years later, now a commoner living in the country, Yao started writing his autobiography (his self-*nianpu*), based on his remembrances and on the notes that he claims he took since he was a young kid. The text, known as the *Linian ji* 歷年記, remained

in manuscript form until it was published in Shanghai in 1962, and then in a more accessible edition in 1982. It is a rather extraordinary document, strikingly realistic and completely uninhibited in its expression. Besides, beyond recording things "seen and heard" (見聞) and occasionally referring to the larger historical context in the region, it rightly claims to be a historical testimony on the extraordinary changes Jiangnan society went through from the Ming to the Qing. There have been a few studies of it (including by myself), but much remains to be said about its content—such as, precisely, his accounts of the great famine I am discussing and of the Qing conquest in his region.

Yao Tinglin's remembrances confirms that, following the drought, locusts, and other calamities in 1641, the famine became a truly massive phenomenon during the winter leading to 1642, which was marked by countless crowds of vagrants walking the roads in search of food. But his most gripping descriptions, at the same time extremely detailed and precise, are on what he saw in the city of Shanghai: the soup kitchens set up by the magistrate in the Chenghuangmiao and two other temples, using the grain that could still be extracted from the rich; the hundreds of corpses collected every day at the city gates and thrown by bunches of three into two huge pits by workers specially hired for that; the abandoned children massing on the bridges and at the crossroads… Now everybody, including the rich, has the emaciated look (菜色) of malnourished people. Later during the summer, on the occasion of a trip to the country, Yao can see the trees stripped of their bark and people pulling out the grass and reeds to eat the roots—in other words, something more familiar in descriptions of famine in North China. He also speaks of normal-looking people who collapse and die on the street, or of those who came to die every night under a canopy in front of the Yao residence. And he has this rather striking statement: "This is the year when I started going out with friends, we went drinking every evening. When I came back home in the middle of the night, I knew that if I took the bridge of the post relay inn there would be some corpses lying there; and when in darker places I treaded on a body, it sure would be a dead person. (…). If today I'm not afraid of looking at a corpse, it's because I saw so many of them [at the time]!"

In the young Yao's account, and in others as well, not only there is death everywhere, but the society seems to be on the brink of unravelling. Unseemly crimes are perpetrated, like bringing abandoned children home to kill and eat them, or even trying to make a small business out of it. When the criminals are caught, the magistrate inflicts public punishments of a cruelty amounting to lynching in front of a furious crowd. It is as if punishments, the order of society, and nature itself had lost their moorings at the same time.

There are other testimonies offering more or less the same sort of descriptions. One particularly interesting is a collection of jottings full of autobiographical information, due to a certain Zeng Yuwang 曾羽王 and titled *Yiyou biji* 乙酉筆記 ("Notes from the year 1645"), published at the same time as the *Linian ji* in the 1980s. The text may in fact be extracts from

a larger work, now lost. Despite its title it covers the years both before and after the conquest (through 1668). Zeng Yuwang is a very different person from Yao Tingling. He was born in 1608 and was a student (a *shengyuan*) from Huating (that is, Songjiang); his family had lived for generations in a walled town named Qingcun 青村鎮, located on the coast, a place that could boast a sizable elite of literati and military families, which he mentions frequently. He earned his living by teaching in the home of rich people in various places; and this, together with his travels to attend the regular local examinations, made him much more mobile than Yao Tinglin at the time. Not to speak of trips to Songjiang during the dearth in 1642 to try to buy some grain on markets that had almost nothing to offer, and at terribly high prices. Indeed, his more harrowing descriptions are about travelling in the country and from town to town: the fields strewn with corpses, the attacks on travelers who might transport some food, the crowds of abandoned children on the roads, dead people everywhere on the streets, and so on.

Another important witness is Ye Mengzhu 業夢珠, a Shanghai native born in 1623, yet another "student", and the author of the *Yueshi bian* 閱世編. I would describe the *Yueshe bian*, which was put to print for the first time in 1935, as a highly informed private local gazetteer of Songjiang and its vicinity, with materials up to 1690—and not only private, but also first-person, as the author is constantly inserting his own testimony about what he saw, telling about what happened to him, or delivering his own comments. It is in fact a quite remarkable work. One of its characteristics is Ye Mengzhu's insistence on everything that has changed from Ming to Qing, a sort of ongoing comparison in which there is no little nostalgia for the Ming. (As a matter of fact, we find the same sort of comparison in Yao Tinglin's *Linian ji*, indeed in an almost systematic way; but Yao for his part finds many improvements in the Qing.)

Like the others, Ye gives some harrowing descriptions of the famine, in particular when he speaks of the sufferings of the thousands of people converging on Songjiang from far away, with women and children in tow, in the hope of getting some food at the soup kitchens set up by the prefect. Many of them die on the road, whether on the way to, or on the way back because they are no longer fit to eat that much; and there are orphaned children and wandering women everywhere. But Ye Mengzhu's most interesting remarks perhaps are on the plight of the producers of cotton and cotton cloth: as he explains, their livelihood entirely depends on exports, both in the region (for raw cotton) and in North China (for cloth); but now, with Shandong suffering from an even worse famine and Henan totally devastated by rebellions, the big merchants who used to come to buy the stuff did not even try, so that the local producers had no alternative but "stay and wait for death" (立而待斃).

What we could call the cotton belt in Jiangnan, where the many people growing cotton and all the workers and artisans involved in the industry were particularly exposed to high prices,

covered several districts along the Yangzi estuary, like Shanghai (where according to Ye Mengzhu half of the arable is devoted to cotton and the rest to rice), Jiading, and Taicang.

As it happens, Taicang is the place where our last author today was born and lived most of his life. This author is Lu Shiyi 陸世儀. Contrary to the others I mentioned, Lu Shiyi, who was born in 1611, is not unknown to historians. His reputation is mainly due to his post-conquest writings as a neo-Confucian philosopher and statecraft scholar. But during the last years of the Ming he was no more than a local scholar in Taicang, a *shengyuan* among many others. Yet he had many social and intellectual connections in the region, and in particular he displayed very early a taste for creating associations and other forms of Confucian militantism. In addition, Lu Shiyi is quite representative of the craze (at the time) for examining oneself, one's acts, one's thoughts, even one's dreams, writing everything down and discussing it with one's peers. And it is to this trend that the diary I will mention here belongs. It is called *Zhixue lu* 志學錄, and appeared in print for the first time in 1830 only. Despite being a rather long piece, it covers less than a year, from April 1641 to January 1642. So, Lu records day after day everything he did, with a constant preoccupation for its moral correctness (or not), and with a kind of balance sheet of the good and the bad every ten days.

Now what interests us here is that along the way there is a quantity of information on the famine in Jiangnan, which was entering its worst stage during the winter 1641; and it is, more especially, the way Lu and the small group of friends he is constantly dealing with *reacted* in the face of the terrible conditions they could observe around them, *and* also how they reacted to the more distant threats of war that loomed ahead.

In 1641, Lu Shiyi and his friends collaborated in the setting up and the running of a philanthropic society—a *tongshanhui* 同善會—on the model created by the well-known late-Ming Confucian activists Gao Panlong 高攀龍 and Chen Longzheng 陳龍正. But as has been shown by scholars like Fuma Susumu or Joanna Handlin Smith, this kind of associations were intended at improving the moral and material condition of the poor, rather than famine relief strictly speaking, even though they would participate in relief activities when necessary. As a matter of fact, the Taicang *tongshanhui* seems to have ceased to function around November 1641, when the famine situation turned really ugly. Lu Shiyi has many descriptions of famine conditions, but the most striking are found during the winter months. For example, on the occasion of a trip to Suzhou to attend the examinations, Lu and his student friends are appalled by the death and desolation on the streets of Suzhou (similar to what we find in the *Qi Zhen jiwen lu*), worse than at Taicang, according to Lu, although when they are back to Taicang it is now the same. The most terrible occurrence in Lu Shiyi's diary occurs on January 26, 1642, when he can see with his own eyes a woman devouring her own child in front of the Taicang *yamen*. As he exclaims in horror, even wild beasts do not act with such cruelty, and even in the central plains (that is, in North China) it would be unthinkable: and

yet it is here, in our Taicang, that a woman did it for the first time! This, says Lu, is a perversion of the ways of the world (此世道之大變); and the fact that the magistrate inflicted only a minor penalty on the woman only shows that governing by punishments has been lost (於是乎失政刑矣). As he exclaims several times in his diary, "I don't know how this will end!" (不知如何底止也).

As I already said, the combination of a breakdown of the order of society, aggravated as it was by disasters and famine such as had never been seen in the region, on the one hand, *and* on the other hand all the alarming news of rebellion and invasion getting closer—this combination appears to have shaped the mindset of many people in Jiangnan during the very last years of the Ming. Lu Shiyi and his colleagues certainly did not escape this drift. Lu speaks very often of the fright, even the panic, caused by the news of cities having fallen to the rebel armies, closer and closer to Jiangnan; and even worse, by the attacks of *pirates*, who are now very active along the Yangzi—and of course places like Jiading are particularly exposed.

Now it is interesting to find in Lu Shiyi's diary that, in the face of all this uncertainty, Lu and his friends of the *tongshanhui*, however devoted to the public good they may be, discuss at length about plans to flee the impending dangers and abscond to a place where they could study in complete safety (避地讀書), until the situation returns to normal. They also discuss how to defend themselves in such a place if the need arises, and even go through some military training, with not much convincing results it seems—Lu Shiyi acknowledges that he was more adept at reading military treatises than at handling a spear. Several places of refuge were discussed, the last one apparently a remote corner of Jiading; but obviously nothing came out of it.

There are other examples in our texts of this instinct for absconding in the wilderness when the catastrophe everybody was expecting would happen. To cite just one, there is in the *Linian ji*, under the year 1643, an allusion to Yao Tinglin's great-uncle's wish to escape future military calamities, and to his project to acquire a place far from the city with a dense bamboo plantation where he could abscond. This great-uncle, Yao Yongji 姚永濟, was the great man of the Yao family, the only one to have earned the *jinshi* and to have had an official career—a very long career during which he had accumulated a huge fortune; so, he might feel particularly exposed in case of trouble.

Because deadly trouble, as I said, was widely anticipated in a region that seemed to have been caught in a downwards spiral, and where some (like Ye Shaoyuan in 1642) spoke of the "chaos of the end of an era" (末世亂離). The successes of the Manchus were known to everybody in Jiangnan, but this was a far-away nuisance—a terrible nuisance to be sure—and I do not think that many people thought of the Manchus as an immediate threat to the Ming

dynasty. As a matter of fact, the Manchus' entry into Beijing, when it was Wu Sangui 吳三桂 who was expected, took everybody by surprise. Seen from Jiangnan, the real, terrifying threat, as we just saw, was the rebel armies of Li Zicheng and Zhang Xianzhong, which had devastated a large part of China for more than a decade and were now said to get closer and closer. *These* were the enemies whose invasion was anticipated. Against such invaders—mere bandits—the dilemma of flight or resistance, or submission, was set in very different terms from what it would be in 1645 and after, when the invaders were an alien regime that was already occupying the throne in Beijing and claimed legitimacy. This is what I will discuss tomorrow.