

Art and Urban Culture in Early Modern China: Cityscapes and Related Issues*

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Italo Calvino, the Italian novelist famous for his exploration into the city's web of signification,¹ once remarked that the city was a complex symbol that offered a great avenue for expressing the tension between geometric rationality and the entanglement of human lives. He also implied that the city was a many-faceted structure whose culture did not contain a hierarchical order but a network of multiple possibilities.² While Calvino presumably drew his insights on urban culture from observing contemporary cities, it is interesting to consider whether traditional Chinese cities also engendered new kinds of cultural expressions and social values as "a network of multiple possibilities," especially given that orthodox Chinese culture, that is, Confucianism, clearly demonstrated a hierarchical order in its cosmological and ideological configurations. The first step is perhaps to ask how cities were represented in traditional China and how the city as symbol worked in different historical contexts.

The city as a symbol has been widely utilized in distinct cultures to represent the human circumstances defined by urban culture, either in the form of literary works or in visual objects. Cityscapes as visual objects have existed in many societies, including Japan, China, the Islamic World, and Europe, and have a history of over three thousand years. As important cultural artifacts, cityscapes have been studied by scholars in the fields of history, geography, urban studies, cultural studies, and art history. According to their research, there are basically two types of visual cityscapes: city maps, and paintings, prints, or photographs that depict urban life, scenes, or customs.³

This article focuses on the second category of cityscapes (depictions of urban life in paintings and woodblock prints) that emerged as a fashion in the big cities of late-Ming China, approximately from the 1570s to 1644, and continued to thrive throughout the early nineteenth century. It is intended to be a book proposal which integrates three articles that I have published in the past three years with an attempt to broaden the scope of the original

* I would like to express my gratitude to the participants of the conference for their questions, comments, and suggestions, especially to Professor Jeong Ah Kim and Professor Melanie Trede. This project is not a typical research paper which takes a group of coherent materials as its object and focuses on one single theme. Instead, it attempts to encapsulate my reflection upon the research that I have done.

¹ I am referring to his novel *Invisible Cities*, trans. by William Weaver (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974).

² Italo Calvino, trans. by Patrick Creagh, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium: The Charles Norton Lectures, 1985-86* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), p. 70.

³ For example, see Yamori Kazuhiko 矢守一彦, *Toshizu no rekishi: Nihon hen 都市図の歴史—日本編* (Tōkyō: Kōdansha, 1974); Yamori Kazuhiko, *Toshizu no rekishi: Sekai hen 都市図の歴史—世界編* (Tōkyō: Kōdansha, 1974); Howard B. Rock and Deborah Dash Moore, *Cityscapes: A History of New York in Images* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001). For cities represented in fictions and films, see Ben Highmore, *Cityscapes: Cultural Readings in the Material and Symbolic City* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan Ltd., 2005). Regarding the political and cultural meanings of city maps, for example, see Kuroda Hideo 黒田日出男, Mary Elizabeth Berry, and Sugimoto Fumiko 杉本史子, eds., *Chizu to ezu no seiji bunkashi 地図と絵図の政治文化史* (Tōkyō: Tōkyō daigaku shuppankai, 2001).

articles and to provide a conceptual framework for my future book project.⁴

The book will deal with artistic, cultural, social, and political trends found in representations of urban life in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century China, an interdisciplinary study which attempts to draw inspirations from the research models in such fields as art history, history, and urban studies. Moreover, to my limited knowledge, the emergence of cityscapes did not exclusively take place in late sixteenth-century China but in late fifteenth-century Western societies such as Florentine and in early sixteenth-century Japan, a trans-cultural phenomenon whose significance awaits further exploration.⁵

While the connection of urban culture and modernity has been established in the discussion of nineteenth-century Paris,⁶ how urban culture and the emergence of its representations in the early modern period contribute to our understanding of the global historical development that we term “modernity” or “modernities” is a key question which needs to be answered or at least dealt with. I am aware of the controversy regarding the problematic of “modernity” and its reformed version “modernities,” which emphasizes the multiple possibilities through which different societies encounter the modern condition. It has also been a point of much debate in the study of Ming-Qing history whether to define the Chinese historical period from the late sixteenth to the early nineteenth century as “early modern.” It is understandable that scholars in Chinese studies have had reservations on the application of the concept of “early modern” derived from the study of the European history to their own field. As is widely known, this historical characterization implies that the development of Chinese history followed the Western model from medieval to modern, occasionally with a teleological assumption which sees “modernity” as its end.

Nonetheless, I propose that we take “early modern” as a conceptual framework which can help us characterize a set of specific historical phenomena closely associated with certain societies and also in part relevant to other societies. In other words, “early modern” does not represent a fixed set of qualities which are drawn exclusively from the Western historical experience. Moreover, from the perspective of global history which investigates historical phenomena in a cross-cultural context, the commonalities of different cultures should be granted their importance in historical study while the diversities and variations of world cultures are acknowledged. In this

⁴ Regarding my articles, see Wang Cheng-hua 王正華, “Shenghuo, zhishi yu wenhua shangpin: Wan-Ming Fujianban *riyong leishu yu qi shuhuamen* 生活、知識與文化商品：晚明福建版日用類書與其書畫門 (Daily Life, Commercialized Knowledge, and Cultural Consumption: Late-Ming Fujian Household Encyclopedias on Calligraphy and Painting),” in *Jindaishi yanjiusuo jikan* 近代史研究所集刊, no. 41 (September 2003), pp. 1-85; “Guoyan fanhua: Wan-Ming chengshitu, chengshiguan yu wenhua xiaofei de yanjiu 過眼繁華：晚明城市圖、城市觀與文化消費的研究 (The Representation of Urban Life and the Cultural Consumption of Cityscapes in Late-Ming China),” in Li Hsiao-t'i 李孝悌, ed., *Zhongguo de Chengshi shenghuo* 中國的城市生活 (Taipei: Lianjing chuban shiye gongsi, 2005), pp. 1-85; “Qianlong chao Suzhou chengshi tuxiang: Zhengzhi quanli, wenhua xiaofei yu dijing suzao 乾隆朝蘇州城市圖像：政治權力、文化消費與地景塑造 (Reshaping Suzhou: Political Power, Cultural Consumption, and the Making of Local Sites in the Cityscapes of the Qianlong Period),” in *Jindaishi yanjiusuo jikan*, no. 50 (December 2005), pp. 115-84. The following discussion is based on these three articles, unless otherwise noted.

⁵ The earliest Japanese record which mentioned screen painting of Kyoto as the capital city was dated 1506. See Matthew Philip McKelway, *Capitalscapes: Folding Screens and Political Imagination in Late Medieval Kyoto* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006), pp. 1-2. For the research on the Western cityscapes, for example, see Christopher Brown, *Dutch Townscape Painting* (London: National Gallery, 1972). I owe thanks to Prof. Craig Clunas for offering me the reference of the book and the other related materials.

⁶ Contemporary knowledge of the modernity of nineteenth-century Paris is of course indebted to Charles Baudelaire and Walter Benjamin. For recent scholarship, see Patrice Higonnet, trans. by Arthur Goldhammer, *Paris: Capital of the World* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002; French version, 1999).

sense, the history of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century China can be reexamined in the conceptual framework of “early modern” and offer insightful observations on the problematic of “modernities.”⁷

The book will principally examine the contribution of Chinese cityscapes to the exploration of three related issues. These are the rise of genre painting, the stratification of cultural consumption, and urban consciousness and the shift of cultural production from country to city. After dealing with these three issues, in the conclusion, the book will attempt to address the synchronically worldwide phenomenon in the early modern period in which cities became the sources for cultural expressions and social values.

1. Introducing Cityscapes

In seventeenth- and eighteenth-century China, even though there was not a unifying term for “cityscapes,” some of the cityscapes were commonly recognized as a category of paintings distinctive from those of the time-honored genres of landscape, figure, or flower-and-bird painting. As indicated by several records on Paintings entitled *Qingming shanghe tu* (清明上河圖, *Up to the River on the Qingming Festival*), it is clear that this title was generic rather than specific, referring to paintings which depicted a generalized mode of prosperous city life. In early modern China, this mode could be applied to refer to Kaifeng 開封, the capital of the Northern Song dynasty (960-1127), the contemporary capital Beijing, and important cities in the south such as Nanjing, Suzhou, and Yangzhou (fig. 1). In the category of *Qingming shanghe tu* as cityscapes, the format of the painting, either handscroll, hanging scroll, or screen, was not a point in consideration, nor was the painting’s relationship to the oldest version of *Qingming shanghe tu*, presently in the collection of the Palace Museum, Beijing, considered relevant.

The Palace Museum version of *Qingming Shanghe tu*, attributed to Zhang Zeduan 張澤端, a painter of the Northern Song dynasty, was very likely to have been the most famous painting in late-Ming China (fig. 2).⁸ A mythical story attests to the popularity of the painting, in which it played a key role in motivating Wang Shizhen (王世貞, 1526-90), the leader of late-Ming world of letters, to write the erotic novel *The Plum in the Golden Vase* (*Jin Ping Mei* 金瓶梅). No matter how widely-known the Song-dynasty *Qingming shanghe tu* was in the late Ming, most renditions of *Qingming shanghe tu* which had been produced from the late Ming to the mid-Qing dynasty (1644-1911), were not descendents of the Song version, either directly or indirectly. The Song version provided a schema for later paintings of identical title, which was in the format of handscroll and depicted with a meandering river flowing from countryside to a walled city. The resemblance between the Song and later versions of *Qingming shanghe tu* stopped short of the depicted details on urban infrastructure and street activities, which testify to my argument that most of the painters of later versions did not have a clear idea of the Song version.

⁷ The above discussion on the concept of “early modern” benefits much from reading a special issue of *Rekishigaku kenkyū* 歴史学研究. See “‘Kinseika’ wo kangaeru (I) 近世化を考える(1),” in *Rekishigaku kenkyū*, no. 821 (November 2006). Thanks to Prof. Nakamura Masanori at Kanagawa University who mentioned this issue to me. In the issue, the concept of “kinsei” in Japanese history has also been discussed. Even though the emergence of cityscapes in Japan started from the late medieval period, the popularity of cityscapes in early modern Japan has long been well-known to historians and art historians.

⁸ Indeed, the painting remains one of the most famous in contemporary China, as shown by the great number of audiences who had to wait for at least three hours to see the painting in the exhibition held by the Shanghai Museum in the December of 2002.

There remain at least sixty Ming-Qing versions of *Qingming shanghe tu* scattered in the world, mostly undated and anonymous or with a fake signature;⁹ the version by Zhao Zhe 趙浙, with the date of 1577, is thus peculiar and can represent the emerging fashion for cityscapes in the late Ming. Zhao Zhe, an obscure painter from Ningbo 寧波, painted in a style recalling the mid-sixteenth-century Wu school of painting based in Suzhou.¹⁰ In fact, Suzhou had been the center for manufacturing fake paintings and calligraphic works in the late Ming and early Qing period, of which the handscrolls in the title of *Qingming shanghe tu* were a staple.¹¹

Other than the various *Qingming* scrolls, there are several cityscapes datable to the late Ming period; for example, the handscrolls *Thriving Southern Capital (Nan du fan hui 南都繁會)* and *Lantern Festival in Nanjing (Shang yuan deng cai 上元燈彩)* both depict Nanjing, the second capital of the Ming dynasty, in a festive atmosphere (figs. 3 and 4). The main focus of these two handscrolls lies in the commercial activities and theatrical spectacles that flourished in big cities such as Nanjing. The same city and its historical sites were also invoked by an important late-Ming scholar-official in his commissioning of a book whose illustrations contain forty scenic spots in the city, chosen mainly for their historical pedigree and associated literary images.¹²

The late-Ming cityscapes mentioned above all came from professional and obscure painters (or carvers) whose identifications and artistic activities have long been buried in historical oblivion; however, their works made and remade the city as an important symbol unparalleled in the later history of Chinese art and set up models for later cityscapes to follow. One of them was the *Qingming* scroll produced collaboratively by court painters working under the reign of Emperor Qianlong (r. 1736-95). The Qianlong rendition of *Qingming shanghe tu* was intended to embrace all kinds of vignettes which appeared in earlier versions to encapsulate the myriad things and scenes in the empire. As with the other cultural expressions with which the emperor was actively engaged, the *Qingming* scroll demonstrates masterful craftsmanship in all of its details;¹³ along with its all-comprehensive quality, the handscroll embodies a world of diversity and prosperity, one that was under the heavenly mandate of the Qing regime.

This *Qingming* scroll, which creates a city staged as a kaleidoscopic world of imperial glory, is but one of the images of cities reshaped in the symbolic framework of the Qing regime under Qianlong's reign. For example, the painting *Odes to the Capital in Spring (Jingshi shengchun shiyi 京師生春詩意)* portrays imperial palatial

⁹ Some of the Ming-Qing *Qingming* scrolls bear the false signature of Zhang Zeduan or Qiu Ying 仇英, the famous Suzhou professional painter active in the second quarter of the sixteenth century.

¹⁰ Zhao Zhe, as a painter forgotten in the history of Chinese painting, does not leave us any historical record except for his signature on the handscroll *Qingming shanghe* in the collection of the Hayashibara Museum of Art in Okayama. In his signature, he mentions that his native place was Siming 四明, that is, Ningbo.

¹¹ See Yang Chenbin 楊臣彬, "Tan Mingdai shuhua zuowei 談明代書畫作偽," in *Wenwu* 文物, no. 8 (1990), pp. 148-55; Yang Renkai 楊仁愷, ed., *Zhongguo gujin shuhua zhenwei tudian 中國古今書畫真偽圖典* (Shenyang: Liaoning huabao chubanshe, 1997), pp. 148-55; Ellen Johnston Laing, "Suzhou *Pian* and Other Dubious Paintings in the Received Oeuvre of Qiu Ying," in *Artibus Asiae*, vol. 59, no. 3/4 (2000), pp. 265-95.

¹² See Zhu Zhifan 朱之蕃, *Jinling tuyong 金陵圖詠*, in *Zhongguo fangzhi congshu 中國方志叢書* (Taipei: Chengwen chubanshe, 1983). For the discussion of this illustrated book, see Si-yen Fei, "Negotiating Urban Space: The Making and Remaking of the Southern Metropolis in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century China (PhD dissertation, Stanford University, 2004), pp. 162-67.

¹³ For example, the official ceramic production in the Qianlong period also reveals a mastery of all types of shapes and glazes.

compounds and ceremonial sites in Beijing shrouded in a New Year ambiance in which the emperor fulfilled his duty as a son of piety and as a ruler of benevolence. On the other hand, the handscroll *Burgeoning Population under the Prosperous Reign* (*Sheng shi zi sheng* 盛世滋生) transforms the image of Suzhou from a sixteenth-century literati dreamland of lyrical and bucolic landscape to a bustling city of solid infrastructure, affluent shopping districts, and agile performances.

As a genre of painting, cityscapes achieved a special status in the network of signification of the Qing court art and material culture. The above three paintings respectively depict a universalized city, the capital, and the most important cultural city in the Jiangnan area, each assuming its own symbolic meaning but, as a whole, demonstrating that the city, as one of the artistic symbols fashioned by the Qianlong court, played a vital role in bolstering the empire's legitimacy.

The popularity of cityscapes in eighteenth-century China was not a phenomenon exclusive to the court; while the *Qingming* scrolls continued to be made in such cities as Suzhou and Yangzhou,¹⁴ colorful woodblock prints which rendered the image of Suzhou very closely to that of *Burgeoning Population under the Prosperous Reign* were sold and widely circulated in southeastern China and Japan. Used as decorations on the occasion of Chinese New Year, these prints glorified the local government of Suzhou and the Qing regime by emphasizing the connection between good governance and urban infrastructure, represented by the landmark of the city, the Bridge of Ten-Thousand Years (*Wannianqiao* 萬年橋) completed in the fifth year of the Qianlong reign.¹⁵

One of the Suzhou New Year prints, while taking the commercial zone of Suzhou as its focus, bears a title which, on the surface, does not appear to be related to Suzhou or any other specific city. The title *Three Hundred and Sixty Trades* (*Sanbailiushi hang* 三百六十行) was a hyperbolic version of the term “thirty-six trades” (*sanshiliu hang* 三十六行), which was originated from the mid-Ming as an all-comprehensive term for the trades that developed in the economic boom of that time.¹⁶ The representations of specific professions set against a blank background became popular at the very end of the eighteenth century and constituted a staple of export paintings produced in Canton in the nineteenth century.¹⁷ These paintings and prints bring to light the connection of city life, trades, and specific professions in eighteenth-century China, and Suzhou, as a prosperous city, could incorporate all of the professions in its commercial activities and services.

¹⁴ The Palace Museum, Beijing, holds some *Qingming* scrolls which are considered produced in eighteenth-century Yangzhou because of their stylistic resemblances to the painting of Shitao (石濤, 1642-ca. 1707)..

¹⁵ Regarding the mercantile culture represented in eighteenth-century Suzhou carved cityscapes, see Yachen Ma, “Picturing Suzhou: Visual Politics in the Making of Cityscapes in Eighteenth-Century China” (PhD dissertation, Stanford University, 2006), chapter 1. However, I do not agree with her dating of the Suzhou cityscape prints and her conclusion that the consumers of these prints were exclusively middle- and low-level merchants.

¹⁶ See Xu Ke 徐珂, ed., *Qingbai leicha* 清稗類鈔, vol. 5 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1996), p. 2288; Huang Shijian and William Sargent, *Shijiu shiji Zhongguo shijing fengqing* 十九世紀中國市井風情 (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji chubanshe, 1999), p. 1.

¹⁷ See *Shijiu shiji Zhongguo shijing fengqing*. In eighteenth- and nineteenth-century China, the depictions of various trades were also included in the album leaves and woodblock prints which took local products and professions as focus. This kind of paintings and prints constituted a major type of genre paintings other than cityscapes.

2. Cityscapes and the Rise of Genre Painting

The above-mentioned cityscapes vary in provenance and meaning, but as a category of paintings, they shed light on the important issue regarding the rise of genre painting in late imperial China. “Genre painting,” translated in Chinese as *fengsuhua* 風俗畫, albeit a Western concept, is not completely foreign to China in that there was a long tradition of the court and government conducting investigations on local customs and life and having them represented in visual forms.¹⁸ Therefore, “genre painting” can be applied to the type of Chinese paintings which delineate the daily life of common people in real world. While its signified field needs to be clarified, such as the ideas of “daily life,” “common people,” and “real world,” the term “genre painting” can subsume the cityscapes that I am working on; more importantly, it can give them a categorical significance which can be examined from the perspectives of both Chinese traditions of representing local lifestyles and social customs, and the trans-cultural emergence of daily urban life as an artistic subject. Cityscapes, as a key component of genre painting in late imperial China, help to link urbanization and urban culture to the rise of genre painting.

Genre painting in China existed long before the late Ming period, and the Song version of *Qingming* scroll is the best example, not to mention the many paintings depicting rural life and peasantry which appeared conspicuously in the Song dynasty.¹⁹ However, according to a preliminary examination of the related materials and extant paintings, we may propose that there emerged a great number of cityscapes in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century China, a phenomenon which did not take place in previous periods. Also, the interim period between the Song and the late Ming did not produce genre paintings to an extent that can be characterized as “flourishing.” Thirdly, even if genre painting was popular in the Song dynasty, its theme was focused on farmers and rural life, and its main patrons fell into the traditional categories of people for art collection and appreciation, that is, the emperor, nobles, and literati.²⁰ In terms of theme and patronage, genre painting in early modern China witnessed a great transformation in that its focus of attention was shifted to urban life and its consumers were not limited to the upper and well-educated classes, both of which will be further explored in the following.

From the perspective of art history, the rise of genre painting not only demonstrated a great social interest in new themes focused on city life but pointed to the emergence of a style and a taste which did not fit in the mainstream realm of art. The style of cityscapes, with bright colors and detailed depictions of street life, was far removed from the mainstream aesthetic standard. Also, appreciating cityscapes did not require the literati education necessary to understand high art, nor knowledge of the orthodox brushwork lineages central to the conceptualization of Chinese painting which had been formulated by the late Ming. In this sense, cityscapes showed a new kind of aesthetic taste in opposition to that of monochrome landscape painting, whose lyrical quality and lofty aspiration mostly established by literati painters were considered orthodox in traditional Chinese

¹⁸ See Lu Xuanfei 盧宣妃, “Tongli renlun yicheng wangjiao: Qinggong fengsutu yu Zhongguo fengsuguan 統理人倫以成王教：清宮風俗圖與中國風俗觀,” *Gugong wemwu yuekan* 故宮文物月刊, vol. 23, no. 6 (September 2005), pp. 54-63.

¹⁹ Regarding paintings in the theme of rural life produced in the Song period, see Wen-chien Cheng, “Images of Happy Farmers in Song China (960-1279): Drunks, Politics and Social Identity” (PhD dissertation, University of Michigan, 2003).

²⁰ Wen-chien Cheng, “Images of Happy Farmers in Song China (960-1279): Drunks, Politics and Social Identity,” chapters 3 and 4.

artistic practices and theories.²¹

Eighteenth-century cityscapes further deviated from the literati ideal of art for they, either produced in court or in Suzhou, employed a mixed style of popular cityscapes of the seventeenth century and foreign artistic techniques brought in by Catholic missionaries. The uses of chiaroscuro and perspective in the cityscapes highlight the characteristics of cities as built environments containing houses, bridges, and walls and consolidate the political meaning implied in the solid infrastructure of cities. The presence of these Western techniques, which provided a new style to those who consumed cityscapes, change our perception of the homogeneous visual culture of eighteenth-century China and open up a horizon within which we are able to discuss the multi-lateral interactions of China, Japan, and the West in the Age of Exploration.²²

3. Cityscapes and Cultural Consumption

Cityscapes, no matter whether in the format of scroll painting or woodblock print, represent the increasingly vigorous cultural consumption of artworks in major urban centers. The economic growth of the late Ming and the rise of consumerism produced an art market for non-elite customers who purchased inexpensive and lower quality art from shops or street peddlers, in which cityscapes played an important role. As noted by Li Rihua (李日華, 1565-1635), a renowned late-Ming scholar-official, shops carrying handscroll cityscapes were very common in Beijing, each painting worth one *tael* of silver. This was also the approximate price for a set of low-quality household encyclopedias produced in late-Ming Fujian, which circulated in both Fujian and the Jiangnan area. It seems that this sum of money was the yardstick which measured the basic purchasing power for those who were able to consume books and artworks in the late Ming period. With one *tael* of silver, one could afford low-quality artworks and books, and cityscapes in handscroll format and Fujian daily-life encyclopedias were located at the bottom of the ladder of cultural consumption.

In order to further gauge the consumers for cityscapes and household encyclopedias in late-Ming China, a thorough analysis of the contents, forms, and details of these two kinds of cultural objects is necessary; however, here, I can only offer some observations. Many of the cityscapes produced in late imperial China were inscribed with characters indicating the commodities, trades, services, or built environments depicted in the painting. As mentioned above, cityscapes, without an artistic tradition and with many real-life like vignettes, appealed to those who did not have cultural capital to appreciate abstract landscapes or to consume expensive and high-quality artworks by famous painters. Furthermore, a functionally literate viewer, with an ability to read primers such as

²¹ For a pioneering study of Chinese art theories, especially those of the literati class, see Susan Bush, *The Chinese Literati on Painting: Su Shih (1037-1101) to Tung Chi-ch'ang (1555-1636)* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971). For a detailed discussion of late-Ming formulation of painting tradition and its association with contemporary social and cultural trends, see Wang Cheng-hua, "Cong Chen Hongshou de 'Hua Lun' kan wan Ming Zhejiang huatan: jianlun Jiangnan huihua wanluo yu quyu jingzheng 從陳洪綬的畫論看晚明浙江畫壇：兼論江南繪畫網絡與區域競爭 (Chen Hongshou's "On Painting": A Study of Stylistic Networking and Regional Competition in Late-Ming China," in *Qiyu yu wangluo 區域與網絡* (Taipei: Guoli Taiwan daxue Yishushi yanjiusuo, 2001), pp. 329-79.

²² Japanese scholars, while discussing the Western influence on art in the framework of Rangaku 蘭学, emphasize the bi-lateral relationship between Japan and the West in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. On the other hand, Japanese scholars who specialize in Chinese woodblock prints and their influence on Japanese period during the same period look at the bi-lateral relationship between China and Japan. Here, I propose an examination of the complicated and multi-lateral interactions between China, Japan, and the West because, as today, the cultural interactions between two areas could not be isolated.

Three Character Classic (*Sanzijing* 三字經) and to consult manuals for learning professional skills such as accounting, could enjoy cityscapes more than the illiterate.

Understanding a late-Ming Fujian household encyclopedia also took at least a functionally literate education, even though, unlike with cityscapes, literacy was indispensable. With the exception of the chapters following the traditional daily-life encyclopedias that derived from the models of the Southern Song (1127-1279), the contents of Fujian household encyclopedias were imbued with urban culture, especially with regard to the entertaining and socializing skills which were best brewed in urban environments. The viewer of cityscapes seems to have shared a similar economic and cultural background with the reader of daily-life encyclopedias. They were the functionally literate who benefited from late-Ming economic development, possessed basic purchasing power, and thus formed the bottom rung of cultural consumers. These consumers found delight in the efflorescence of urban culture, and a market of low-quality and low-priced artworks and books were created to meet their demands.

Traditionally, except for the emperor and nobility, the literati class and rich merchants were the two major groups of people who could afford works of art, especially those made on commission. Even though paintings as commodities prepared for sale had had a long history by the late Ming – including, for instance, those sold at the itinerant markets in the Northern Song capital, Kaifeng – the great demand of common people for affordable artworks triggered the production of low-priced and low-quality paintings on a huge scale unparalleled in previous times. It seems that the stratification of the artworks in different levels of prices and qualities was successfully developed in late-Ming art market. Similarly, Fujian daily-life encyclopedias, which exist in at least forty, mostly shoddy editions, constituted the lowest strata of the book market in terms of price and quality.

According to research on merchant patronage, rich merchants in late imperial China, with their economic capital, strove to emulate the taste of those who possessed cultural capital, that is, the literati,²³ despite the fact that the conversion of economic into cultural capital, and vice versa, was more difficult in Ming-Qing China than in the 1970s French society of Pierre Bourdieu's classic study on the subject.²⁴ In the late Ming, as more people gained the means to purchase artworks, the discourse on the binary concepts of elegance (*ya* 雅) and vulgarity (*su* 俗) blossomed vigorously. While, as pointed out by scholars, the relationship between these two criteria for taste was dialectic, not static, the tension between different stratified levels of cultural consumers was intense. Cityscapes and the knowledge of art offered by the Fujian household encyclopedias were thus cast as the representations of vulgar taste in the writings of literati. On the other hand, the knowledge of art in the Fujian encyclopedias, distinctive from that in literati writings, carved out a social space in which common people formulated their own cognition of art. It seems that cultural emulation in late imperial China was only limited to rich merchants who could afford high-quality artworks and frequent socialization with the literati class.

The question of whether the Ming-Qing transition disrupted the efflorescent urban culture developed in the late Ming waits to be answered. It is also unclear whether the stratification of cultural consumption in the late Ming continued in the early Qing dynasty; however, in the eighteenth century, the *Qingming* scrolls and the emergence

²³ See Jason Chi-sheng Kuo, *Huizhou Merchants as Art Patrons in the Late Sixteenth and Early seventeenth Centuries*, in Chu-tsing Li, ed., *Artists and Patrons: Some Social and Economic Aspects of Chinese Painting* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1989), pp. 177-88; Ginger Cheng-chi Hsü, *A bushel of Pearls: Painting for Sale in Eighteenth-Century Yangchow* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), chapters 2 and 3.

²⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, trans. by Richard Nice, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984).

of a great number of colored prints, such as the cityscapes mentioned above, satisfied the demand of common people for a taste of art whenever affordable.

The Yangzhou school of painting has long been the most studied in the artistic scenes of eighteenth-century China, and the issue regarding the connection between patronage and style remains essential, especially whether there was a new social class of patrons who purchased paintings of new subjects and styles by such painters as Zheng Xie (鄭燮, 1693-1765).²⁵ In the case of the Yangzhou paintings, it remains difficult to ascertain the emergence of new buyers for art, in terms of their social and economic standings. The main reasons lie in that the Yangzhou painters still belonged to the traditional category of literati painters who received literati education but made paintings for living. And their style, though showing a shift in prevalent subject from landscape to figure and flower-and-bird, retained the sophisticated brushwork of mainstream landscape. More importantly, in terms of the socio-economic mechanism through which paintings were produced as commodities, the Yangzhou paintings entered the art market through commissions, rather than as ready-made commodities. They did not demonstrate a new pattern in consumptive activities, and did not create a multi-layered stratified market for cultural consumption.

By contrast, the low-quality and low-priced cityscapes were the steady products of art workshops and routine commodities which were widely sold in major urban centers. They represented the opposite end of the spectrum – in style, quality, and taste – from literati painting. As such, cityscapes are a vital resource for exploring the emergence of a new social class, a class of functionally literate people with modest means who demanded that cultural objects cater to their desire for art and books and created a stratified market for cultural consumption in early modern China.

4. Urban Consciousness and Cities as Important Cultural Sites

As mentioned above, the Ming-Qing cityscapes demonstrate a clear and consistent view on cities, which was centered on two aspects of urban life and culture: Commodities and commercial activities on the one hand, and theatrical performances and spectatorship on the other. In cityscapes, these two aspects are linked by a multitude of people who acted as pedestrians, sellers, buyers, or onlookers. This view of cities was not at all conventional or orthodox; for example, the Song version of the *Qingming* scroll instead laid stress on the activities associated with labor and work. Most of the traditional city maps projected cities from an official perspective focused on different levels of governmental offices and schools.²⁶

While the Song-dynasty *Qingming* scroll was very likely to have been a court painting, it seems that cityscapes commissioned by the court or the government employed a perspective very different from that of the Ming-Qing cityscapes sold on the art market as routine commodities. The latter group of cityscapes projected cities from the eye of common people without literati education, who took pleasure in the dusty life of bustling cities. In this sense, the quotidian, consumptive, and flashy nature of urban life became important cultural expressions which deserved appreciation. While some literati criticized the commercialization and commoditization of the southern

²⁵ *A Bushel of Pearls*, chapters 4 and 5.

²⁶ See Chang Che-chia 張哲嘉, “Mingdai fangzhi zhong de ditu 明代方志中的地圖 (Maps in Ming Local Gazetteers),” in Huang Kewu 黃克武, ed., *Huazhong youhua: Jindai Zhongguo de shijue biaooshu yu wenhua goutu* 畫中有話：近代中國的視覺表述與文化構圖 (Taipei: Zhongyang yanjiuyuan Jindaishi yanjiusuo, 2003), pp. 288-312.

metropolises and their association with vulgarity, the low-quality cityscapes sold in the cities represented a chance for common people to participate in urban commodity and visual culture.

Two points can be deduced from the above discussion. First, there emerged a clear sense of urban culture and life in early modern China, which distinguished cities from other human environments and relished the activities and cultural expressions associated with cities. This urban consciousness also manifested itself in the novels which took the city and its associated lifestyle as their theme, such as *Jin Ping Mei*.²⁷ As mentioned above, in many late-Ming records of the Song-dynasty *Qingming* scroll, the novel and the scroll were mythically linked together. The conjoining of these two important cultural expressions of city life in the anecdote seems to insinuate that urban consciousness not only penetrated popular stories and folk psychology but also became a resource for different modes of cultural expression.

Second, the wide circulation of cityscapes in the Jiangnan area and the capital Beijing (including the eighteenth-century Qing court) demonstrated the vitality of the city as a symbolic and cultural site. By “cultural site,” I refer to specific places or physical spaces that were traditionally considered centers of social and cultural prestige.

Before the late Ming, places such as beautiful scenic spots, eminent historical remains, or famous religious sanctuaries attracted the attention of Chinese social elites. As Frederick Mote notes in his seminal studies of Chinese cities, most of these cultural sites were located outside of city walls, the traditional symbol of the border of urban life. While a combination of agricultural cultivation and scholarly study (*gengdu* 耕讀) composed the ideal life of Confucianism, the importance of cities and urban life was neglected. This ideal life not only involved a life pattern and its associated economic and social foundation but also a certain social value. Agrarian life in the countryside was hardly fertile ground for social values which regarded the commercialization, commoditization, and spectatorship of urban culture as positive qualities. The rise of cities as important cultural sites certainly changed the social values predominant in late imperial China.

Frederick Mote also indicates that the Western dichotomy of the city and the country is not applicable to China, for the relationship between Chinese cities and countryside was in a pattern more of continuum than rupture.²⁸ Furthermore, social and economic historians have noted that the magnitude and cosmopolitan quality of cities in late imperial China did not exceed those of the Tang (618-970) and Song dynasties until the rise of Shanghai as a modern city in the late nineteenth century. However, if we shift our attention from statistics and economic indicators to urban consciousness and the representations of urban culture in literary and visual products, a completely different story emerges.

This project gives an account of this story from the perspective of artworks by focusing on a great number of

²⁷ The relationship of *Jin Ping Mei* and the burgeoning urban culture of the late-Ming period has been discussed by scholars in literary studies; for example, see Shang Wei, “The Making of the Everyday World: *Jin Ping Mei Cihua* and the Encyclopedias for Daily Use,” in David Der-wei Wang and Shang Wei, eds., *Dynastic Crisis and Cultural Innovation: From the Late Ming to the Late Qing and Beyond* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2005), pp. 63-92.

²⁸ Frederick W. Mote, “The City in Traditional Chinese Civilization,” in James T. C. Liu and Wei-ming Tu., eds., *Traditional China* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1970), p. 49; see also his “Millennium of Chinese Urban History: Form, Time and Space Concepts in Soochow,” in *Rice University Studies*, vol. 58, no. 4 (1973), pp. 101-54.

cityscapes from the late-sixteenth through the early nineteenth-centuries, while also incorporating recent research on fiction depicting urban life. The emergence of cities as the primary cultural sites in late imperial China and the blossoming of cultural qualities associated with urban life are very likely to be the key for us to investigate the problematic of modernity.

As mentioned above, the complexities of modernity or “modernities” as an analytic framework to characterize the cultural and social traits in the historical development of human societies have aroused heated discussion in the humanities and social sciences. Here, I am unable to discuss the entire spectrum of the problematic of modernity and the ways by which cityscapes illuminate China’s historical course toward modern world. However, for the moment, I can point out that cities constituted critical cultural sites in early modern China, and urban culture became vital to the transformation of cultural expressions and social values of this historical period. Therefore, cityscapes, as one of the most important representations of the city, should play a role in shaping the analytical and conceptual tools that we apply to the problem of characterizing early modern China.

< Figures >

- Fig. 1 Qiu Ying (attributed), *Qingming shanghe tu* (*Up to the River on Qingming Festival*), early 17th century, Liaoning Provincial Museum, Shenyang, China
- Fig. 2 Zhang Zeduan (attributed), *Qingming shanghe tu*, 11th or 12th century, the Palace Museum, Beijing, China
- Fig. 3 Anonymous, *Nan du fan hui* (*Thriving Southern Capital*), early 17th century, The National Museum of China, Beijing, China
- Fig. 4 Anonymous, *Shang yuan deng cai* (*Lantern Festival in Nanjing*), detail, early 17th century, private collection, Taipei, Taiwan