

Theorisation of art as a commodity: Wen Zhengming and the commodity culture of the late Ming Dynasty.

By Russel Storer, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, 2005

[an MA coursework essay which usefully summarizes a field for others, loaded here with permission]

Art has been collected in China for centuries, from the treasuring of ritual objects as family heirlooms in the Shang and Zhou dynasties (1766 – 249 BCE) to the Han passion for bronzes (220 BCE – AD 200) to the trading of valuable goods from as far as Europe during the Tang dynasty (AD 618 – 906).¹ Inventories and encyclopedias of antiquities were being published in the Song dynasty, such as Ouyang Xiu's *Ji gu lu, Records on Collected Antiquities* (1064), and texts on the connoisseurship of objects have been in circulation in China since at least the early 1200s, when Zhao Xigu's *Record of the Pure Registers of the Cavern Heaven* was written. It was not, however, until the late Ming dynasty that a highly sophisticated and self-reflexive culture of consumption developed, with art objects very much a part of the system of exchange.² This essay will look at the shift in the understanding of art, and particularly painting, as a commodity during the late Ming period of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, with a specific focus on the patronage and collecting of the work of the mid-Ming literati painter Wen Zhengming (1470-1559). The traditional split between the professional and the amateur artist is brought into relief by Wen's persona, which has generally been presented as the epitome of the Confucian ideal of an autonomous artist-scholar. Yet as a number of researchers

¹ See Michel Beurdeley, *The Chinese Collector Through the Centuries*, Charles E. Tuttle Company, Rutland, Vermont and Tokyo, 1966 for an overview of the development of Chinese connoisseurship and collecting from the Han dynasty to the mid 20th century.

² Craig Clunas, *Superfluous Things: Material Culture and Social Status in Early Modern China*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, 1991, p. 8; Peter Burke, 'Res et verba: conspicuous consumption in the early modern world', in John Brewer and Roy Porter (eds), *Consumption and the World of Goods*, Routledge, London, 1993, p. 151.

over the past few decades have brought to light, this only told part of the story. This is particularly the case in terms of the Ming dynasty, with its rapidly expanding commodity culture and concomitant rise in the number of affluent, educated men turning to painting and of wealthy collectors eager to acquire their work. In such an environment, the elite aversion to commerce and the cherished divisions between amateur and professional became ever more difficult to sustain.³

The late Ming followed a particularly prosperous and peaceful two centuries in China, in which ‘both artists and patrons had been able to lead relatively stable and complacent lives’.⁴ With the expansion of commerce and international trade in this time, a wealthy merchant middle class had developed. This class enjoyed an increased social mobility during the Ming, disrupting their position at the bottom of the ancient Confucian hierarchy of officer-peasant-artisan-merchant, operating in the secondary industry of trade rather than the primary industry of agriculture. Despite its reiteration by the Hongwu emperor in the early Ming, and the application of a series of sumptuary laws, this system of categorisation did not prove to be a major disincentive to those wishing to take up commerce or to side-step certain rules and regulations.⁵ China’s population had doubled during the Ming dynasty; the visible presence of merchants all over China had increased dramatically, and the desire to be acknowledged as part of the higher strata of society had grown.⁶ Many of the more prosperous merchants were becoming land-owners – traditionally the source of true status with its connection to agriculture – with land as

³ See James Cahill, *The Painter’s Practice: How Artists Lived and Worked in Traditional China*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1994, for a sustained critique of the traditional division between professional and amateur painting.

⁴ James Cahill, *The Compelling Image: Nature and Style in Seventeenth Century Chinese Painting*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA and London, 1979, p. 1.

⁵ Timothy Brook, *The Confusions of Pleasure: Commerce and Culture in Ming China*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1998, p. 73.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 210-212.

much as anything else a commodity able to be bought and sold; while at the same time, the landed gentry were leaving the countryside behind to live in the cities. This increased social and geographical mobility generated a ready market in goods and information for those wishing to attain the trappings of the elite.

One of the key tools for obtaining the required knowledge to participate in the intricacies of genteel society was connoisseurship literature, which began to be circulated widely in late Ming China. These texts included catalogues of antiquities for collectors and guides to elegant living, supported by ‘novels of manners’ such as *Golden Lotus*, which contained detailed descriptions of luxury objects. With the major growth of printing in this period, both in volume and variety,⁷ the availability of such literature was unprecedented, making accessible to anyone who could afford it information that had until then been circulated by word of mouth or by example amongst a small coterie of privileged families.⁸ These texts include Gao Lian’s *Zun sheng ba jian, Eight Discourses on the Art of Living* (1591), Zhang Mingwen’s *Qing bi cang, Pure and Arcane Collecting* (1595) and Wen Zhengheng’s *Zhang wu zhi, Treatise on Superfluous Things* (1615-20), as well as the regularly republished editions of an earlier work, Cao Zhao’s *Ge gu yao lun, Essential Criteria of Antiquities* (1388). Containing elaborately detailed information on the evaluation, collection, presentation and proper usages of art objects, many of these books also discussed broader aspects of material culture, from food, drink and clothing to travelling equipment, medicine and gardens. The authors of these texts were usually from high-ranking families themselves, and often distinguished in some way as scholars, writers and/or collectors. They positioned themselves as people ‘of detachment and

⁷ Ibid., p.169.

⁸ Cahill, *The Painter’s Practice*, p. 33.

indifference to worldly affairs, keen only to save the well-meaning from falling into error,⁹ although many of them were closely integrated within networks of power politics and in the case of Gao Lian, trade.

The availability of this information contributed to a greater demand for particular kinds of goods. Simultaneously, the broadening nature of the commodities described as worthy of discrimination indicates a growing access to and acceptance of commercial products by the gentry. The effect on production of all kinds of goods was marked. Peter Burke notes the flourishing of the arts of inlay, enamel and lacquer in this period, more elaborate porcelain ware, and the greater availability of jade,¹⁰ while Michel Beurdeley describes how the sumptuous houses preferred by the *parvenu* merchant classes led to more secular, decorative, descriptive and colourful art.¹¹ Painting was in general less valuable than calligraphy, but within that category, according to Wen Zhenheng, there were specific preferences:

Calligraphy is arranged by period, the Six Dynasties not being up to that of the Wei or Jin, the Song and Yuan not being up to the Six Dynasties or Tang. This is not true of painting. In Buddhist and Taoist subjects, ladies, and oxen and horse, the modern is not up to the ancient. In landscape, forests and rocks, flowers and bamboos, and birds and fish, the ancients are not up to the moderns.¹²

Antiques, particularly bronzes, jade and ceramics, were as always highly prized, as indicated by the popularity of *Essential Criteria*, but what was notable in the late Ming is the increasing attention given to more contemporary work. Craig Clunas suggests that this may be due precisely to the increased market for luxury goods, with expanding

⁹ Clunas, *Superfluous Things*, p. 12.

¹⁰ Burke, 'Res et verba', 151

¹¹ Beurdeley, *The Chinese Collector*, p. 111.

¹² From Wen Zhenheng, *Treatise on Superfluous Things*, as quoted in Clunas, *Superfluous Things*, p. 127.

notions of what constituted prestigious art, as well as what was considered ‘antique’.¹³ He quotes the Ming writer Shen Defu, who commented that at a time of peace and increased leisure time, ‘prosperous members of the official classes... turned to the enjoyment of antiquities’, which Clunas views as a sign of the central role that the connoisseurship of antiquities began to take in the maintenance of social status in the mid-sixteenth century.¹⁴ The need for a greater supply of antiques spurred on more widespread excavation of buried objects, as well as a flood of forgeries onto the market, including painting, calligraphy, and metal, jade and ceramic ware. The ever-present threat of brilliantly produced copies of luxury goods – an industry that finds a parallel in contemporary China’s vast market in designer ripoffs – is evident in the connoisseurship literature, which exhibited a consistent anxiety about authenticity.¹⁵ Connoisseurs required keen skills of discrimination which were by no means foolproof, with key indicators such as reign dates on porcelain readily faked.¹⁶

While the connoisseurship literature offered the novice a way through the elaborate landscape of Ming elite taste – which objects to acquire, how to judge their quality and authenticity, how and when to display them – it simultaneously reaffirmed the distinction between the arbiters of that taste and the followers. As Timothy Brook notes: ‘This literature of taste also quietly suggested that ownership (and therefore the ability to purchase a valued item) was not the most important aspect of connoisseurship. The elegant always knew better than the rich.’¹⁷ It was often a narrow distinction however, and the state attempted to regulate consumption by imposing a complex system of

¹³ Clunas, *Superfluous Things*, p. 103-4.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 107-8.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.12.

¹⁶ Brook, *Confusions of Pleasure*, p. 226.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 224.

sumptuary laws regarding everything from utensils to clothing to funeral rites, although paradoxically it also seemed to be lax in updating laws that had been on the books for centuries¹⁸. In any case, the regulations were widely ignored, with other forces such as fashion playing perhaps a greater role in determining the demand for luxury goods. Arjun Appadurai places fashion at the other end of the spectrum to politically determined sumptuary legislation, subject as it is to the free play of the market. The two naturally came into conflict, not only in China but in numerous societies, particularly recently colonised cultures in which processes of emulation or mimicry take place.¹⁹

Both systems, however, maintain the elite as the setters of rules, acting as gatekeepers to the upper echelons of society. Fashion, as Appadurai notes, ‘suggests high velocity, rapid turnover, the illusion of total access and high convertibility, the assumption of a democracy of consumers and of objects of consumption’²⁰, which seems to fit to some extent the operation of taste that had begun to occur in the late Ming. With its rapidly shifting sets of criteria, the culture of luxury consumption was forever just out of reach to those not already within its realm; connoisseurship literature, with its slightly subversive ‘democratic’ thrust, could only ever fleetingly capture its coordinates at any one time. Overly conspicuous consumption was generally frowned upon; the possession of showy goods was considered vulgar, and possibly dangerous, lest it cite envy and social disruption.²¹ With the highest strata of society out of the public eye for the most part, and

¹⁸ Clunas *Superfluous Things*, p. 151.

¹⁹ Arjun Appadurai, ‘Introduction: commodities and the politics of value’ in Appadurai (ed.) *The Social Life of Things*, University of Cambridge Press, Cambridge, 1986, pp. 38-39.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.32.

²¹ Clunas, *Superfluous Things*, p. 157.

with a general lack of public architecture and shared public ritual, displays of wealth were kept relatively private, offered to family and friends in the interiors of homes.²²

Yet while the elite maintained a level of control over the status of objects, demand and supply was also determined by traders and the operations of the market. In the case of paintings, there were a number of different methods of exchange and circulation available, largely depending on whether the artist was a professional (generally considered at the lower end of the scale of prestige) or an amateur (considered at the higher end), but within these general categories there were no fixed rules.²³ In the case of professional painters, in which there were far fewer taboos regarding the exchange of money, clients usually placed an order in the form of a letter, with a servant sent to conduct the transaction. For a less direct approach, go-betweens and agents were often used, who may have professional expertise and/or social or familial connections. In the case of literati painters, where there was a strong aversion to commissions and cash payments, go-betweens undertook more complex negotiations involving the exchange of gifts and favours in the tradition of *guanxi* (social connections). Alternatively there were markets, considered a last resort due to the taint of the street, or visits to the artist's studio, where paintings were often kept in reserve for gifts to visitors, which would usually result in obligatory reciprocal exchange. Methods of payment, from cash to goods and services, also varied considerably, again based on a basic sliding scale between professional and amateur, but certain situations and conditions, usually economic, meant the rules could be bent a little. This aspect will be discussed in further detail later in the essay.

²² Burke, '*Res et verba*', p. 152.

²³ James Cahill, *The Painter's Practice*, p. 35.

The commodification of painting was not new in China; indeed, the anxiety about its commodity status, as the product of artisans, is perhaps in part responsible for the long-standing elevation of amateur art-making as an elite pursuit.²⁴ The paradox here is that its assumed resistance to commodification and status of being outside of the base economic system made amateur painting even more desirable to the market. Of course even those paintings not initially produced for financial gain could ultimately become valuable commodities, and an elaborate system of distinction was applied to paintings of a certain era, on certain subjects or by certain artists in terms of establishing value. Clunas notes that the late Ming was a period when other luxury objects actually caught up with painting in terms of an application of discrimination ‘when in their commodity state’. This notion of commodities as part of a process, rather than a fixed condition, follows Appadurai, who describes commodities as ‘things in a certain situation, a situation that can characterise many different kinds of thing, at different points in their social lives’²⁵, indicating that almost anything is potentially a commodity, and this status can shift depending on the web of social relations in which the thing is enmeshed.

A useful way of thinking through the commodification process is offered by Igor Kopytoff, who traces the transformations that things (including people) go through as they pass in and out of the commodity phase as a form of cultural biography.²⁶ He looks at the world of commodities as a continuum with two opposing poles: a homogeneous, ‘perfectly commoditised world’, in which all objects are able to be exchanged for everything else, and heterogeneous, ‘perfectly decommoditised world’, in which

²⁴ Ibid., p.6.

²⁵ Appadurai, ‘Introduction’, p. 13.

²⁶ Igor Kopytoff, ‘The cultural biography of things’, in Arjun Appadurai (ed.), *The social life of things: Commodities in cultural perspective*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1986, pp. 64-91.

everything is completely singular and unable to be exchanged. Discrimination in the form of culture provides a semblance of order in a world of vast numbers of singular objects, categorising things into distinct strata of similar value, while not going too far into grouping everything together as a homogeneous lump.²⁷ These strata form several spheres of relatively independent exchange values, which are recognised as such by particular groups who ‘subscribe to a common cultural code and a specially focused morality’²⁸, which in this case could be the Ming gentry. This group, as previously discussed, managed the functioning of exchange value through a complex combination of sumptuary laws and fashion; the former, setting the object in a fixed position against which its status is determined, the latter, shifting the emphasis onto the social situation into which the object is subsumed.

Kopytoff describes how the justification for singularisation, which so often depends on the taste of an individual or small group, is not intrinsic to the system of exchange, but is imported from external, unquantifiable systems such as aesthetics or morality.²⁹ When different exchange spheres come together, such as placing a monetary value on a painting, it creates a productive tension in which the ‘pricelessness’ of the work is confirmed by its value in the commodity sphere. The spheres, in a sense, need each other.

This tension is certainly evident in the paradox of value that operated in the market for literati painting in the late Ming. While amateur painting was considered superior to the world of commerce, the singularity of particular works, styles and periods was ensured by their being painted by ‘name’ artists, by being held in particular collections (evidenced by colophons and seals being added to works), and/or their occasional forays

²⁷ Ibid., p.70.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 78.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 82.

into the market. Kopytoff's structuring principle states that the more sophisticated the system of exchange, the stronger the drive toward commodification. The counterforces of culture and the individual, with their desire to discriminate and classify objects, find it more difficult to resist the barrage of commoditisation and more and more require the market to justify its increasingly more ambiguous and contradictory judgements of value. This is a useful model with which to consider the expanding market of the late Ming, with its rapid influx of goods and more complex exchange systems requiring ever-more elaborate strategies of discrimination as hierarchies became more fluid and the division between art and mart became ever more blurred. The next part of this paper will look more closely at how this situation operated for artists through a discussion of the career of Wen Zhengming.

Wen Zhengming is a major figure in Chinese art history, standing, as Anne de Coursey Clapp writes, 'as an exemplar of the traditional Confucian ideal – scholar, government official, poet, artist, a man blameless in character and career.'³⁰ Born into a prominent family of officials and scholars in the city of Suzhou, one of the main cultural centres of the Ming period, Wen is credited with being the most influential of the literati painters of the era.³¹ Following family tradition and expectations, he worked toward an official position through the rigorous examination system, but failed ten times, between 1495 and 1522. While by no means uncommon, Wen's repeated lack of success was apparently due in part to his disinterest of the contemporary writing forms required,

³⁰ Anne de Coursey Clapp, *Wen Cheng-ming: The Ming Artist and Antiquity*, Artibus Asiae Publishers, Ascona, 1975, p. 1.

³¹ James Cahill, *Parting at the Shore: Chinese Painting of the Early and Middle Ming Dynasty 1368-1580*, Weatherhill, New York and Tokyo, 1978, p. 211.

preferring instead classical literature.³² He was ultimately recommended for a place at the National University in Beijing, leading to a position at the city's Hanlin Academy writing official records and proclamations. However, despite the great prestige of holding an official post in Ming China, Wen only remained in the role for three years before tendering his resignation. A number of reasons have been given for this, including homesickness and isolation, resentment from others over his legitimacy in the role, erratic pay, and factional entanglements at a particularly volatile political moment.³³

Through his father, Wen had a number of important master and patron relationships in his early life, involving some of the most prominent men in the region. These men were scholars and officials, and several were distinguished in the fields of writing, calligraphy and painting, in the literati tradition. Wen received training in these disciplines from masters such as Shen Zhou (painting), Wu Kuan (literature) and Li Yingzhen (calligraphy) as part of his preparation for the examinations, and by the time he was in the process of sitting them, had been painting for over five years and become involved in a circle of young literati who gathered around older scholars such as Zhu Yunming and Yang Xunji.³⁴ Wen's associations brought social advancement, and recommendations from such men were intrinsic to his ultimate success in attaining an official position. In 1512 Wen penned a series of poems entitled 'Poems for my Late Father's Friends', public eulogies to eight of his patrons (who had all died by this time) that acknowledged his indebtedness to them for his station in life. These poems, his multiple attempts at passing the examinations, and a number of sincerely expressed

³² Clapp, *Wen Cheng-ming*, p. 2.

³³ See Craig Clunas, *Elegant Debts: The Social Art of Wen Zhengming, 1470-1559*, University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu, 2004, pp. 71-85 for a detailed discussion of the conditions at court and Wen's involvement with the Great Ritual Controversy.

³⁴ Clapp, *Wen-Cheng-ming*, p. 7.

letters ‘seeking assistance or expressing gratitude for help received’ indicate the deep ambition that Wen harboured to succeed in the civil service for much of his life.³⁵

Although Wen had made a name for himself as a painter before heading to Beijing, it was on his return to Suzhou in 1527, in his mid-fifties, that his most focused artistic production, in painting, poetry and calligraphy, took place. His experiences in the capital strengthened his resolve to follow certain principles in regard to officialdom and commerce, and he positioned himself in the culturally sanctioned role of recluse or *lin xia* (man beneath the trees). Clapp states in her 1975 study of Wen that:

He would not accept presents of cash offered by government agents, seeking to counter the plots of their opponents by laying the influential provincial gentry under obligation to the Emperor. He would reject absolutely any request for paintings from government colleagues that was not made in accordance with propriety. And he would have nothing further to do with members of the imperial family, courtiers, eunuchs, and politicians; especially he would not receive their petitions for pictures or literary works... Both his biographers report that he would not paint or write for foreigners... nor for members of the merchant class.³⁶

Writing a few years later, James Cahill is a little more skeptical of the ‘almost complete independence’ and ‘near perfect freedom of choice’ that Clapp claims for Wen. He writes that Wen ‘*reportedly* [my emphasis] even refused requests from politicians for his works... He also refused to paint, *we are told*, for foreigners or merchants.’ Cahill also senses that although Wen would ‘give a vehement (and indignant) no’ to questions of painting pictures for sale, accepting commissions, working for patrons or allowing

³⁵ Ibid., p. 14.

³⁶ Ibid., p.11.

others' demands to affect his work, 'he must at times have lapsed from pure amateurism'.³⁷

Craig Clunas's 2004 study of Wen and his social relations *Elegant Debts* examines these claims in detail, finding that Wen was more closely entangled with officialdom on his return from Beijing than previously claimed, and that he did indeed produce literature and painting for commission and exchange, not only for the gentry but also for members of the mercantile class. One of the reasons for this expanded notion of Wen's commercial practice is the availability, particularly via the work of the scholar Zhou Daozhen in the 1980s, of a far broader series of texts by Wen than previously.³⁸ Clapp's research is based on the *Futian ji*, the selected works collated by Wen and his descendents for posterity, which represented the artist as someone whose literary output had markedly declined after 1527 and whose commissioned writing was 'funerary inscriptions for senior male members of the elite'.³⁹ However, on Zhou's evidence, Wen's writing of commemorative texts actually increased, with clients including women and merchants, none of which was included in the *Futian ji*. Wen also exchanged painting and calligraphy regularly in return for food, medicine and art materials as part of a well-established tradition of gift exchange and reciprocity.

The gift economy enabled literati artists to avoid direct commercial transactions and was a regular alternative to money, generally understood within the terms of *guanxi*, or social connections. Artists were often paid in goods, favours or services, masking the circulation of their work as commodities. As Clunas suggests however, the distinction between gift and commodity is perhaps not so simple; the two operate within the same

³⁷ Ibid., p. 216.

³⁸ Clunas, *Elegant Debts*, p. 113.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 114.

system, as ‘concurrent modes of exchange’.⁴⁰ This is in keeping with analyses of gift economies by sociologists such as Pierre Bourdieu and Appadurai, who propose that gift exchange, previously viewed as indicative of smaller, less complex societies, is not necessarily opposed or mutually exclusive to commodity exchange, as theorised by Marcel Mauss.⁴¹ Gifts also function along lines of economic calculation, developed over time as part of a wider process of commodity circulation rather than as a singular, spontaneous event.⁴² Clunas writes that the temporal dimension of exchange provides perhaps a more useful distinction in terms of Wen’s work for others. That is, the difference between exchanges that were ‘bounded and complete’ and those that were ongoing, forming cycles of reciprocity that could continue for decades. He notes two wealthy families in particular, the Hua and Yuan, whose relationships with Wen over the years involved complex obligatory relations with several members and the exchange of inscriptions, paintings, poems and colophons for tea, rice, fish, paintings, books and medicine.

Wen also exchanged his work through go-betweens, usually friends and relatives such as his wife or his sons Wen Peng and Wen Jia, who augmented his income as an artist by acting in this capacity.⁴³ He was also known to provide paintings to friends and family who needed the money, in the knowledge that the works would be instantly sold for profit. Wen would apparently also sign fakes of his work in order to benefit the owners financially if they were poor. His work was indeed widely forged; his biographer Wang

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 127.

⁴¹ This refers to Marcel Mauss’s 1925 book *The Gift: Forms and Function of Exchange in Archaic Societies*. See Clunas, *Elegant Debts*, p. 10-13, for a discussion of other research on gift exchange and how it has formed his own writing on Ming China.

⁴² Appadurai, ‘Introduction’, pp. 11-12.

⁴³ Cahill, *The Painter’s Practice*, p. 39.

Shizhen estimated that only 20% of the works attributed to Wen in circulation were genuine. Wen's busy output in keeping up with gifts and obligations necessitated the hiring of 'ghost painters', who would execute the work on his behalf, including his pupil Zhu Lang.

Craig Clunas describes the Confucian ideal of families living exemplary lives on specific properties in which the place becomes closely connected to its owners; this relationship was affirmed by commemorative writing and painting. Wen himself owned property and included it in a number of his poems and paintings, even if it was not necessary to the work.⁴⁴ A large number of Wen's paintings, as Cahill has noted, 'are of houses set in gardens and represent the residencies or studios of his Suzhou friends and acquaintances.'⁴⁵ He adds that 'Whether or not they bear inscriptions with dedications, we may assume that they were done as presents'. This suggests that Wen was not averse to painting subjects to flatter its owners or to let the artist-client relationship affect the direction of his painting. For example, the gardens and studios of his patrons, such as Qian Tongai's Eastern Grove, Wang Xianchen's Garden of the Artless Official and Hua Xia's Studio of True Connoisseurship featured in poems, albums and handscrolls (as Cahill notes of the latter site, 'To have one's dwelling depicted by an artist of Wen's status and renown, in his cool, disciplined, irreproachably upper-class style, invested it with an aura of literati elegance.'⁴⁶). The *biehao tu* ('by-name picture') was another form of painting in which the individual and the landscape could be closely identified. The *hao* or *bie hao* was a self-chosen name that was intended to express the (male) owner's

⁴⁴ Clunas, *Elegant Debts*, p. 105.

⁴⁵ Cahill, *Parting at the Shore*, p. 217.

⁴⁶ James Cahill, from 'Chinese Painting: Innovation after "Progress" Ends', 1998, as quoted in Clunas, *Elegant Debts*, p. 137.

personality, and was a name also given to elements of the owner's property, such as a building. Landscape paintings could therefore be extended metaphors for the lives and personalities of clients, and Wen produced a number of them, to the extent that his *biehao* commitments were getting in the way of other work.⁴⁷

Wen Zhengming's practice as an artist, particularly after his return from Beijing in 1527, was not, then, an unfettered, isolated, autonomous one, producing work solely for the elevation of himself and his intimate circle, free from the taint of commerce. It was entangled in a web of social interactions and obligations that were the daily grind of the Ming artist. The prestige that Wen's name bestowed upon his output as a scholar and returned official made his work even more desirable as a commodity, and it circulated as a kind of trademark on his own work, on forgeries, and on those of his school of followers.⁴⁸ This can be seen as evidence of a drive toward singularisation of his work, as does the elision of his most 'mercantile' texts in the *Futian ji*. This presentation of the individual as the ultimate Confucian artist-scholar by Wen himself, his descendents and biographers served a purpose at a time when this cherished persona was increasingly under threat. The large numbers of educated men in the late Ming unable to gain official positions, either by not getting through the examination system or by sheer lack of jobs necessitated a turn to other forms of income generation, which included painting. Wen was, as Clunas notes, 'the perfect role model for the generations born after the 1520s, the 'frustrated scholars' who perceived themselves as living in a decadent age',⁴⁹ a generation whose time was passing. The fall of the Ming in 1644 saw a further integration of the educated and the merchant classes – to contemporary commentators

⁴⁷ Clunas, *Elegant Debts*, p. 110.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 173.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 167.

such as local magistrate and gazetteer Zhang Tao, the gentry's deepening relationship with commerce was evidence of Ming corruption and a reason for its fall, but it could also be viewed as a resolution that 'strengthened rather than diminished gentry society'⁵⁰, enabling it to weather more robustly the transition to the Qing, not unlike the aristocratic family in Lampedusa's *The Leopard*. Conspicuous consumption continued, yet the driving force it had as a specific topic of concern for the elite abated, along with a loosening of anxiety about the immorality of trade.

REFERENCES

- Arjun Appadurai, 'Introduction: commodities and the politics of value' in Appadurai (ed.) *The Social Life of Things*, University of Cambridge Press, Cambridge, 1986, pp. 3-63
- Richard Barnhart, "'The Wild and Heterodox School" of Ming Painting', in Susan Bush and Christian Murck (eds), *Theories of the Arts in China*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1983, pp. 365-396
- Michel Beurdeley, *The Chinese Collector Through the Centuries: From the Han to the 20th Century*, Charles E. Tuttle Company, Rutland VT and Tokyo, 1966
- Timothy Brook, *The Confusions of Pleasure: Commerce and Culture in Ming China*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1998
- Peter Burke, 'Res et verba: conspicuous consumption in the early modern world', in John Brewer and Roy Porter (eds), *Consumption and the World of Goods*, Routledge, London, 1993, pp. 148-161
- James Cahill, *Parting at the Shore: Chinese Painting of the Early and Middle Ming Dynasty 1368-1580*, Weatherhill, New York and Tokyo, 1978
- James Cahill, *The Compelling Image: Nature and Style in Seventeenth-Century Chinese Painting*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1982
- James Cahill, *The Distant Mountains: Chinese Painting of the Late Ming Dynasty, 1570-1644*, Weatherhill, New York and Tokyo, 1982

⁵⁰ Brook, *The Confusions of Pleasure*, p. 253.

- James Cahill, *The Painter's Practice: How Artists Lived and Worked in Traditional China*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1994
- Anne de Coursey Clapp, *Wen Cheng-Ming: The Ming Artist and Antiquity*, Artibus Asiae Publishers, Ascona, 1975
- Craig Clunas, *Superfluous Things: Material Culture and Social Status in Early Modern China*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, 1991
- Craig Clunas, 'Modernity Global and Local: Consumption and the Rise of the West', *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 104, No. 5, December 1999, pp. 1497-1511
- Craig Clunas, *Elegant Debts: The Social Art of Wen Zhengming 1470-1559*, University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu, 2004
- Igor Kopytoff, 'The cultural biography of things: commoditization as process', in Arjun Appadurai (ed.) *The Social Life of Things*, University of Cambridge Press, Cambridge, 1986, pp. 64-91