

**Document 2.12: Excerpts describing severe hardship in the lives of peasants during the latter part of the Ming dynasty**

*During the Ming dynasty, the majority of the people (by some estimates, up to 90 percent) were peasants. A writer from the period noted, “men and women, young and old—aside from the one or two who remained at home to prepare the food—are all in the fields.”<sup>1</sup> The life of these farmers was hard. Though Confucian tradition had peasants as second on the social hierarchy, in reality they were at the bottom. Droughts, locusts, floods, the injustice of landlords, high taxes, and the negligence and corruption of the government officials all contributed to the often dismal lot of the peasantry. The following excerpts provide various eyewitness accounts of some of the difficulties, even horrors, that late Ming dynasty peasants faced.*

**Excerpt A: “Letter to a Friend” by Wang Wenlu, 1545**

The drought in Haiyan county began in 1538 when a tidal wave crossed the sea wall in the south, inundating the fields with saltwater, and then flowed north and attacked the crops. What with the blazing autumn sun and no sources of freshwater to irrigate, the rice put forth ears that did not turn to seed, or produced seed that then rotted. Growing plants shrank and turned to weeds, the fields yellowed: as far as you looked it was a scene of desolation. The officials did not report this to the throne. The stricken were excused from paying taxes, yet the prosperous were so pressed that they also became impoverished. Paddy rice did not come on the market and the price of rice went even higher. People fed themselves first on chaff and bean pods, then on tree bark and weeds. In 1539 and 1544 we suffered virulent epidemics. Both in the country villages and in the towns, nine out of ten houses stood empty. In any village, half the girls and boys were sold off. Now it is spring, and as we wait for the end of the summer growing season, the corpses of the starved lie everywhere—beside the monasteries, below the fords, within the suburban gates, in the middle of the roads—and everywhere the sound of wailing pierces our ears. Source: Quoted in Brook, Timothy. *The Confusions of Pleasure: Commerce and Culture in Ming China*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998. 105-106.

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Timothy Brook, *The Confusions of Pleasure: Commerce and Culture in Ming China* (Berkeley: University of California, 1998) 66.

**Excerpt B: Excerpts from “Desolate Fields” by Wu Yingxi**

*In a letter to a friend, Wu wrote of what he saw and heard in Hunan Province. As he had traveled, he noted fields of reeds and grass. There was no sign of rice or wheat being grown. His sedan-chair carrier explained that between 80 and 90 percent of the farms were like that, though conditions were a little less bad elsewhere. Later, he asked several low-grade government officials about the situation. They explained that the land could not be farmed because there were no animals left to help with the work.*

Furthermore, [they continued] the government of this district was known for its severity in exacting horses and labor from the people. When a man was assigned to some fixed duty and found the burden too heavy, he first sold his cow, then abandoned his farm, and a little later absconded. When he had gone, his land was left uncultivated but the land tax was still attached to it.... [Because no one could afford to pay the taxes] the villages were all empty and the farms were left uncultivated....

I next wanted to know whether anyone had reported all these facts to the governor of the prefecture. To this they answered, “The governors are usually provincial graduates or licentiates. They are disappointed with their posts and think of nothing but bribes. They know well that there is corruption of every kind in the government office but they cannot prevent it. To ward off the censure of their superiors they try to collect the full amount of taxes, sparing no means, not even the daily torturing of the people. They care very little if the farmers and their families run away or if the farms are left uncultivated. Anyone who tries to explain these things to them is immediately condemned to a flogging. Hence, although the people are suffering and murmuring, no one dares say anything in public....

[The low-grade government officials explained that the provincial governors and district governors had seen the situation, but they didn’t ask about it.]

[The officials] knelt down and said through their tears: ...If some day Your Excellency should happen to be in a position to do something for us, please remember our neighborhood.”

Source: Quoted in Chan, Albert. *The Glory and Fall of the Ming Dynasty*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1982. 229-231.

**Excerpt C: A description of the effects of a famine in Shandong by Pu Songling<sup>2</sup>, late seventeenth century**

*Pu Songling wrote many stories about the horrific effects of famine. Among these was cannibalism. One writer describing a famine in 1640 wrote, “Formerly, when I was told of cannibalism in Shandong and Hunan, I was inclined to be skeptical. But now this practice occurs frequently inside and outside the city of Suzhou [in the south]. In spite of severe penalties imposed by the authorities for this offense, it is often committed.” In this excerpt, however, Pu Songling described yet another way people tried to stay alive.*

In 1640 there was a great famine, and there were cases of cannibalism. One day Liu... came across a man and a woman weeping bitterly, and asked them what the trouble was. They replied, “We’ve been married over a year, but now there is no way we can both survive in this time of famine, so we weep.”

A while later he saw the couple again, in front of a [cooking] oil seller’s shop, and there seemed to be some kind of quarrel going on. Liu approached and the shopowner... explained, “This man and his wife are dying of starvation, every day they come and beg me for a little sesame oil to keep them alive. Now the man is trying to sell me his wife. But in my house there are already more than ten women that I’ve bought, so what does one more matter to me? If she’s cheap, I’ll make a deal; if not, that’s that! It’s really ridiculous that he should go on bothering me like this.”

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<sup>2</sup> Also spelled P’u Sung-ling.

To this the man replied, “Grain costs as much as pearls; unless I can get at least three hundred cash I won’t have enough to pay to run away somewhere else. Obviously both of us want to stay alive—if I sell her and even so don’t get enough money to escape death, then what have we gained?...

[Liu] asked [the shopowner] how much he would offer. “In these days the price for a woman is only about one hundred cash,” he said.

*Liu tries to negotiate with the shopowner, offering him half of the purchase price, but the shopowner refuses. Eventually, Liu gives the young couple money in hopes that they will be able to stay together and still survive the famine.*

Source: Quoted in Spence, Jonathan D. *The Death of Woman Wang*. New York: Viking, 1978. 20-21.

#### **Excerpt D: Poem: “Ballad of Selling a Child” by Wang Jiusi<sup>3</sup> (1468–1551)**

The village woman brings her five-year-old son  
to sell to our household for four and a half measures of grain.  
I ask her, “Why do you wish to sell your son?”  
And she answers me, with repeated sighs:  
“My husband is old, sick in bed, and blind in both eyes;  
from morning to evening, there’s no telling if he’ll live or die.  
Our five acres near the village are only poor land,  
and our two rooms, circled by a wall, are falling apart.  
My eldest son is thirteen, and he can push a plow,  
but our fields are few, our profit meager, so we don’t have enough to eat.  
Last winter we were late with our tax payments:  
the officials came knocking at our door, pressuring us to pay.  
Only when a rich family made us a loan did we manage to get through,  
but thinking back, that only made our life more difficult than before.

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<sup>3</sup> Also spelled Wang Chiu-ssu.

My second son, eight years old, knows oxen and sheep,  
so the eastern neighbor bought him to care for his herds.  
Meanwhile, the rich people demand payment of our debt, as if they expected us to pay  
with our lives, and my sick husband coughs and wheezes, his stomach completely  
empty.  
Come to such a pass, we realized we had no choice at all,  
and so I've brought my youngest son here to exchange for grain.  
Half this grain will be used to repay the rich folks' loan,  
half will be used to make some gruel to feed my poor husband.”  
When the village woman stopped speaking, she prepared to leave,  
but her son tugged at her clothes, crying his mother's name.  
The woman, miserable, lingered for a while,  
and borrowed the use of a spare bed, so she could pass the night with her son.  
When the morning drums beat solemnly, and the roosters cried their wild cry,  
the woman rose, and hesitated as she watched her son in his sound sleep.  
Then, stifling her sobs, holding back the tears, she left the city walls  
with the grain that would at least alleviate her terrible suffering.  
When the boy woke up, he called for his mother, but she was nowhere to be seen,  
so he walked around the house, crying out loud, unsteady on his feet.  
Everyone who saw him wept tears at the sight.  
Everyone who heard him knit his brow.  
Alas! The wild tiger does not eat its cub,  
and the old ox will lick the calf.  
How can we throw away this pearl we hold in the palm of our hand,  
cutting away this flesh from our heart!

Please realize: The rich grow crueler as their fields increase,  
and they buy servants and slaves with their wealth.  
Then, one day they curse them in anger,  
whipping them unfeelingly until their blood flows!  
Don't they know that all flesh and bone comes from the same womb,

that another's son and my son are of one form?  
Alas! Will the four seas and the nine continents ever share the same springtime,  
so there will be no more people who must sell their daughters and sons?

Source: Wang Chiu-ssu, "Ballad of Selling a Child." Trans. Jonathan Chaves. *The Columbia Anthology of Traditional Chinese Literature*, ed. Victor H. Mair. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994. 274-275.