Chinese Autobiographical Writing
Yao, Ping, Zhang, Cong Ellen, Ebrey, Patricia Buckley

Published by University of Washington Press

Yao, Ping, et al.
Chinese Autobiographical Writing: An Anthology of Personal Accounts.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/109909.

⇒ For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/109909
ENVIRONMENTAL CATASTROPHES

Harrowing reports by Chen Qide 陳其德 (fl. 1640s) and Pu Songling 蒲松齡 (1640–1715)

During the seventeenth century, much of Eurasia experienced a “little ice age.” Climate change, especially a drop in temperature, brought environmental stress, often leading to famine, insect infestations, epidemics, and violence. Disorder of this sort contributed to the collapse of the Ming dynasty, as desperate farmers formed gangs and ravaged the countryside, soldiers deserted and joined them, and the Ming government lacked the resources to alleviate the situation. The Manchus’ Qing dynasty restored order, but they could not do anything about the weather, which continued to make life difficult in various places at certain times. Among the abundant sources that survive from this period are detailed accounts of what particular places experienced as disaster struck.

The first of the two accounts below was written by Chen Qide in 1641, near the end of the Ming dynasty. Although one book of moral advice by him survives, little else is known about him beyond what he reports in this
essay. He was from Tongxiang County in Zhejiang, not far from Hangzhou, generally a part of the country that did not have to worry about drought. As he reports, however, in the early seventeenth century, the region faced crisis after crisis. He wrote a follow-up account the next year, reporting that things had only gotten worse with further spread of disease and death.

The second account was written in the early eighteenth century by Pu Songling, who lived in northern China (Shandong) and offers evidence that even during the relatively peaceful years of the Kangxi reign (1661–1722), severe weather could lead to social problems of many sorts. Pu today is known primarily for the fictional stories that he wrote, but he was a widely read scholar with broad interests.

Although it would seem that both authors are reporting what they had learned firsthand, they adopt the style of the historian, trying to write objectively about the general situation in their area, and do not mention what they or their families personally experienced. Perhaps to make their case as forcefully as possible, neither stresses the impact of these calamities on those closest to them.

Record of Disasters, by Chen Qide

I was born too late to see the glories of the founding Hongwu [1368–1398] and Yongle [1403–1424] reigns, nor did I manage to see the dazzling brilliance of the reigns of Chenghua [1465–1487] and Hongzhi [1488–1505]. But I do remember the early years of the Wanli period [1573–1620], the time of my youth, when prosperity was widespread, commoners lived abundantly, and the cost of a peck of rice never exceeded 0.3 or 0.4 tael of silver. At that time, anyone who sought to trade using millet was turned down with a haughty sneer. Wheat and beans were fed to the cattle and pigs. Every household consumed fresh fish and fine meat.

People thought that such a situation would go on forever. However, as people grew indulgent, Heaven turned against the miscreants. Within the flash of an eye, in the wuzi year [1588], rain fell in a continuous downpour. Far and near, all the land turned into swamps. The next year, there was a drought that extended over a thousand li. For two months, the rivers didn’t have even a spoonful of water to keep the grass alive. During this time, one picul of rice could be sold for 1.6 taels of silver. Within a month of this great surge in the price of rice, people had stripped the uncultivated land of plants
and the trees of bark. In the wilderness, there was no more green grass, nor
did trees have their bark untouched. People wandered off, and everywhere
corpses were lying in the roads.

Between the end of this crisis and the early years of the Tianqi reign period
[1621], although the price of rice was constantly fluctuating, conditions did
not reach those of severe famine. However, the vicious clique of Wei Zhong-
xian [1568–1627] tyrannically oppressed the gentry scholars. They turned
the nation’s loyal and righteous heroes into angry ghosts. Heaven was angry
above, and the people were resentful below. Although the new emperor was
brilliant and determined and exterminated Wei and his followers, the country
could not recover from the devastation caused by the Wei clique. There were
still many bandits and thieves, and the troubles within and without lasted
more than twenty years.

In the thirteenth year of the Chongzhen reign [1640], heavy downpours
lasted for almost a month. The water rose two feet higher than it had in the
Wanli period [1588]. Whatever direction one looked, everything was covered
with water. Boats were tied to bedposts; fish and shrimp frolicked in wells and
sinks. Those with multistory houses used the top floors as a refuge. Those
who had no upper story either lived on their rooftops or climbed up towers,
afraid that they would not live through the day.

At first the price of rice was only a little more than one tael per picul, then
it went up to more than two taels. After the floods retreated, the farmers of
the Wuxing region searched for good young seedlings, competing for these
rare commodities. Even during the last ten days of the seventh month, one
could still see the boats departing one after the other.

The next year, the fourteenth of the Chongzhen reign [1641], the drought
demon brought disaster. The rivers all dried up. The price of rice suddenly
jumped from two taels to three taels per picul. Finally, in my village, a single
peck was selling for 0.4 tael. Although there were twice as many wheat shoots
than the previous year, there were not enough of them to fill people up. Some
ate the bran of wheat and rice; others made wild grass and tree bark their main
dishes, with bran as side dishes. Even the wealthy families all ate porridge
mixed with noodles. Those who ate two meals a day claimed that they were
full, but most of the people had only one. Husbands deserted their wives,
and fathers deserted their children, as each person put himself or herself
first. Consumer goods piled up in the markets and could be purchased for
half-price. As for luxuries and toys, people did not even bother to ask the
prices! Alas, people had reached the most extreme limit of desperation. Not only was it impossible to get a loan, but also there was no place to pawn one's possessions. Though one called upon Heaven for help, there was no response. Though one begged at gates, no relief was obtained. Given these circumstances, those who cried bitterly for help in the morning by evening might be so weak they could only crawl. Once they fell, it was like they had sunk into a churning wave, making survival impossible. There were stories of those who still had morsels of food in their mouths although they had been lying dead for some time. No benevolent person could fail to weep on seeing these scenes of extreme suffering.

Next, those who had the luck to survive and managed to get their crops planted were struck by locusts, which swarmed over the fields and destroyed the young sprouts. Then the rivers dried up. The pumps on the wells could bring up no water, or just a dribble, too little to nourish those withered shoots.

Then came the epidemics. Five or six out of every ten families fell victim to disease. Some of the dead could be buried in wooden coffins; many, however, were wrapped in reeds and had only flies attending their funerals. Uncounted dead were thrown into the rivers. The price of daily necessities increased several-fold; even the price of young chickens and ducklings was four or five times higher than usual. If they could not afford the several dozen cash necessary to buy bean curd, a family of eight might have nothing to eat. Moreover, since feeding pigs had gotten so expensive, even middle-income families could no longer afford to raise them. Those with two sows had already moved them into their cooking pots.

Previously, one tael of silver could get a whole pig. But now even the price of a pig’s head was about 0.8 to 0.9 tael. In the past, the racket of chickens and dogs could be heard throughout one's neighborhood; now to hear a single cock crow was as rare as the cry of a crane at Huating, even if one carefully listened in a busy marketplace all morning long.

Whereas previously famines were confined to one prefecture or one province, this time the famine not only struck in Zhejiang; it also spread nearby to Nanjing and as far as Shandong, Henan, and Hubei. The suffering was especially severe in Nanjing, where people who were not killed by armed men died of starvation or, if not that, of disease. How could people cope with so much? Was the Creator destroying the people because they had multiplied so rapidly? Or had people so wasted the gifts of Heaven that Heaven hated to see such waste and therefore punished them?
Suffering leads people to aspire to goodness. Yet when they have enough food and clothing, they get indulgent, which gives rise to evil desires. If people could just remember that the cost of rice may at times equal that of pearls and the cost of firewood that of cassia, then they may be able to attain the great Dao, not to mention being able to find ways to support themselves.

I fear that later generations will not always keep these events in mind and stay vigilant. Therefore, I have written these earnest words to let people know what happened. Please do not look on this as useless words.

Written in the fourteenth year of the Chongzhen reign period [1641], on the fifteenth of the seventh month, the day of the Ghost Festival, by retired scholar Songtao.

source: Tongxiang xianzhi 桐鄉縣誌 (Guangxu ed.), 20.8a–9a.

First Account of Disasters in the Forty-Third Year of the Kangxi Reign Period, by Pu Songling

In the fourth month in the guiwei year, the forty-third year in the Kangxi reign period [1704], red rain fell. It was a lean year for both wheat and barley. On the twenty-fourth day of the fifth month, wind and rain lasted a whole day. From then on, rain did not stop for a long time, so much so that clear water flowed between the ridges of the fields. As a result, farmers were not able to weed and weeds became rampant and competed with the crops. It was not until the nineteenth day of the sixth month that it stopped raining and fully cleared up.

By then, the standing water in low places reached people's shin bones, and even after many sunny days, the water still had not dried up. Having been exposed to the burning sun, the water in the fields was close to boiling, killing all the seedlings. There was not much standing water on the high fields, but stink bugs ran rampant there and were extremely malodorous. They mounted in large numbers on the seedlings and bamboo shoots and would fly out when one broke the leaves and stems of those plants. By midday, they would hide underground. Seedlings bitten by the stink bugs all died or decayed and smelled bad. Even oxen and horses refused to feed on them. Because they came in large numbers and were good at hibernating, stink bugs could survive freezing conditions. Before the wheat crop leafed out, they were everywhere and impossible to chase away or eliminate, wreaking nonstop havoc.
The only crop stink bugs did not like was beans, so they were spared at first. But before the bean crop bloomed, when the need for precipitation was the greatest, not one drop of rain fell. The local people had no way to keep their hopes up. By harvest time, when people went to gather the beans in the morning, they saw blooms, blighted pods, and some beans amid the shimmering dew. One mu of land yielded only two pecks of beans. There seemed no logic to the actions of Heaven.

Because there had been a drought, the soil was not moist even half a foot down, so planting wheat had to be delayed. There was a light rain on the fifth day of the eighth month, but the amount was not enough to make plowing possible. Some farmers became impatient, digging up the surface and sowing some of their land instead of leaving it completely untended. It rained twice as much on the twenty-seventh. By then the weather had turned cold, so no one dared to delay any longer. When they plowed their fields, the moisture had barely reached the plowshares. They plowed and then flattened the field, covering up the seeds with a layer of damp soil, then another layer of dry soil [to preserve moisture]. Five days later, the land became too dry to plow.

The seedlings that were sowed the earliest sprouted, with some dying and more opening up, but they were as thin as a thread. Most of the seeds sowed later did not germinate. If you bent over to look closely, you could probably see one or two sprouts. The seeds that were planted around the mid-eighth month looked neat, but because the ridges had not been maintained [due to the flooding], the soil was poor. The hope was to rejuvenate the fields with next year’s precipitation. Yet, it did not snow at all the whole winter. When it became slightly warmer, yellow dust blew so hard one couldn’t see the road.

Because of the lack of timely rainfall, hunger became common everywhere in the six prefectures. Grain prices skyrocketed. By the end of the twelfth month, one peck of wheat or sorghum cost seven hundred cash and beans and millet cost five hundred cash. Also, sellers were strict with the type of payments they would accept. Earlier, the government announced that it would allow people to use all the different types of currency in circulation in the market but that when the newly minted coins arrived, other varieties would not be permitted anymore. Vendors, frightened by this policy, would accept only official coins. But most of the government-issued coins had been split into two by private casters, only a few left whole. New official coins did not arrive for a long time. Prices continued to rise to the point that even a thousand cash was not enough to buy one pint of rice. Many in Jiaozhou and
Laizhou [both in Shandong] starved to death with money in their hands, ready to buy food. Not until local officials threatened vendors with heavy penalties if they did not accept unofficially issued money did a variety of currency circulate again.

There was a husks-and-sweepings market in the county seat that stretched for one li where everything would be sold out by dusk. On the empty ground that was used to husk grain, one bag of swept-up leftovers [grain mixed with husks and dirt] cost fifty to sixty cash; a bag of mixed millet with sweepings cost twice as much. Beggars passed by households nonstop and couldn’t even get food made of sweepings and blighted grain. When there is an abundant harvest, large merchants are the wealthy; when there is a hunger, the frugal farmers are the wealthy; during a famine, the diligent are the wealthy. At this time, if a family had a thousand piculs of grain and thousands of rows of cabbages and chives, their wealth was seen as equal to a high nobleman’s. The court diverted five hundred thousand piculs of government grain and sent over a hundred Manchu officials to manage relief work. But Zizhou was not considered a disaster area so did not receive any relief grain. Still, imperial grace did reach Zizhou, as the residents were exempted from the spring and fall taxes. This was the work of Heaven and Earth; even the thunder and lightning deities do not get to choose where it rains.

After New Year’s day, it snowed on the twenty-seventh day of the first month, then again on the twenty-third of the second month. When the snow melted, the wheat seeds that had not germinated all sprouted and grew well. Those who did not plant wheat the previous fall went north to search for seeds for spring planting. Every day, they went to look for wheat seeds, which by now sold for fifteen hundred cash per peck. They nonetheless carried the seeds home from faraway places and planted them all.

After that, the rain stopped and the fall wheat crop died from drought. The spring wheat was killed by stink bugs. Zhuangwan wheat for high land died from extreme heat. Only the autumn drought-resistant wheat grew to be four inches tall and bore some tiny ears of wheat. Even a family owning several mu of wheat fields, in order to survive, had to have the men go out to beg and the women harvest the wheat, carry it home, dry it in the yard, then husk it. By then, grain prices surged, to a thousand cash per peck. Those selling their sons or wives hired thugs as brokers and had to pay them commissions.

In the early spring, people peeled off and consumed the bark of all the elm trees. Looking from afar, one saw a host of beautiful trees, poplar, willow,
Chinese scholar trees, with all their leaves and branches gone, leaving only bald trunks. Families guarded the edible wild herbs grown on their property. If one approached a village known for vulgar social customs, one saw hooligans with baskets on their backs, roaming around in groups of tens, even hundreds, just like ants and monkeys. People did not dare to shout at them but only looked askance.

By now, all the six prefectures had suffered from crop failure, with Zizhou having had it twice. All the six prefectures suffered from drought as well, but Zizhou also suffered from stink bugs. All the six prefectures suffered from famine, but Zizhou also suffered from banditry. Banditry began in the winter, to the point where no village was left undisturbed in an entire township and not one day was peaceful. If a family had more than one peck of grain, one string of cash, or one set of clothes in their possession, they would not dare to close their eyes. If they momentarily let their guard down, they might be robbed and killed any minute. Therefore, there were families who were rich in the morning and by dusk were begging for food. The number of bandits grew, reaching to groups of dozens, even of forty or fifty people in a band. They burned villages, killed people, and raped women, not stopping at anything. People did not dare to report them or fight back. The reason was that if there was a robbery, local officials could pretend not to know of it, but if human lives were lost, they would learn of it. When bandits murdered local residents, officials would not investigate. But if local residents killed robbers, they could face legal consequences. Robbery was not subject to the death penalty, but murder was. For this reason, villagers stood guard all night, but they would take out the arrowheads and bullets when they shot arrows or blunderbusses at the robbers, aiming only to scare them away.

By then, there was no green grass left in sight in Zizhou. But there was wheat south, west, and north of its borders. So the people one saw carrying their belongings and young children and wandering about as vagrants were all from Zizhou. Only four families stayed in a village of more than twenty households. Then, as banditry grew more rampant, they became afraid of being left alone and moved away too. So an entire village became abandoned. At the time, of every ten people in Zizhou, two died, three fled, three stayed, and two turned to banditry.

By the end of the fifth month, it still had not rained. Those who had stayed had gradually fled, leaving only robbers. The robbers stuck like lice; even if the thing is poor, as long as it is alive, they cling to it. People who died on the
road were left unburied and were devoured by vultures or dogs. People grew thin, and scavenging animals grew fat. The prefectural seat was filled with the displaced; the entire region was completely lifeless. Kindhearted people in the suburbs had pits dug several feet deep to bury the corpses. Once one was filled, another would be dug. Altogether, over ten were dug, which was still not enough to hold all the bodies. Those who sold human flesh would transport the meat to the markets on donkey-drawn carts early in the morning. The price was one-tenth that of mutton. Others marinated the meat, carried it in a container to the market, and sold it by making a sound by clicking copper coins. The price was similar to that for crows and sparrows. Those who got to be buried in pits at least enjoyed a decent interment.

Those not yet dead, exposed to filth and sleeping by the roadsides at night, lost all sense of shame as death approached. Those who survived lost their ability to react emotionally. Some families that left home would keep going even when one of them died on the road. As a result, many corpses lay next to thoroughfares with no one mourning them. Children were deserted on the grass. Some were taken in by those who had sympathy for them. As time went on, human life became ever cheaper. A young girl could be traded for as little as one peck of grain.

Fortunately, it rained on the ninth day of the sixth month. When people plowed, they saw about three inches of dry soil, yet everywhere one looked, farmers were working in the fields. Even though sowing took place late, there were no stink bugs underground. Because there was no vegetation aboveground, they did not have anything to feed on and no humid soil for them to burrow into. As a result, all the adult and juvenile stink bugs were scorched to death. It was as if Heaven said, “The stink bugs have harmed the people of Zizhou, but it took three years of drought to wipe them out.” All the counties suffered from the drought, but Zizhou was the only one that suffered from stink bugs.

**Source:** Pu Songling ji 蒲松齡集 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1962), 2.47–49.

**Further Reading**

