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Salt Merchant Culture in Qing Dynasty Yangzhou

Yangzhou occupied a special place, both economically and culturally, in the eighteenth century Chinese empire. Its location on the northern bank of the Yangtze River in the Jiangbei region of Jiangsu province placed it near the coastal salt fields and on the Salt Transport Canal. The salt trade in China was controlled by government monopoly, and in the Qing dynasty the majority of that monopoly was in the hands of merchants in Yangzhou, who together possessed the larger aggregate capital of any commercial or industrial group in China at the time.¹ These salt merchants straddled the line between the aristocratic literati class and the lower merchant class. In fact, they were rather seen as the “aristocracy” of merchants and were favored by the Manchu government, which gave them a special classification allowing their children special quotas for district studentships.² This in turn made it more likely for their children to then pass the civil service examinations and become part of the literati class.

Most of the Yangzhou salt merchants were not initially natives of Yangzhou. They actually came from Huizhou prefecture in Anhui or from the northern provinces of Shanxi and Shaanxi.³ In the late fifteenth century, at a moment when the salt trade had been thrown open, these two groups of merchants left their less fruitful home provinces with ready capital to

¹ Ginger Cheng-chi Hsü, *A Bushel of Pearls: Painting for Sale in Eighteenth Century Yangchow* (Stanford: Stanford U Press, 2001) 5.

² Ping-ti Ho, “The Salt Merchants of Yang-chou: A Study of Commercial Capitalism in Eighteenth-Century China,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 17.1 (1954): 155.

³ Antonia Finnane, “Yangzhou: A Central Place in the Qing Empire,” *Cities of Jiangnan in Late Imperial China*, ed. Linda Cooke Johnson (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993) 137-138.

invest in the Yangzhou's lucrative salt market.⁴ The merchants who were directly licensed by the state were called transport merchants. They often leased their rights to business merchants (*yeshang*), who handled daily trade affairs, or employed yard merchants (*changshang*) to handle the operation of the salt yards. The transport merchants were the ones with the greatest fortunes, however, with some thought to possess individual fortunes of millions of taels of silver. Among the transport merchants, the 24-30 appointed head merchants (*zongshang*) were the greatest; they were responsible for the rest of the merchants and handled the merchants' dealings with the imperial government, especially regarding tax collection.⁵

The lifestyles of these extremely wealthy merchants was marked by excess. The most visible influence of this lifestyle was the magnificent gardens they created both within and without the city walls, characterized by rockeries, water features, and the special architecture of the buildings. The were owned mostly by former Huizhou merchants; none were owned by natives of Yangzhou.⁶ These gardens also provided the perfect location for gatherings of literati; the patronage of artists and poets was another area in which the merchants were free with their wealth. Artists especially blurred the boundary between the pursuit of art as a commercial venture rather than merely as gentleman's hobby.

Much of the salt merchants' wealth was also turned towards social mobility. They established exclusive academies for the education of their children in order to facilitate their ability to gain an official career, and many were successful. Other members of salt merchant

⁴ Ho 143.

⁵ Antonia Finnane, *Speaking of Yangzhou: A Chinese City, 1550-1850* (Cambridge: Harvard U Press, 2004) 122-123.

⁶ Finnane, *Speaking of Yangzhou* 188-189.

families were able to purchase offices. In this was each successive generation was able to achieve a slightly higher status than the one before.⁷ However, due to their extravagant way of life, most salt merchant family fortunes were largely depleted by the third generation; even the larger fortunes were finished off within four or five generations.⁸ By the end of the eighteenth century, the age of the Yangzhou salt merchant was well in decline.

⁷ Ho 165-166.

⁸ Ho 167-168

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Summary of Sources

Ying Wang, "The Cloud Brocade and Yangzhou"

This is an article summarizing a presentation given at a symposium for the Textile Society for America in 2008. I found this source through Google Scholar with the keywords "Yangzhou" and "salt." The article was written by Dr. Ying Wang, a professor in the University of Milwaukee's art history department who specializes in Chinese art and architecture, and published by the Textile Society for America through the University of Nebraska.

The article discusses a study which investigated an eighteenth century Chinese textile called "cloud brocade," the production of which involved both the silk industry of Nanjing and the salt industry of Yangzhou. The two industries were connected through members of the Cao family who, though their close relationship to the Kangxi Emperor, held high posts in the regulation of both the textile and salt trades. More importantly, the incredible wealth generated by Yangzhou's salt trade was critical in financing the manufacture of varieties of silk like the prized "cloud brocade," which was made exclusively in Nanjing. The article also delves into the status of Yangzhou's merchant class as social climbers, utilizing their wealth to transform themselves and their children into literati.

Critical Evaluation: Although this source is only a few pages long, it gave me an idea of the extravagance of eighteenth century Yangzhou and introduced many a number of ideas that helped me to define further lines of inquiry. The topics that I investigated further included Yangzhou's government sanctioned salt monopoly; the unique position of Yangzhou's merchant class, who, while wealthy, were still looked down upon; and a famous group of artists called the

Eight Eccentrics of Yangzhou. The article's bibliography also led me to a couple of other good sources.

Ping-ti Ho, "The Salt Merchants of Yang-chou: A Study of Commercial Capitalism in Eighteenth-Century China"

This article by notable Chinese historian Dr. Ping-ti Ho was published in the *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* in 1954. It is mentioned by Antonia Finnane in both her article and her book about Yangzhou and is also listed in the biography of the article by Ying Wang. Finnane lauds it as the first English language historical study of Qing dynasty merchant culture, as well as mentioning its continued relevance despite the many changes in the field of Chinese history since its publication.⁹

As stated in the abstract, the article aims to describe the organization of the salt trade, focusing on estimating their number and the sizes of their profits and fortunes; to study their way of life and social mobility; and to explore the reasons why they never completely developed a capitalistic system.¹⁰ In pursuing the first two aims, the article provides a great deal of well-documented information, which the author then uses to help fulfill the third. He puts forward the idea that the gradual dissipation of the wealth of salt merchant families is due to an extravagant lifestyle and desire for social mobility on one hand and to a tradition of inheritance which divided property among male heirs (rather than only to the eldest male) on the other. This diversion of capital from economic use is what prevented the rise of a capitalistic system.

⁹ Finnane, *Speaking of Yangzhou* 6.

¹⁰ Ho 130.

Critical Evaluation: This source was valuable as a foundational text on the subject of merchant culture in the Qing dynasty, as evidenced by the fact that it was mentioned or cited in many of my other sources. It provided estimates of the number of salt merchants and their approximate fortunes which were more exact than those in any of the other sources; in fact, many of the other source merely emphasized the largeness of their fortunes without providing any figures. I also found the author's reasoning as to why capitalism never really rose in Yangzhou to be very interesting.

Antonia Finnane, "Yangzhou: A Central Place in the Qing Empire"

This essay is part of the collection *Cities of Jiangnan in Late Imperial China*. The book focuses on the rise of urban centers in south-central China between the twelfth and nineteenth centuries and contains essays about Suzhou, Hangzhou, and Shanghai in addition to the one on Yangzhou. It was published in 1993 by SUNY Press as part of a series in Chinese local studies and was compiled by Dr. Linda Cooke Johnson, a member of Michigan State University's Asian Studies department who specializes in pre-Modern Chinese history. The author of the essay about Yangzhou, Dr. Antonia Finnane, is a professor in the history department at the University of Melbourne; her period of interest is early modern to modern China. This source was also discovered in my initial search on Google Scholar using the terms "Yangzhou" and "salt."

The essay is accompanied by extensive endnotes and bibliography. It is divided into sections describing Yangzhou's spatial context, internal organization, and social structure during the Qing dynasty, using these aspects of the city to describe its unique cultural and economic position in late imperial China. From the information she provides, the author draws a couple of

conclusions. Regarding Yangzhou's spatial context, she posits that rather than serving merely as a regional center of Jiangnan, Yangzhou actually functioned as a link in the extensive trade network of the Chinese empire, as its most important economic relations were not with its own surrounding region but with cities in other regions.¹¹ In this network, Yangzhou functioned as a funnel through which salt flowed out to the rest of the empire. She also likens Yangzhou to a colonial city in which the salt merchants, a non-native minority, held the majority of economic and social power.¹²

Antonia Finnane, *Speaking of Yangzhou: A Chinese City, 1550-1850*

I found this source by searching for works by Antonia Finnane after my searches using the keywords "Yangzhou" and "Yangchow" turned up several book reviews she had written. It was published in 2004 by Harvard University Press as part of the Harvard East Asian Monographs series. Antonia Finnane is also the author of "Yangzhou: A Central Place in the Qing Empire."

The book is divided into four parts which each contain several chapters, altogether covering a lot of ground. The first part introduces the historical context of Yangzhou through the Tang dynasty, and the second part traces the development of Yangzhou and its merchant class from the Ming to the Qing dynasties. Parts three and four look at the city itself; three focuses on aspects such as the administration of the salt trade and the structure of the city, especially its gardens, while four deals with hierarchies of gender and native place. The information the book provides is largely fact-based, although the author does occasionally offer

¹¹ Finnane, "Yangzhou: A Central Place in the Qing Empire" 128.

¹² Finnane, "Yangzhou: A Central Place in the Qing Empire" 146.

her own conclusions. For example, she elaborates on the idea she expressed in “Yangzhou: A Central Place in the Qing Empire” that Yangzhou functions more as a node in the empire-wide economic network than as an economic center within the smaller region of Jiangnan.¹³

Ginger Cheng-chi Hsü, *A Bushel of Pearls: Painting for Sale in Eighteenth-Century Yangchow*

This book was published by Stanford University Press in 2001. The author, Dr. Ginger Hsü, teaches art history at the University of California Riverside; her areas of specialization include later Chinese painting with an interest in topics such as the production and exchange of artwork and in regions and networks of late imperial China. I found this source using Google Scholar, through a review written by Antonia Finnane which came up when I used the search terms “Yangchow” and “salt.” Finnane also mentions *A Bushel of Pearls* in her own book, *Speaking of Yangzhou*, praising it for its depiction of the complex social and economic relationships that made up the commercial society of eighteenth Yangzhou.¹⁴

Four of the book’s chapters center on painters, three of whom are often considered part of the “eight eccentrics of Yangzhou” (Huang Shen, Cheng Hsieh, and Chin Nung). The fourth painter, the more orthodox Fang Shih-shu, serves as a foil for the others, as he painted in a more traditional style and was less involved in the commercial art market. Another chapter is devoted to the Ma brothers, wealthy merchants known for their patronage of the local painting market. In addition to providing biographical accounts of these subjects, the author uses them to demonstrate a blurring of the lines between artists as gentlemen who relied on wealthy patrons and artists as professionals who sold their work on the market.

¹³ Finnane, *Speaking of Yangzhou* 37.

¹⁴ Finnane, *Speaking of Yangzhou* 9.