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Made for trade - Made in China. Chinese export paintings in Dutch collections: art and commodity

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Chapter 2

Theories for new insights into Chinese export paintings

By examining Chinese export paintings, with their art and commodity character, in terms of their use value through time and space, this chapter gives us insight into the theoretical frameworks that shed new light on this painting genre. It will deal with their commodity/export value, related cultural-biographical issues and other value and meaning matters in their social life. It also treats aspects of visual economy and the materiality of this specific painting genre with its historical and artistic value accrued (or not) by the various mechanisms active along the trajectory of production, exchange and circulation, through to consumption, ‘freezing’ or de-commodification and, sometimes, revivification or re-commodification.

2.1. Framework for visual analysis on a multiple level

Among the numerous theoretical sources on visual culture, I found Gilian Rose’s angle effective for interpreting the individual images and in terms of achieving the underlying objective of this dissertation; that is, to revitalize the legacy of Chinese export painting in the Dutch collections.¹ Therefore, this study deploys her developed framework to approach objects, in this case Chinese export paintings, which (never innocently) render the world in visual terms. To interpret these paintings, both the meaning and use value of the corpus must be examined on multiple levels; what Rose calls the ‘sites’ and ‘modalities’.² To qualify and evaluate the large body of paintings involved and to remain consistent with the theoretical frame of reference revealed in this chapter, it is important to explore three sites:

1. the site of the production of the paintings (all aspects of the *modus operandi* of Chinese

export painters and their practice, as treated in Chapter 3.3.);

2. the site of the image itself with its assigned value depending on the genre (sets, albums, and singular paintings executed in different media) and the represented Chinese subject matter;

3. the site(s) where the paintings were seen and interpreted by various consumers, or audiences, along the total trajectory of their social life (in general discussed throughout this dissertation and explained in more detail in the case studies in Chapters 5 and 6).

These three sites are active in relation to the value accrument, or the opposite, the value dwindle, of the paintings.

The modalities (aspects) at stake at each site are:

1. technological (what an image looks like and what it is made from effects what it might do and what might be done to it);

2. compositional (referring to the specific material qualities of the paintings: content, set, album, singular, colour and spatial organisation);

3. socially relevant (referring to “the range of economic, social and political relations, institutions and practices that surround an image and through which it is seen and used.”³).

The aspect of ‘subject matter’ or ‘genre’ of all three modalities remains important to the social function and evaluation of Chinese export paintings. Thus, this aspect will be discussed in Chapter 4, which provides an inventory of the Dutch collections; that is, an aggregate amount of sets, albums, and various genres.

To theorise the materiality of Chinese export paintings and in order to get the necessary metaview with regard to the paintings and their trajectories, I had to zoom out to a larger picture. This study, therefore, distanced itself from the paintings’ material, the represented subject matter, stylistic and compositional

1 Rose 2007 and 2012.

2 Rose 2007, 13 and 257-262.

3 Ibid., 13.

aspects, indexical and iconographical worth, and their production date. Only then (looking at the paintings beyond a classic art historical approach) can the materiality of the collections and their current state in the Netherlands be grasped. This requires moving back and forth between the two unequal magnitudes of ‘materials’ and ‘materiality’, to achieve an overview of the corpus across physical and cultural contexts in space and time. In addition to incorporating these helpful theoretical concepts in the construction of my argument, this second chapter also provides an analysis of the concepts ‘transcultural’ and ‘cultural translation’ to reveal their artistic value.

A new interdisciplinary approach is necessary to analyse this specific cultural heritage around the world and, more specifically, to evaluate the Dutch collections. Building on existing (art) historical approaches (descriptive and iconographical issues, dating quests, mimesis facets, painting-technical aspects, ‘East-West’-painting conventions, cultural-contextual interpretations, etc.), which no longer hold strong positions and need extending, this study highlights some useful views that have taken root in the fields of art history, anthropology, history, archaeology and museum studies. The novel mix of concepts from the mentioned scholarly fields is effective for me in terms of analysing the corpus central to *Made for Trade* and makes it, what Coltman calls ‘talkative’, and worthy of discussion.⁴ To support my argument that Chinese export paintings, with their omnipresent commodity character, should be evaluated as valuable art works, this chapter is constructed in sections dealing with, respectively: commodity dynamics, Chinese export painting as part of a visual economy, commodities and people in a material complex, and transcultural lenses on this specific art genre. The conclusion provides the most fitting angles from which to examine the Dutch corpus and to give this shared cultural repertoire the right place and status in line with its acknowledged use value.

4 Coltman 2015, 20.

5 Kopytoff 1986, 64-91.

6 Renfrew 2005, 91-93. Van Binsbergen 2005, 26.

7 Renfrew, so posited by Van Binsbergen 2005, 25-26, sees the emerging circulation of commodities – from the Upper Palaeolithic onwards but gaining full momentum in the Neolithic – as the true Human Revolution (maybe of more consequence than the emergence of *homo sapiens sapiens* as such).

8 Renfrew 2005, 93.

9 Van Binsbergen 2005, 45.

2.2.

Commodity dynamics

The commodity perspective presents a valuable point of entry to material culture. It is closely linked to the embedded notion of – what Igor Kopytoff calls – a cultural biography of objects.⁵ In this case, it means that the paintings are not considered art works that have emerged from a specific art-historical style or development per se. Neither are they treated as catalysts for a fundamental break with former tendencies, nor as simply important to new trends; rather, they are addressed as artistic products intended for exchange. Primarily, we should understand them as things that can be transferred from one to another, involving socio-cultural, spatial and temporal aspects, and as having a certain exchange value. According to the leading British archaeologist Colin Renfrew, in ‘Archaeology and commodification: The role of things in societal transformation’ in *Commodification: Things, Agency, and Identities (The Social Life of Things Revisited)*, “the etymology of the word commodity as something corresponding to a specific regime of measurement is of special importance to understanding the crucial role of commodification in human history.”⁶ The term ‘commodification’ can be understood as the process when objects, goods, services, and artworks are turned into a commercial and exchangeable product that can be bought and sold around the world. At the time the commodification process started, the human world order changed.⁷ In its initial sense, so Renfrew argues, commodity is a symbolic concept, referring to “a material whose quantity may be measured, which may have a definite value, and which may be exchanged.”⁸ Alternatively, Van Binsbergen tentatively defines a commodity as “a domestic object, that is, a part of the physical world that has been defined, classified, and appropriated by humans.”⁹ This definition by Van Binsbergen – as an anthropologist presently working on the theory and method of research on cultural globalisation, especially in connection with virtuality, information and communication technology, ethnicity and religion – was mainly

intended to show the difference between a commodity and an object that is originally domesticated in a specific local community; that is to say, existing within a local horizon with a strong, sometimes ancient and ritual significance. In terms of this present research, the commodity aspect is an important parameter, most notably in relation to the meaning and use value of Chinese export paintings.

In order to see a Chinese export painting as a commodity with a ‘social life’, we must proceed methodically. Firstly, it is good to focus on spatial and temporal aspects in order to identify its use value. Indeed, both their place of production and of consumption, and the more or less demarcated period of time in which they are produced are significant in the process of their appraisal. Focusing on the forms of functions of use (or exchange) legitimises the conception that commodities, like people, have social lives. Secondly, we must deduce how the artwork has acquired or, indeed, lost value; and finally, we must consider the ways in which said values affected interactions between people and objects and the ways in which these interactions are to be determined.

According to Jane Fajans, researchers often step into a trap when it comes to the use of terms like ‘exchange’ and ‘circulation’.¹⁰ As we can read in David Graeber’s *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value*, she suggests making a consistent distinction between exchange and circulation. Whereas exchange occurs “when property of some sort passes from one person to another,” the notion of circulation is appropriate “when values or valued qualities are transferred.”¹¹ I argue that within a business-like market with global dimensions, such as the Chinese export painting exchange, these concepts usually come down to more or less the same thing. In some cases it may be possible to realise the high value of such a painting, perhaps it is as an heirloom, by giving it away to a museum; in others, by displaying it as a saleable item on eBay or Alibaba’s Taobao

Marketplace, or putting it up for public auction; in yet others, by keeping it (and making sure others know that you have one).¹² In all three cases, values circulate. Exchange, then, is just one of many possible forms circulation might take. Thus, in the case of Chinese export painting, these terms can safely be used interchangeably.

After its production and having being exchanged to a Westerner as a commodity, a Chinese export painting became socially placeless, ready to be appropriated in potentially distant and unknown meta local contexts.¹³ In addition to a life as a more-than-a-souvenir object, I argue, in line with Van Binsbergen, that the painting was ready to be measured there against the universalising standards of a meta local medium of exchange – of which money is the principal example – thus endowing it with a new meta local meaning.¹⁴

Regardless of their own particular object story, network and provenance, the commodity aspect that objects such as Chinese export paintings acquire, makes them all, in principle, similar in light of the great equaliser, i.e. money. The impersonal principle of money creates a multitude of potential circumstances in which the commodity may be exchanged into ever-new contexts and into ever-new hands, without, in principle, being transformed in the process. As such, most Chinese export paintings are more or less interchangeable with other things, in unlimited spaces and times, beyond the here and now. While in general we can apply this definition of commodity to Chinese export paintings circulating in commercial art markets around the globe, in the case of this research, we cannot; at least, we cannot entirely. A number of the paintings kept in the Dutch museum collections are currently withdrawn from further effective circulation. They are remain hidden due to their vulnerability or their damaged state and, so far, are not accessible through the internet. Other contexts in which this withdrawing is imaginable is when they act as valuable

¹⁰ Fajans’ view on exchange and circulation is discussed in Graeber 2001, 81.

¹¹ Graeber 2001, 81. David Graeber is an American anthropologist. From 1998–2007 he taught Anthropology at Yale University, where he specialised in theories of value and social theory. From 2008 to spring 2013, Graeber was a lecturer and a reader at Goldsmith’s College of the University of London. Since 2013, he is Professor of Anthropology at the London School of Economics.

¹² Since March 2015, Sotheby’s, one of the most prestigious auction houses, entered the digital arena by organising one of the first public auctions via the internet. This resulted in a shift from physical to online art sales, also in the highest segment of the market. Thus, sales of art have become more accessible to a wider audience, worldwide.

¹³ Chinese export paintings never became totally culturally placeless, because they are inscribed with a certain kind of ‘Chineseness’.

¹⁴ Van Binsbergen 2005, 46.

heirlooms that guarantee someone's historical identity and thus confirm their claims to status and authority as icons of the China trade. In this way, they are appropriated and hoarded as a unique object, singularised by collectors, museum curators or people who design their home with things that they imagine breathe the life of China, articulating their identity as a 'been-to', as Van Binsbergen calls this phenomenon.¹⁵ In this respect, the owner is actually trying to ensure these items do not circulate.

Approaching these paintings from a commodity perspective requires us to follow the paintings' pathways from production to consumption. The path that leads to 'freezing' or de-commodification is a dynamic that often emerges when, in the positive sense of the word, an object is set apart as unique cultural heritage, for instance in museums. In a negative sense, the painting is neglected, in a bad conservational state, and has become of no value for the current owner, whether this is a public institution or a private person. Additionally, if an object's identity is permanently attached to that of an original owner, or when things are inalienable, circulation, Graeber states, cannot actually enhance an object's value.¹⁶ Its value, then, is measured in the fear of loss and not in it being a product of exchange. Moreover, the process of claiming identity of an object is a fluid, overlapping and inconsistent process. The relation between commodities (or, more generally, things) and the marking of human identities is generally accepted.¹⁷ However, this nexus shows some ambivalence. On the one hand, things may be used to confirm identities. On the other hand, things are involved in processes of commodification, related to a market that is, in principle, open-ended, and this, I agree with Van Binsbergen, "necessarily undermines such efforts at closure."¹⁸ Often,

human agency comes to the fore when the trajectory of production to consumption closes. It is always human valuation towards inanimate things – in casu Chinese export paintings, which in their turn contain agency too – that could close the open-ended market of commodification. But is this really closed? When closed, after all, there is always a chance that this commodification process will open up again in other contextual circumstances. This basic ambiguity concerning the commodity soul of Chinese export paintings will be covered later in this chapter when discussing the concept of material complex.

The painting *View of the waterfront of Canton* (Figure 2.0.) on loan to Museum Volkenkunde from the Leembruggen family, for example, functioned as an artistic commodity at the time and place of its production, until its inheritance by the Leembruggen family, when it became a real identity-marker for the people involved. For a while, they withdrew the painting from further circulation. This also happened when the artwork entered the museum in 1905, where it remains in the storeroom until today. This de-commodification has nothing to do with identity marking or with unique, artistic and historic value; rather, it has everything to do with priorities and strategies in collection management, whether or not motivated by valuation of Chinese export painting in general and/or by financial considerations. In their turn, we can assume that these considerations are fed by existing ignorance about the high use value of this art work. The future, fortunately, holds the promise of change for this particular painting with its representative function.

By labelling the Dutch museum collections of Chinese export paintings as cultural heritage, the safeguarding of which for future generations is essential, the joint collections acquire value as a class of cultural property that should not be

15 Van Binsbergen 2005, 44.

16 Graeber 2001, 34.

17 Van Binsbergen 2005, 23, 30. The terminological exploration of the word 'thing' in the introduction of *Commodification: Things, Agency, and Identities* (2005) gives us a definition of a thing as "an extensive (in principle unbounded) set of distinct, countable individual objects, marked as non-human (even as inanimate), and together constituting the ensemble of the concrete world that surrounds humans, without including or implying them." In English, the expression 'things' clearly has the above connotation, but the expression tends to refer to concrete objects, not to the empirical world as a whole. This definition is appropriate for this present research. In Chinese, the expression 'wan wu,' 萬物, literally 'the ten thousand things' (all things, everything that is happening), connotes the 'general world', although 'wu', 物, is also used for 'object(s)' and 'commodity/ies'.

18 Van Binsbergen 2005, 23. The authors of *The Social Life of Things* rather use the term 'commoditization.' Together with Van Binsbergen (2005, 15, footnote 2), I prefer 'commodification', since -ification relates to 'making' while -ization might refer, in some sort of teleological sense, to a more or less automatic and unilineal process.



circulated, but retained and transmitted from one generation to another. As Mike Rowlands points out in his ‘Value and the cultural transmission of things’ in *Commodification: Things, Agency, and Identities (The Social Life of Things Revisited)*, “they are ‘objects in social motion’, without being commodities.”¹⁹ This research also asks whether, notwithstanding their de-commodified existence, Chinese export paintings in the Netherlands should be revived and brought back into the commodity chain, in order to circulate again and, in some way, promote cultural autonomy (or patriotism?) and identity in the country where they initially arose.

Arjun Appadurai writes in the introduction of his seminal study *The Social Life of Things*, “It is only through the analysis of the total trajectories that we can interpret the human transactions and calculations that enliven things.”²⁰ Following Appadurai’s idea of a commodity being an object in a certain situation, which can be compared to other objects, we must focus on the moment when the exchangeability (past, present, or future) of an object (for other objects) becomes its relevant feature. Furthermore, Appadurai argues that the commodity situation can be split into three aspects of ‘commodity-hood’: the commodity phase, the commodity candidacy and the commodity context.²¹ By explaining these three aspects, it becomes clear that commodification acts at the complex intersection of temporal,

cultural and social factors. My research originated from the idea that, to varying degrees, the research material considered here is frequently found in the commodity phase, the paintings fit the requirements of commodity candidacy and they often appear, at least when they circulate in the global art market, in a commodity context.

Taking the Leembruggen painting as an example to explain how this commodification process works, I argue that this painting is a typical product of the vibrant commodity industry, fully at work in the nineteenth century in South Chinese port cities, like Canton and Macao. This iconic harbour view can be taken as a clear example of being in a true commodity phase at the time of its production. Almost certainly, at that time, this painting was exchanged for something else with a comparable value (money, service, another good). The mass produced scene of this particular painting, which refers to the high status of the historical China trade and its exponents, serves as an ‘ultimate commodity’ throughout its social life. Despite the current status of this painting, i.e. that it is not a typical commodity, because it lies ‘frozen’ in a museum depot, it keeps its commodity candidacy until today. After all, this family heirloom can easily be brought back into circulation again, either by displaying it at the museum (physically or virtually), or by putting it up for auction. This latter action, in my opinion,

Fig. 2.o. View of the waterfront of Canton, anonymous, oil on canvas, 1845-1855, 87,5 x 200 cm, Museum Volkenkunde/ Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, inv.no. RV-B3-1.

19 Rowlands 2005, 267.

20 Appadurai 1986, 5.

21 Ibid., 13-16.

is not preferable, because of several reasons. With this painting, truly emblematic for the historical China trade, are many narratives to (re)construct. Future museum audiences can learn about the various appealing facets connected with this specific art genre and the painting's social life from its production to the state of it today.

In other words, it seems that Chinese export paintings are ultimate commodities, with an aesthetic contextualisation as a natural result of the commodifying process. But is this right? In fact, there is a serious *but* in here. We have just read that pathways from production to consumption sometimes lead to 'freezing', when an object is set apart as cultural heritage. Let us dwell, then, on the determination that Chinese export paintings are 'commodities' by examining the three aspects of commodity-hood.

**A cultural biography perspective:
the commodity phase**

Over time, objects can move in and out of the commodity phase, the period representative of the moment during an object's life when it is operating as a commodity. I aim to analyse the total trajectories of Chinese export paintings in the Dutch museum collections and, as we shall see, most of them did not stay with their first owner, but instead travelled widely before entering the museum. On their journey, the value initially ascribed to them appears to be fluid and subject to changing interpretations; in other words, "the values are constantly in flux," as Diana Fridberg, anthropologist and research associate at Washington University in St. Louis, remarks in her online article 'The social life of things'.²² Every time a Chinese export painting is transferred, its cultural context and its use or function shifts and, at the same time, this defines its changing exchange value. On this journey through different social-cultural milieus, passing through time as well as space, the paintings are subsequently assigned historical value, aesthetic value, memory value, and economic value.

Kopytoff's formulation of the perspective of a cultural biography of objects, which is appropriate to specific things as they move through different hands, contexts and uses, seems an essential and workable tool for allowing these paintings to speak to us. We will see that such a painting may have a number of different potential biographies focused on

different aspects of its life, including those focused on technical, social, and economic values. The core of a cultural biography comprises the chain of events through which a painting becomes culturally marked and unmarked. As Kopytoff suggests "a culturally informed biography of an object would look at a biography as a culturally constructed entity, endowed with culturally specific meanings, and classified and reclassified into culturally constituted categories."²³ Chinese export paintings are culturally marked objects with a specific use value in their social life. How, and from what perspective their biographies deal with their social life and related use value must be studied. Many different aspects of a painting's cultural biography along its trajectory contribute to its value. Although its commodity value can be distinguished from its artistic value, when studying this art genre these two sorts of values can never be looked at separately. On the contrary, this kind of art is filled with social and cultural connotations, the various layers of which are built up throughout a painting's existence, culminating in the conclusion that such a painting can be treated as an art object.

Questions that arise when we approach paintings as commodities with a biographical model are: What are the biographical possibilities inherent in their status regarding notions such as exchange value, period and culture? Where does the painting come from and who made it? What has been their career so far? What are the recognised 'ages' or periods in a painting's life and, what are the cultural markers for the paintings? What did a specific painting represent for the succession of people who owned it? A painting would have passed through several hands during its production, its 'middle passage' from a Chinese painting studio to a Western home or museum wall. A painting can be admired, cared for, bequeathed as an heirloom, sold, exhibited, damaged, de-commodified, rediscovered, restored and once more admired in its former glory. The biographical aspect of a Chinese export painting as heirloom and antique is clear, but Kopytoff prompts us to ask, how does the painting's use (or sentimental) value change with age?²⁴ Are heirlooms valuable just because they are unique, or because of their specific history? What is their capacity to accumulate a history as a collector's item? What happens to them when they reach

22 Fridberg 2008. https://www.academia.edu/19364792/The_Social_Life_of_Things (consulted October 2016).

23 Kopytoff 1986, 68.

24 Ibid., 66-67.

the end of their use value? Do people create value based on imagined futures, or also on imagined pasts? The various biographical details reveal a tangled mass of judgements about use value that shape our attitudes to these paintings. Similar questions may be asked on a larger scale to determine the social history of a class of things. This refers to a long-term view of how the meanings and uses of a painting change over time. As Charles Orser Jr. wrote in 1996: “[I]n a cultural biography, a particular object is followed through time, with its changing context noted at each stage of its life. The social history of things focuses on the large-scale dynamics of supply, demand, and meanings of whole classes of items and tracks their changes through time.”²⁵ The sum of many of these cultural biographies forms the social history of the class of Chinese export paintings. As will be shown in chapter 5, this history, in turn, affects the cultural biography of them: a circular ‘chicken-and-egg’ process.

Commodification: Exchange as source of value

The commodity candidacy, the second aspect of commodity-hood, is less a temporal than a conceptual feature. It refers to standards and criteria that define the exchangeability of an object in any particular social and historical context. Furthermore, the ‘candidacy’ affects, as Fridberg argues, “the ability of an object to operate as a commodity in a certain situation in line with the needs and desires of buyer and seller, the cultural framework in which the exchange takes place, and other situational factors.”²⁶ In the Dutch situation, with a lot of Chinese export paintings living their overlooked lives in museum storerooms, removed from circulation, this candidacy aspect gives a promising perspective. Yet, it also presents the possibility that the involved paintings can always regain their exchange value and function as artistic commodities. How an object came to hold a particular value depends on the specifics of its creation, use and ultimate value. For example, the degree of rarity of a product, the level of expertise required to create an object, or the transformative processes involved in creation may provide clues to value. The British social anthropologist Alfred Gell, whose most influential work concerned art, language, symbolism, ritual and agency, even refers to the way in which beautifully made or skilfully

constructed objects may produce certain psychological effects, including the attribution of value as “the enchantment of technology.”²⁷ In doing so, objects are designed to elicit a certain psychological effect by exploiting certain sensory characteristics. In this formulation of material ‘performance’, I argue, in tandem with Gell’s idea, that human engagement with material culture also lends Chinese export paintings agency. Another mode for identifying value is to determine the performance characteristics, i.e. how well the object can be used to achieve the purpose of its use, relative to objects of a similar type. For example, a large Chinese export oil painting serves a different purpose from a small, loose sheet of pith paper with a watercolour on it. This is ultimately reflected in its value and price. The value of the huge panoramic Leembruggen *View of the waterfront of Canton* painting may be ascribed value by society at large at the time of its production, while the value of a watercolour on pith paper may be passionately personal. The value of both paintings, I argue, is inseparable from their material existence, which is always substantive.

We must bear in mind that, in the case of Chinese export painting, the intercultural exchange is characterised by different standards of value. We cannot maintain the idea that it is just the cultural framework that defines the commodity value of these paintings. The degree of value coherence between, for instance, buyers and sellers varied considerably. In the Netherlands at that time, Chinese export paintings belonged to one or more external, globally circulating classification that was imposed on owning such an artwork. In most respects, the classification by Western merchants differs markedly, we can presume, from the classification applied by the Chinese painters who produced them. It is therefore preferable to follow Appadurai and use the term ‘regimes of value’, which does not imply that every act of commodity exchange presupposes a complete cultural sharing of assumptions.²⁸ Using this term, we can consistently work with both a very high and a very low sharing of standards by the actors involved in this particular sector of trade.

The production process of these paintings was an intentional, productive action, with a certain goal in mind. This process required a set of material processes in which painters had to

25 Orser 1996, quoted in Fridberg 2008 (online article, n.p.).

26 Fridberg 2008.

27 Gell 1994, 43-44.

28 Appadurai 1986, 15.



Fig. 2.1. Winter landscape (from set of 7), anonymous, oil on canvas, c. 1800, 64 x 95 cm, Museum Volkenkunde/Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, inv.no. RV-369-349d. Since 1883 'frozen' in the storeroom.

design and paint on canvas or paper (i.e. the making of) and then display them in showcases so that merchants could view them. To meet the huge demand, export painters were to produce as many paintings as possible in the shortest possible time period, thus maximising their production to the highest level. Another important feature of encountering this production process as an intentional action is that this open-ended process produces relations and, as Graeber suggests, in doing so, it transforms the producers themselves.²⁹ It is known that the successes of Chinese export painting production were largely a result of the flexibility, creativity and the capacities of the painters to paint to order for their Western patrons. These paintings clearly did not display the kind of convertibility and commensurability that would make them appear more than commodities, as has been (and still sometimes is) the case in specific local communities, where objects are circulating among close kinsmen as part of a generalised exchange not involving money.³⁰ With the single and primary aim being to sell these paintings to foreigners, we can regard them at this stage in their biography, leaving Canton, already as commodities, paid for, mostly, through a cash transaction. In turn, the merchants had to have the resources to buy and pack them carefully to bring them back home. Once they returned home, a myriad of material processes unfolded in order to maximise their consumption, including: hanging them on the wall as a material reminder, in

which all kind of adventurous actions are condensed; placing it on the art market and selling the painting for money via an auction or art dealer; or donating it to a museum.

Just as an object can move in and out of the commodity phase, so it can also pass back and forth between 'regimes of value'. But what does this mean exactly? We must consider that art objects were not always objects that were immediately exchanged. They may, as Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann and Michael North posit, "change their functions and meanings while passing through different zones of value. They may change from being a commissioned gift to a commodity, an heirloom, or another sort of symbolic representation."³¹ Money is an important factor in the exchange of commodities. The sale of a Chinese export painting for money caused a certain detachment from the product. This is less the case when a painting is exchanged or given as a gift and when things like 'reciprocity' play a role. When donating a Chinese export painting to a museum, the donor would possibly expect that further investigation would follow or that an exhibition – at least once – would be organised.

Taking on board Appadurai's ideas on how objects can move back and forth between different cultural worlds, we can ask new questions about colonialism, tourism, collection, trade and so on.³² Hence, adopting Appadurai, this research follows the idea that "such regimes of value account for the constant transcendence of cultural boundaries by the flow of commodities."³³ Chinese export paintings are objects – typical commodities – that can be placed under this heading. My assumption is that 'culture' can never be understood as a bounded and localised system of meanings. The South Chinese harbour culture, in which these paintings were once produced, was and still is an unconfined and mixed culture. Western culture, too, with all its different ranks and cultural classes, was at that time and remains a multicultural society with different norms and values with conforming ideas about value.

In response to Appadurai's regimes of value, Graeber says that this notion largely includes the idea of "how various cultural elites try to control and limit exchange and consumption ('freeze'), while others try to expand it, and with

29 Graeber 2001, 59.

30 Van Binsbergen 2005, 41.

31 Kaufmann & North 2014, 18.

32 Graeber 2001, 33.

33 Appadurai 1986, 15.



the social struggles that result.” On the other hand, Graeber continues, regimes of value are “the degree to which these elites have succeeded in channelling the free flow of exchange, or alternately, to which existing cultural standards limit the possibilities of what can be exchanged for what.”³⁴ Then and now, the fate of Chinese export paintings, and their success, is determined by the Chinese export painting market – the mixed cultural arena where producers and consumers meet each other and where the channelling and limiting of the free flow of exchange is determined by various *actants*, who influence value accrument or cause value dwindle.

Regarding the Dutch collections, the museums implement varying policies in respect of preservation and conservation. There is no agreed formulated standard (high) valuation by the ‘cultural elites’ (the museums as cultural institutions).³⁵ This results in variform conservation results, exemplified by two

examples of Chinese export oil paintings existing on the opposite poles of the line ‘de-commodification-re-modification’. One is an example of a ‘frozen’ object that, since 1883, has been on the premises of Museum Volkenkunde in Leiden, where it has received the minimum amount of attention required to save it from total destruction. (Figure 2.1.) The second painting is a clear example of revivification. (Figure 2.2.) Having remained hidden since its acquisition in 1961, the Maritime Museum Rotterdam decided to spend money on restoring the painting. In doing so, this museum brought the ship portrait, emblematic of the Dutch trade with China, back to its former glory, so that it could participate in the successful 2011-2012 exhibition *Yin & Jan*, “an exposition of enterprising Dutch and ingenious Chinese people”, as the exhibition was framed by Marieke Prins in the *Historisch Nieuwsblad*.³⁶

I am aware of the fact that these two paintings belong to museums that have a different character. One is ethnographic in essence, while the other is a typical maritime museum. Does their existance in disparate conservation places causes this difference in conservation policy per se? And, does this situation say anything about the use value of these paintings? I would argue that the answer to both these questions is no. Both paintings can be treated as objects that accumulate value via their use value (commodity/export, artistic, historic, materiality). This remarkable difference is primarily to do with current museum policy towards Chinese export paintings, as well as

Fig. 2.2. Ship portrait of Dutch frigate at Whampoa, inscription recto: De PLANTER van AMSTERDAM leggende ter REEDE van WHAMPOA in China den 13 NOVEMBER 1836, anonymous, oil on canvas, 1836, 46 x 60.5 cm, Maritime Museum Rotterdam, inv.no. P1729. In 2011 restored back into its former glory.

34 Graeber 2001, 32.

35 I received various replies from curators and librarians to my questions, sent out on 7 September 2015, about their (current) policy on the Chinese export paintings in their collections: The Hague Royal Academy of Fine Arts: “No specific policy for these works, but for the near future we have the intention to preserve them in better circumstances and bring them to the attention of students and teachers as educational material.” Amsterdam Museum: “No special policy regarding Chinese export paintings.” ABN AMRO Historical Archive: “Our policy toward these Chinese paintings is alike other historical exponents in our collection. Our harbour views illustrate the international character of the Netherlands Trading Society, one of the most important predecessors of ABN AMRO. There are no future plans for changing this policy.” Groninger Museum: “We only collect Chinese export painting when it can be related to our porcelain collection, with which we endeavor to present the dynamic East-West relation.” Rijksmuseum Amsterdam: “The museum is interested in art works emanating from (historical) contacts between the Netherlands and the outer world.” Some works (Royer harbour views) are part of the permanent display; other works (among others the oil painting View of Canton and gouaches on the tea production process) are published in the book on the Dutch-Chinese shared history, *Zijden Draad* (Van Campen 2016). Wereldmuseum Rotterdam: ‘No special policy concerning Chinese export paintings in our collection.’ National Maritime Museum Amsterdam: ‘Thematically, these paintings fit both the former and the contemporary collecting policy of the museum. The most important subject of the paintings in our museum is the presence of Dutch ships at faraway foreign anchorages and the Dutch trading settlements at these places. The documentary content of the image is important. At this moment there are no specific plans for or around these paintings.’

36 Marieke Prins: <http://www.historischnieuwsblad.nl/nl/artikel/27412/allemaal-een-chinees-aan-de-hand.html> (consulted June 2016).

their evaluation today and in the past.

Finally, Appadurai refers to the commodity context of the variety of social arenas within or between cultural units. Where and when does exchange take place? To elaborate, it is clear that the exchange with ‘strangers’, as is the case within the China trade, provided the right circumstances for the commodification of the paintings under discussion. This specific context – a true bazaar setting likely to encourage commodity flows – with transactions across cultural boundaries, brought together buyers from abroad and local sellers from China. These actors originated from quite different cultural systems and shared only the most minimal understandings from a conceptual point of view about these paintings. They agreed only about the terms of trade.

To re-capitulate the commodity dynamics at work in the case of Chinese export paintings in Dutch collections, we have seen that manifold facets are at work: spatial, temporal and social aspects in order to identify their use value; the forms of functions of use (or exchange), how the artwork, with its materiality, acquired or lost value; the ways in which said values affected interactions between people and objects; and the ways in which these interactions are to be determined. Using the commodity approach in this vibrant manner, it is possible to state something about Chinese export paintings’ valuation in the course of time. Other, complementary, concepts that are sufficient for disclosing a more complete image of this painting genre and for understanding this specific artistic phenomenon are ‘visual economy’ and ‘material complex’.

2.3. Chinese export painting as part of a visual economy

The concept of ‘visual economy’ is discussed by visual anthropologist Deborah Poole in *Vision, Race and Modernity*.³⁷ This notion of a comprehensive organisation of people, ideas and objects, is useful due to the similarities with the historical China trade, from which the export painting practice emerged. Poole prefers, and I agree with her, to use ‘visual economy’ above ‘visual culture’, because, as she states, the term

culture brings “a good deal of baggage” and “it carries a sense of shared meanings and symbolic codes that can create communities of people.”³⁸ For this reason, visual culture can be useful in my analysis of what these paintings mean, taking ‘culture’ (the producing as well as the receiving culture) as a starting point for this visual analysis. However, this is not the aim of this dissertation. As mentioned, the actors active in the historical China trade community did not share a common cultural background and generally differed in ideas about cultural concepts. That is why, in this study, the construction of use value is examined. Spatial and temporal elements, human or institutional actions towards these artworks, organised systematically or not, and their materiality, all have a role to play at a specific moment in time.

Meanwhile, Poole argues that the word ‘economy’ suggests that: “the field of vision is organised in some systematic way.”³⁹ In a more specific sense, working with this visual economic standpoint, I think of a creative, efficient and well-organised system that is characterised by connections and structures that are related to production and exchange in order to meet the high demand of Western customers for visual attractive paintings. In addition, the term ‘visual economy’ allows us to think clearly about the global channels through which these paintings have travelled between the South Chinese harbour cities of the Pearl River delta and the Western world. Through their exchange – primarily through economic networks – they entered the global ‘visual economy’ as highly desirable and attractive curiosities. We can easily imagine them as part of a shared economy, but to speak of them as part of a shared culture is rather more difficult.

For *Made for Trade*, which studies value accrual mechanisms, the visual economy angle reveals aspects that we must consider when appraising the painting genre central to this research. Again, the Leembruggen *View of the waterfront of Canton* painting in Museum Volkenkunde, for example, can be looked upon as exemplary for this visual economic practice. Reproductions of this painting can be found in various authoritative museum collections around the world, as well in ethnographic, (art) historic

³⁷ Poole 1997. Since 2002, Deborah Poole has been Professor at the Department of Anthropology of The Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore. Following an intensive examination of photographs and engravings in European, Peruvian, and US archives relating to the Andean image world, in *Vision, Race and Modernity* she explores the role visual images and technologies have played in shaping modern understandings of race.

³⁸ Poole 1997, 8.

³⁹ Ibid.

as in maritime museums.⁴⁰ This work, emblematic of successful sea trading activities, travelled via global channels and has shaped our vision of Canton as an important and lively port city. The well-organised painting system, which incorporates ‘transmitting’ processes for this particular image, is designed to meet the demand of the Western audience and resulted in many identical works. In this case, the ‘site of composition’ is crucial. Furthermore, the fact that master export painter Youqua and his studio painters benevolently produced this scene again and again, gives prestige and value to this particular scene (as if it is ‘a Youqua’ itself).

Production and consumption:

Levels of organisation

When we further elaborate on the term ‘visual economy’ we can distinguish at least three levels of organisation. Firstly, there must be an organisation of production, encompassing both the individuals and the technologies that produce paintings. Previous analyses of Chinese export paintings emphasise, to a great extent, the intentional organisation of production within the construction of the Chinese image world, rather than focusing on the works of individual painters. Moreover, the conditions for trading these paintings, to be sold to a Western audience, were clearly set. What is even more striking when we study the corpus is the similar sizes of paper and materials and the same kinds of subjects, which, time and again, were painted in the same, or indeed different, types of media. The Chinese export painters were well aware of the most popular subjects. To make their painting trade as lucrative as possible, they, of course, stuck to producing ‘successful numbers’ and only introduced tiny variations. A conspicuous illustration of this is two oil paintings of the quay at Canton, one in the collection of the Groninger Museum, the other in the National Maritime Museum in Amsterdam. Both depict an identical iconic scene of the various nations’ trading houses (*hongs*); viewed from left to right: Denmark, Austria (Republic), America, Sweden, England and Holland. (Figures 2.3. and 2.4.) Although the subject and composition of both paintings are largely the same, there are a number of differences. Amongst other things, the Danish flag is missing in the Groninger painting, the



number and outlining of the boats and edifices differ, and the differences in execution are evident. This suggests that, contrary to the prevalent idea that these Quay-of-Canton-scenes were painted in assembly lines, the illustrated paintings were handmade by individual Chinese painters who most likely wanted to produce a saleable painting. The images might be based upon a precedent image and most probably were made on commission, but, to produce them, I argue, Chinese export painters also employed a range of artistic practices, as per Winnie Wong’s idea of the contemporary Dafen painting practice.⁴¹ These artistic practices included techniques beyond the skill of mere copyists, as Chinese export painters were improperly viewed

Fig. 2.3. Quay of Canton (from set of 4), anonymous, oil on copper, 1810, 11.9 x 15.5 cm, Groninger Museum, inv.no. 1978.0366.

Fig. 2.4. Quay of Canton (from set of 4), anonymous, oil on bone, c. 1810, 9.5 x 13.5 cm, National Maritime Museum Amsterdam, inv.no. A.2068(06)a.

40 Besides the Leiden version, I have studied comparable wide panoramic paintings, at, among other collections, Greenwich Maritime Museum, Martyn Gregory Gallery, and Guangdong Provincial Museum. All are almost identical when it comes to composition, but differ clearly in terms of rendition and in details.

41 Wong 2013, 87.



Figs. 2.5. Production of tea (from set of 4), anonymous, gouache on paper, 1800-1825, 31.3 x 25 cm, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, inv.no. NG 1981-12-D.

Fig. 2.6. Production of tea (from set of 32), signed, watercolour on paper, 19th century, 31 x 30 cm, Maritime Museum Rotterdam, inv.no. P4423.

Fig. 2.7. Production of porcelain (from set of 28), anonymous, gouaches on paper, 19th century, 30 x 28 cm, Ceramics Museum Princessehof, inv.no. NO 5506.

Fig. 2.8. Production of silk (from album with 24 images), anonymous, watercolour on paper, 19th century, 25 x 24 cm, Tropenmuseum/ Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, inv.no. TM-3728-495.

for a long time. Considering transfer, transformation, invention, innovation, appropriation, and delegation as legitimate techniques used by modern painters and other artists around the world, these production methods were already applicable to and deliberately and actively used by Cantonese painters at the time of the historical China trade.

Another example of the existence of a well-organised production system with active artists, whose agency is to make aesthetically and economically alluring images, is a series of watercolours and gouaches with images portraying the different steps in the tea, porcelain and silk production process. (Figures 2.5. to 2.8.) Although the images differ in terms of execution, these visually strong and colourful images all exude the same peaceful atmosphere. We see women and men at work and children playing in clean (idealistic) surroundings and in similar looking buildings. These images, a series of paintings with representations of the manufacturing trajectory of the main Chinese trade goods, are greatly inspired by earlier examples, once produced for successive Qing emperors like Kangxi (1622-1722) and Qianlong (1736-1795). But, on closer examination, we discover significant differences in the details of these paintings, which demonstrates that, notwithstanding the strictly organised painting system, painters were always looking to add their own 'signature', either in compositional



terms or in the use of colours. I will elaborate on this painting series and its successors in Chapter 4.

In some cases, a museum owns several oil paintings with the same subject matter, but executed in different media, either as a reverse glass painting or on canvas. (Figures 2.9. and 2.10.) These examples support the notion that the productions originating from the Chinese image world in the historical China trade were highly organised in terms of the selection of subjects to paint for a Western clientele. At that time, the subject of an Imperial audience was sufficiently popular to be executed in a range of media in order to serve a broad audience. This uniformity of subject selection suggests that production was centralised, rather than individual; but, when we take a closer look, the self-supporting and independent painter shows himself loud and clear. He conforms to the system in order to meet the demands of the customers, and by painting a popular topic he can make good money, but he is also able to bring his own interpretation to the work. What we do not know is whether the nineteenth-century export painter worked in his own home to provide Cantonese art shops and studio's with his handmade paintings, as is often the contemporary practice in Dafen.⁴²

A second level of economic organisation involves the circulation of goods. At this level, the technological innovation of the production of oil paintings combined with other, Western

42 Wong 2013.

43 Poole 1997, 10.

44 Roberts 2010, 1. Allen F. Roberts is Professor of Culture and Performance at the UCLA Department of World Arts and Cultures and an editor of *African Arts*.

45 Roberts 2010, 1.

46 Dean & Leibsohn 2003, 5.



painting conventions plays a determining role. Moreover, the effect of the characteristic module-orientated method of working, along with the mass-production seen in Chinese painting studios, was a spectacular expansion of both the quantity and the accessibility of Chinese images. This technological aspect served to distribute the paintings and, along with them, ideas and ‘knowledge’ about China. These ‘images of China’, further explored in Chapter 4, were primarily constructed from the various subjects depicted, which were painted again and again. Furthermore, there is a tendency to hold the vibrant trade system as a whole responsible for the practices and the production of these kinds of paintings.

The third level at which an economy of vision must be assessed is, as Poole argues, “the cultural and discursive systems through which images are appraised, interpreted, and assigned historical, scientific and aesthetic worth.”⁴³ Here, it becomes important to ask how the paintings accrue value(s) – rather than what specific paintings mean – taking time and place-specific aspects into account. In this respect,

I concur with Allen F. Roberts when he discusses the recolonisation of an African visual economy “that all economies, including visual ones, are fluid as to relationships that they imply, create, and strengthen, for actors, ideas, and means come and go constantly, making it impossible to define the boundaries of any given economy.”⁴⁴ The sense of ‘scapes’ formulated by Appadurai is also useful here, so Roberts argues, as it suggests “dynamic transactions developed and understood through cultural frames that produce ‘fuzzy sets’ rather than rigidities of political delimitation.”⁴⁵ With Chinese export painting in mind, we must swap the pejorative word ‘fuzzy’ for the more relevant and positive term ‘hybrid’. This term, however, is not entirely straightforward and needs some elaboration. In the discourse of hybridity, the description of this concept is selectively used by scholars who resist defining cultural forms as such, and by others who apply this word as “a way of acknowledging the mixed descendancy of certain objects and practices.”⁴⁶ In every culture, certain mixed cultural forms are naturalised as belonging to that particular heterogeneous

Fig. 2.9. The emperor’s audience (from set of 19), anonymous, oil on glass, 1785–1790, 52.5 x 81 cm, Museum Volkenkunde/ Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, inv.no. RV-360-1122.

Fig. 2.10. The emperor’s audience, anonymous, oil on canvas, c. 1820s, 72 x 100 cm, Museum Volkenkunde/ Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, inv.no. RV-360-1139.



society, while other forms continue to be identified as mixed and integrated objects, not belonging to prevailing canonical ideas and conventions. Chinese export paintings exemplify this latter identification, which made them second-rate for a long time. But I concur with Carolyn Dean and Dana Leibsohn, American specialists in the fields of art history, anthropology and colonial visual culture, that it is “we who recognise, name and remark on hybridity.”⁴⁷ In a (post)colonial context, hybridity connotes specific new by-products of Western expansion and a polarising construction of ‘we’ and ‘they’. In this oppositional sense, when marking cultural differences, grown out of intolerance or out of the need to distinguish between things belonging to the ‘own’ society and things that do not – often with an implicit (de)valuation of the latter – the use of the term ‘hybridity’ is problematic.

When in *Made for Trade*, however, the term ‘hybrid’ is used, it is always done in a positive way and stays away from the inherent value judgement that this term implicitly carries in its meaning. ‘Hybrid’ in *Made for Trade* means ‘blended’, to describe this painting phenomenon as a ‘product’ of confluences of ideas. This term also incorporates various cultural conventions for Chinese export paintings, as it makes this painting genre understandable. Furthermore, ‘hybrid’ suggests a genre that is not confined by ‘pure’ Western stylistic elements, or by ‘pure’ traditional (literati) Chinese painting laws (the purity of which do not exist in empirical reality). When the hybrid character of these artworks is referred to throughout this dissertation, this signifies that Chinese painters adopted dominant Western painting conventions only selectively to make their work more successful for trade to Western buyers. Rather, it is a reference to this painting genre’s hybridity in subject matter, in applied techniques, in used media, in material forms, and also in the characteristic market place with its specific production methods and its particular kind of consumers. The confluence of hybridity present in all these aspects makes the Dutch corpus and other collections of Chinese export paintings a truly shared cultural repertoire. And certainly, this conflux of shared cultural signs adds to the genre’s use value. Concurring with Maria Mok, I argue that, in the

case of Chinese export paintings, the meaning of the term hybridity has nothing to do with developing new cultural paradigms or identities in the manner of Homi K. Bhabha; rather, it has everything to do with processes of exchange, appropriation and the combination of taste and visual conventions.⁴⁸ Notwithstanding the way in which this integrated painting style was seen, received and assigned value in the West at the time of its production and today (i.e. as a mix between Chinese and Western painting conventions), this study posits that these paintings possess equivalent signs of the inherently collective and blended culture of the place of their production. By using the term hybrid in this complimentary way, it includes the idea that a Chinese export painting bears strong traces of its maker’s handwriting, rather than being a mere copy of a Western model. Moreover, it is this interpreted Chineseness that makes this art genre interesting and valuable to modern eyes and hybrid audiences around the world.

For a long time, it was believed that a Chinese export painting’s use value or utility resided in its ability to represent or reproduce an image of an original or a reality.⁴⁹ But, rather than represent a cultural reality of the hardships of a residency in ‘the East’ – a difficult sea voyage, a stay in a messy Cantonese apartment, chaotic and crowded streets, noise, the inaccessibility of the city – these paintings of caricatured visions of China fed the Dutch ‘traders gaze’ and the one of their beloved back home, with an exotic and romantic stereotypical image. This quite fixed and clear-cut view of China, represented in the content of these paintings, kept their fantasies about China afloat. In addition to being a representation of a cultural reality, they appear to form a *selective reality*, separate and distinct from the subjects they portray. In the historical China trade period, this construction of visual culture – that is, a common business tourist visual culture – included an array of agents who, we can assume, might have guided the gaze. By painting only specific subjects in their characteristic way, the painters themselves were important agents who guided the ‘trader’s gaze’. In addition, both on board ship and on the home front, fellow-seamen and wives were influential agents in the purchase. The high

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Mok 2014, 37. Bhabha 1994.

⁴⁹ Noteworthy here is that after photography came on the scene in China in the mid-nineteenth century, the phenomenon of Chinese export painting slowly disappeared and painters’ studios transformed into photography studios.

status of Chinese art and the interior fashion during the period under discussion led to requests for, at least, a painting or an album to be brought back home. Furthermore, fascination for the exotic and the otherness of the depicted images legitimated the trader himself as an agent to keep his memory and imagination vivid. Today, the characters of the agents who determine the contemporary gaze on Chinese export paintings have changed, but they still exist. What should we think of descendants with their heirlooms (valuable antiques or, conversely, old junk from a distant ancestor, out of place on the wall of a modern flat)? Or auctioneers who determine which art objects to put under the spotlights; the marketeers with their targeted and compelling descriptions in catalogues and press releases; museum managers who decide what to exhibit; curators who digitalise and thus unlock; or, on the contrary, lock their collections; enthusiasts who bring the paintings to the attention of a wider public via social media; and academics who write, or do not write, about this subject. In Chapter 4, I will expand on the assigned value of the various genres, the represented subject matter depicted in the paintings in the Dutch collections, and the ways of seeing (interpretation) and imagining. We will see that, depending on the subject and the material, different value accruments are at stake.

2.4. **Commodities and people in a material complex**

Within the concept of ‘visual economy’, another, closely connected, approach comes to the fore, as we can interpret the images and their multiple meanings as a ‘material complex’. Chinese export paintings, which exert a cultural claim to represent reality, wield a peculiarly powerful hold on many people’s imaginations, then and now. To cite Deborah Poole, “Visual images fascinate us and give us pleasure. They compel us to look at them, especially when the material they show us is unfamiliar or strange.”⁵⁰ She further asserts: “Once unleashed in society, an image can acquire myriad interpretations or meanings according to the different codes and referents brought to it by its diverse viewers.”⁵¹ To understand how this acquisition of

interpretations works, we must focus on mechanisms through which meaning and value are constructed and, at the same time, recognise the relevance of the paintings’ materiality. We can speak of ‘materiality’ rather than ‘material’, as the basic premise of this research is that a social and cultural reality (how we experience the actual world around us) is constructed by ourselves in relation to our surrounding material objects, and that the paintings central to this study can be understood as *actants* (non-human actors) in processes at work when shaping this reality. To paraphrase the archaeologist Carl Knappett, writing on materiality in *Archaeological Theory Today*, it is useful to recognise the point at which objects and people, engaged in particular activities, converge.⁵² Furthermore, to understand what materiality comprises, we must connect matter, in casu paintings, with socio-cultural aspects. In other words, materiality differs from mere materials in its inclusion of the social and can be considered as “the greyscale between mind and matter, or thinking and things.”⁵³ In the course of time, looking at cultural biographies, the attitude of people towards their Chinese export paintings differs. These variable attitudes determined the significance of these paintings in former days and will continue to do so in the future. The social-relational perspective put on these artworks by, for instance, family members or museum curators is often decisive in respect of our attitude to the collections examined for this study.

To grasp the method of how meaning and value are constructed, the inherently static nature of matter in the production process of Chinese export paintings for particular markets, or in their usage by consumers through times and places, is crucial in shaping cultural realities and allocating value. Value may be ascribed by society at large (an original Rembrandt painting has a high value in economic exchange) or it may be intensely personal and subjective (a small Chinese export pith paper painting given as a gift by a close friend). As anthropologist Pieter ter Keurs, an expert on cultural heritage (theory and policy), museum collection history and the theory of material culture, clarifies in *Condensed Reality*, objects are best seen as items in which existing meanings are materialised or

50 Poole 1997, 17.

51 Ibid., 18.

52 Knappett 2012, 188–189. Carl Knappett holds the Walter Graham / Homer Thompson Chair in Aegean Prehistory at the Art History Department, University of Toronto.

53 Coltman 2015, 22.

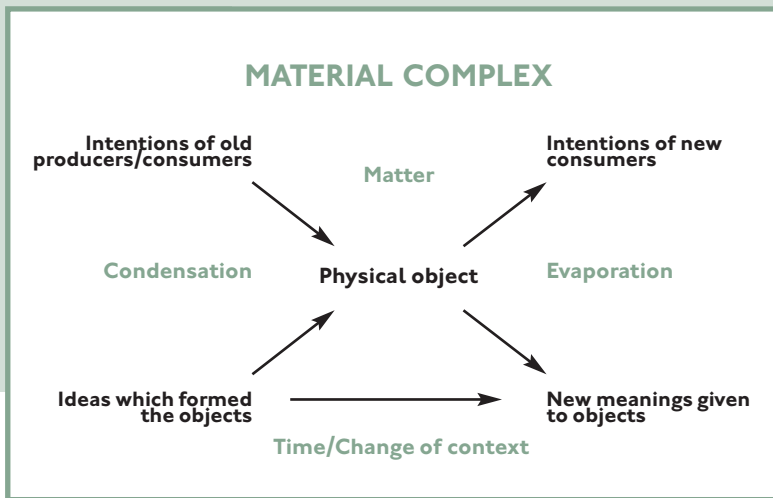


Fig. 2.11. Ter Keurs' model for the study of material culture.

condensed.⁵⁴ Generally, there is a certain intention in making, receiving or buying an object. These intentions, which Ter Keurs calls 'primary meanings', come into focus for the producer as well as the user, or for me as the researcher.⁵⁵ The exciting search for initial and further intentions and motivations regarding commissioning and purchasing these kinds of paintings is part of this ongoing research. However, they should not be considered as 'first' or 'original' meanings, because, in most cases, these are impossible to identify.⁵⁶ It is more interesting to explain why and how Chinese export paintings in Dutch collections are currently seen or used. Primary meanings on the side of the producer may somehow be internalised in Chinese export paintings, as they are first made with an idea in mind. For example, the idea to earn money or to paint the best ship portraits ever was materialised or condensed, in these paintings. This economic idea or this professional attitude has been made tangible and is condensed in matter. Ter Keurs calls this process a 'material condensation,' a process that is, in fact, a simultaneous externalisation and internalisation.⁵⁷ When people turn ideas into material things, this is a process of externalisation. At the same time, some scholars see this process (internalising ideas into matter) as a process of internalisation. Although my idea is that things have no brains to actively internalise, they can evoke human

practices. They are, therefore, active players in the relationship between, on the one hand, ideas and intentions and, on the other hand material things (objects). We may assume that these paintings were produced for more than just a material end, i.e. earning money. Likewise, on the side of the consumers, presumably the Dutch men who, in the nineteenth century, bought a Chinese export painting in Canton thought about how they would like to use it before they obtained it. The idea that the buyer's intention was merely opportunistic and economic is quite possible, but that is certainly not the only motivation.

Ideas not only condense in objects, but also evaporate from them. As well as condensation, we learn from Ter Keurs' model of material complex that, equally, we must study the opposite process of 'evaporation'; namely, of extracting meanings and value from physical objects, when viewed or used in a different context. (Figure 2.11.).

In the case of heirlooms, paintings often move from the first owner to the second and so on. The fact is that many of these paintings end up as long-term loans and sometimes as neglected items in inaccessible museum basements. This fact clarifies something about the private valuation put upon them by their owners at that time and, consequently, the constructed meaning given to the particular painting. Ter Keurs calls this the 'evaporation process', in which change of meaning is a process from matter to idea.

The whole complex of the paintings and their multiple meanings can be depicted as a 'material complex'. In this complex, it is impossible to pinpoint determinations of value and meaning accrument, because there were and will always be subjective attitudes towards them. Furthermore, this research argues that along the total trajectory, from their production in the nineteenth century to their consumption today, the layering of these subjective attitudes forms the meaning and evaluation of these material objects, in casu Chinese export paintings in Dutch museum collections. What other explanation can be given for the multifarious nature of the museums where they are kept, for

54 Ter Keurs 2006, 51-70. Pieter ter Keurs is the Head of Collections and Research Department of the National Museum of Antiquities in Leiden. He holds the endowed chair in the Anthropology of Material Culture at Leiden University's Institute of Cultural Anthropology and Development Sociology, where he teaches subjects including material culture and heritage. Alongside theoretical research, his interests include the critical analysis of collections, museums and museum history.

55 Ter Keurs 2006, 58.

56 Ibid. I agree with Ter Keurs that investigating original meaning is a rather useless academic exercise.

57 Ter Keurs 2006, 60-61.

their variable conservation state, for the differences in the motives of private individuals to either keep their paintings, put them up for auction or bequeath them to a venerable place like a museum?

Actants and users as producers

We can say that Chinese export paintings functioned as part of a ‘meaningful whole’ in Dutch society at the time of the historical China trade in the nineteenth century. But, in reference to the high value put upon them by the higher levels of society at that time, it was apparently difficult for these paintings to keep this status in the Dutch context. The emergence of a new *zeitgeist* over time, means that most of these paintings – apparently lacking contemporary relevance and importance – have ceased to be significant; or, at least, their function has changed to some (major) extent. Here, it is important to focus on the meanings derived from these artworks. For the meanings derived from the paintings by their owners often differ from those previously identified. The intentions of the first documented users of the paintings may become a burden due to changing circumstances and changing opinions. Having entered a museum, their physical presence can sometimes cause ‘problems’ for the museum management by raising questions about ways the collections are stored or put on display, conducting academic research on them, restoring the paintings, the production of exhibitions, making the collections digitally accessible, etc. Decisions about these kinds of issues are influenced by practical, social, political and financial matters and also by marketing considerations. I fully agree with Ter Keurs, however, that the way in which the collection is the basis for shaping a museum’s activity is, “not always clearly dictated by the collection.”⁵⁸ Given their unfamiliarity, it seems that some Dutch collections of Chinese export paintings have become ‘a burden’ in the course of time.

Although a documented first owner might have attributed intrinsically personal value to a painting in the first phase of its social life, by analysing its cultural biography – that is, the

story of its origins, exchange and use by the people who ascribed value to it – we notice a changing use value over time. Objects never have lives of their own, but are granted lives by their users. Viewed from this perspective, I argue that objects always have agency, which, in turn, makes people act in one way or another. The lives of objects can often diverge considerably from the intentions of their producers. New users, as Ter Keurs states, “may challenge old interpretations and derive new meanings from objects.”⁵⁹ In this case, consumers can also be seen as producers. Yet, users (consumers) generate meanings and produce interpretations for the objects they appropriate.⁶⁰ This concept follows the idea of Dikötter, who states that “consumption is appropriation, in other words a social activity by which objects produced by others become one’s own by subjecting them to personal meanings and differential uses.”⁶¹ The cultural biography and social life of Chinese export paintings is constituted depending on the value accrument – or, value dwindle – by individuals or insitutional powers.

In Ter Keurs’ model, the painting as an object is the centrepiece and it functions simultaneously as a destination and a starting point. Again, it is important to ask not what specific paintings mean, but rather what a painting as *actant* did in the process of meaning construction in different cultural contexts. Taken as a material object existing on the crossroads between time and place, a Chinese export painting may appear in the same form later in time. At the very moment a new owner observes it, the painting enters a new phase of the interpreting process. Condensation and evaporation, as Ter Keurs argues, are “continuing, irreversible processes in which both the meanings (non-material) and the objects (material) can change.”⁶² To reiterate Ter Keurs, “the construction of meaning and the change of meaning, are processes that shift from idea to matter and from matter to idea.”⁶³ The decision, for example, about whether to restore or not restore a little-known group of Chinese export paintings is often preceded by a long opinion-forming process, in which both their historic meaning and their significance for future

58 Ter Keurs 2006, 2.

59 Ibid., 59.

60 Dikötter 2006, 11. In his book *Exotic Commodities* (also published as *Things Modern* in 2007) Dikötter uses the terms ‘user’ and ‘consumer’ to describe individuals as distinct from the social spaces where transactions take place; namely, the market, contrary to common usage in economic theory.

61 Ter Keurs 2006, 59.

62 Ibid., 60.

63 Ibid.

use and possible display is decisive. Such a process always involves a variety of disciplines and a wide range of ambitions.

In Ter Keurs' model presented here, the position of the interpreters has not been made sufficiently clear. However, people are actively involved in every condensation and evaporation process. As we can read in Ter Keurs: "People need to make themselves familiar with the values and structures around them, for they need to act [...] according to the rules among which their culture has placed them."⁶⁴ They have intentions (to buy, to sell), they make choices (to keep as an heirloom, to donate to a museum, to put on display, to restore the paintings) and they develop strategies (determining museum core collection, conservation policy, exhibition subjects). Thus, both people and the material complex (the material form and its meaning) are changing in the process of constructing meaning, related to matter, in time. For present purposes, the premise of my research is that condensation and evaporation are part of the material complex and that interpreters can change their relationships to this complex. Furthermore, I find the model given to us by Ter Keurs useful because my research emphasises that an approach towards culture as a process, rather than a fixed entity with fixed meanings, is of great importance. The complex liaison, insofar as it is a temporal outcome of the relationship between humans and, in this case, Chinese export paintings, makes things meaningful.

Materiality and meaning construction

In general, we can say that in the process from matter to idea, as soon as the social or emotional relationship of the owner with the inherent substantive nature of matter (the physical object) has gone, its status and, accordingly, its ascribed value, changes considerably. Thus, this value accrument is inseparable from its material existence.

The situation of Chinese export paintings in Dutch collections is an appropriate case study for the ever-changing outcomes of this intricate relationship in changing times and spaces. When construction of meaning is related to the materiality of these paintings, we will see that this association has been and can still be culturally significant. As said, these paintings

cannot be viewed in isolation from other aspects of culture. They do not exist outside of culture. The meaning given to them or their ascribed value through the ages is not static and has been subject to major changes. Neither the paintings, nor the people who owned them fit into "circuits or audiences that are easily bound within local, national, or regional spaces."⁶⁵ We can say that in some cases, even in former times, attributed meaning has disappeared.

In the case of Chinese export paintings, it was the foreign merchants and seamen who attributed an autonomous materiality to these artworks. Viewed literally, on the one hand, their specific material characteristics contributed to the fact that they were sold in the first place. The paintings and loose sheets or albums were often suitable, in terms of size, for being transported to the home countries in the personal sea chest. Moreover, watercolours were not too expensive, and the content of the images were revealing, if not consequential. Their characteristics, such as affordability, portability and size were, therefore, meaningful to the buyer in question and made the materiality of these paintings "a site of cultural encounter."⁶⁶ On the other hand, we must take into account the concept of materiality in a more figurative sense; as Ter Keurs observes, "the active role that matter can play in human life."⁶⁷ The act of buying a Chinese harbour view can be looked upon as an intentional deed, caused by the painting's agency. The painting's agency, in turn, extends its user's agency. The painting as an artwork is a means of bringing about a result. That is what can be explained as 'paintings as actants'. In addition to the fact that a Chinese export painting is an artistic object per se, the beauty of which can undoubtedly be justified, it caused other results sociologically or psychologically. These paintings conferred a special status on their owners. They accrued value through the social facts of ownership and display. They gave the owner kudos, justified or not, just for owing such paintings. They allowed the owner to tell interesting and swanky stories about appalling journeys to the East with successful trade deals, or share fond memories, etc. But here there is a serious *but*. We must also recognise that "the same object can be assigned different meanings and different uses by different social groups,

64 Ibid., 64.

65 Appadurai 1996, 4.

66 Vinograd 2015, 19.

67 Ter Keurs 2006, 52

even if the object itself imposes a limit on the possible uses.”⁶⁸ Despite the generally high status they conferred on their owners, presumably these paintings were popular among different social groups for their own sake, rather than for any prestige they may accrue. As researchers, then, we must always be “careful not simply to reproduce a set of assumptions about motivation and meaning, while ignoring particular situations and needs.”⁶⁹ These motivations and value or meaning accruals differ from person to person and vary greatly in the dissimilar afterlives of the paintings.

In terms of the materiality of the extensive amount of Chinese export paintings in the Netherlands, I argue that the mere existence of this shared collection, with its size and value, has a valuable meaning. The attention to the material properties of these artworks as things *qua* things, leads us to acknowledge the exhibited power of their material agency. The question that has previously arisen comes to the fore again: what did these Chinese export paintings, as *actants*, do in their social life? By standing back from localised, individual Chinese export paintings, we can better understand their materiality. Indeed, these artworks, approached in their totality as a unique corpus, do not inhere in one kind of material, but rather in an assemblage of various distinctive materials with various qualities and aspects ‘bundled’ together. We must think, in respect of Chinese export paintings, of the different colours and multifarious media used for depicting the same subjects with their associated prices, as well as of the very different meanings and values they accrue in the course of time and the rationale behind them, linked to all kinds of aspects of the historical China trade. In this dimension, which Knappett calls ‘plurality’, materiality emerges from interdependent (plural) properties.⁷⁰ The paintings as things are always connected with other things. Moreover, underlining the potential and possibilities of things one can understand, materiality art anthropologists Ludovic Coupay and Laurence Douny talk of “the ensemble of phenomenal and material properties of things, ensemble conceived as a form of potential or possibility, recognized through its physical and/or conceptual engagement.”⁷¹ Thus, the

future of the present research corpus appears bright and shiny. Surely, this outlook, which recognises the ensemble character of these paintings, which perform in their primary mode of being things, and their bundling across different scales, is promising, as the subsequent chapters will show. To revert to the model of Ter Keurs, in which dynamic processes of condensation and evaporation play a role, we can expect new material complexes around them in the times to come.

Hitherto, this chapter analysed the mechanisms at work when value accrual or dwindling value and meaning construction is at stake. I examined the commodity perspective and disentangled the concepts of visual economy, material complex and materiality. One more line must be explored. Because this research perspective treats the extant collections in Dutch museums not only as artworks, but also as commodities – as things – it is necessary to unravel this concept (things) in relation to value accrual, more comprehensively.

The entanglement of things and people

The paintings referred to in this research are perceived as valuable and artistic by-products of this China trade with their own position as things in their own right (*qua* things) and within systems of trade relations and entanglements in many other fields. They are *actants* that can make a distinction and are able to perform an effect or to impose something on reality. What does the ability of things or Chinese export paintings to make a difference consist of? With their essential properties and their intrinsic power, Chinese export paintings are mediators capable of acting on other existing objects. Moreover, they are still of interest to us because they involve us, people.

As Olsen remarks, we cannot think of humans outside the thing-domain, but the opposite option is quite viable.⁷² The archaeologist Olsen, who is a follower of the symmetrical archaeology approach, gives me a insightful starting point when concerning how things “exist, act, and inflict on each other outside the human realm and how this interaction affects human life.”⁷³ Just think of most Chinese export paintings in Dutch

68 Dikötter 2006, 10.

69 Ibid.

70 Knappett 2012, 196.

71 Coupay & Douny, quoted in Knappett 2012, 196.

72 Olsen 2012, 214.

73 Ibid, 213.

collections, apparently lacking contemporary relevance and currently living their social life outside the active and vivid human realm or, at least, outside that of human intentional action. Considering their status, mostly gathering dust in museum storerooms, we can legitimately ask: are any agents, other than people or things (the paintings themselves), acting? Or, does the fact that these paintings are largely concealed within the storerooms of these establishments have agency in its own specific (visual) artifactual way? Since, as Olsen argues, “acting is neither a human privilege, nor that of things and non-humans”, this sole fact (a best kept secret) contextualises the Dutch collections *in extremis* and might help them to become meaningful.⁷⁴ To better understand how meaning ascription works, I must elaborate on the term value, as I use these two terms (meaning and value) interchangeably throughout this study. In so doing, I adhere to some perspectives given to us by Graeber. As an anthropologist, he re-examined a century of anthropological thought about value and exchange in order to recast value as a model of human meaning-making that far exceeds rationalist/reductive economist paradigms. According to him, value can best be seen as “the way in which actions become meaningful to the actor by being incorporated in some larger, social totality – even if in many cases the totality in question exists primarily in the actor’s imagination.”⁷⁵ In his innovative work to formulate a comprehensive theory of value, he gives us some significant lines of thought, which converge in the term value that has been used in social theory in the past.⁷⁶

Firstly, we must think of value in a sociological sense: conceptions of what is ultimately good, proper or desirable in human life. Ideas in a society as a whole are also values that can be analysed as part of an overall system of meaning. For this research, the question of whether there are any key values of Chinese (or western) society condensed in some types of Chinese export paintings is relevant when we look at the commodity/export value and artistic value of them. In the chapters to follow I will delve more deeply into both of these values, with the notion in mind that the connected historical and material value are always part of the overall use value of these paintings.

74 Ibid, 215.

75 Graeber 2001, xii.

76 Ibid., 1.

77 Steiner 1994, 61-79.

78 Steiner 1994, 62.

A second line of thought for understanding how value accrument works treats this aspect in an economic sense: the degree to which objects are desired, particularly in terms of being measured by how much others are willing to sacrifice in order to obtain them. The first contact in their social life is the point when, almost certainly, the price is negotiated, an important marker for determining the value. Taking into account the social production of value, Christopher Steiner tells us in *African Art in Transit* that negotiations between individuals in the total trajectory from production to consumption, should be considered when the monetary value of an individual art object is determined.⁷⁷ In general, the price of an artwork is dependent on variable factors, such as the source (who made the work or from which collection or collector does it originate), the prevailing market prices, quality, the financial circumstances of the buyer, maybe even the time of day, week or month when the transaction takes place, and whether or not there is a personal relationship between buyer and seller. Although many prices were fixed in advance on the Cantonese painting market, there was some freedom to negotiate. No doubt, the quality was considered when purchasing a painting and whether the studio had a master painter who could be commissioned to make one-of-a-kind paintings, or if the painting shop had high levels of production.

Whether the valuation of a painting is the subject of one or more ‘negotiations’ depends on the dynamism of the social life of the artwork. Does it take a circuitous path through multiple trade networks of the art market system? Does it live a quiet life as an important keepsake and a precious heirloom in one particular family? Or maybe it is a ‘frozen’ painting, overlooked in a museum collection. When valuation matters, these statuses must all be taken into consideration. In an economic system, as Steiner says, “in which objects move from one realm of value to the next,” we can say that an individual Chinese export painting accrues value.⁷⁸ Indeed, from the price paid in China to the price at which a painting is sold today in a London or Amsterdam gallery, the costs of such works could easily increase by a factor of ten or more. I agree with Steiner that “the perceived value of

an item is thus wholly dependent on where one is situated in the chain of economic transactions, and each transaction is characterized by the logic of its own system of value and mode of bargaining.”⁷⁹ In more detail, from an economic perspective, the seller would judge a painting according to its use value, while the buyer appraises its worth according to its exchange value. Presumably, a specialised Chinese export painting dealer would determine a painting’s value through the rational calculation of its potential resale price. Then, it is surely the case that the exchange value of Chinese export paintings is manipulated by art dealers in order to add economic value to these artworks. This manipulation, which capitalises on the cultural values and desires from different worlds, takes place in different ways. Firstly, the presentation of a painting influences its meaning production and value. The context in which a work of art is placed and is shown is often “a key element in the success of a sale.”⁸⁰ Secondly, the description of a painting frequently conditions what we see. The information regarding a painting is often constructed with an indication of its rarity and popularity. Sometimes the title of the artwork is changed, in order to fit the current taste of collectors and to increase the likelihood of sale. A painting with a documented pedigree is all-important. Once belonging to a famous collector or produced by a well-known export painter, a painting is valued far higher than a similar one from an unknown source. A fine work with an added value of provenance or of a painstakingly orchestrated event at an up-market gallery or auction house will fetch prices that at least double, triple or even quadruple its value. Apparently, collectors are still willing to pay for original nineteenth-century Chinese export paintings with a carefully cultivated aura of China trade connotations. Figure 2.12. shows a stamp at the back of an album. This stamp, a serious authenticity marker, however, has clearly been cut out of the original album and re-glued into the illustrated album to make look like the paintings inside are authentic Youquas. Although each of the paintings have Youqua’s high quality painting style, there is no doubt that this authenticity has been fabricated.⁸¹ Thirdly, there was another aspect, not to be



Fig. 2.12. Youqua studio stamp (Youqua Painter Old Street No 34) re-glued into album, 1850–1860, Wereldmuseum Rotterdam, inv.no. 191666.

underestimated, relating to ‘manipulation’ of Chinese export paintings. Over time, from the beginning of their production in the mid-eighteenth century until today, the sense of ‘up-to-datedness’ of Chinese export paintings and their display of Chinese culture in its multifaceted form, are facets that were (and still are) often exaggerated by shopkeepers, art dealers, and by the painters themselves.

Where Chinese export paintings were initially valued because of their lifelike content and inherent symbolic value, their beauty and colourful and meticulously painted images, these meaningful museum-like collector’s items are currently seen as a valid economic investment too. In turn, I argue, the contemporary focus on the economic dimension of this art genre (its exchange value) can cause competition with “a true sense of artistic enjoyment.”⁸²

Returning once more to Ter Keurs, sometimes, in old cultures, it appears that important concepts, which were first condensed in important material expressions of that culture, evaporated into nothing, sometimes to such an extent that it has not even been guarded in memory.⁸³ All former meanings put upon that material culture did not survive. In these hypothetical cases, a renewed condensation into new material culture never took place. Concerning Chinese export paintings, the construction of meaning is, mostly, a continuous, irrevocable process of condensation and evaporation – as the selling and buying processes on the art market in Canton were – in which ideas are materialised in these paintings, as well as the acquisition of paintings as pieces of art by a museum curator for display in an exhibition,

79 Ibid., 63.

80 Ibid., 132.

81 I own an album with watercolours of domestic furniture and accessories that underwent a similar procedure with a re-glued stamp of Youqua at the back of the album.

82 Steiner 1994, 163.

83 Ter Keurs 2006, 191.

or the inheritance of these artworks by consecutive family members, and so on. Over time, their value and meaning did not disappear or get lost. On the contrary, these paintings were encapsulated into new initiatives, especially in China, (we recall the recent founding of research centres to study the topic, the emergence of interdisciplinary academic curricula, and the renewed buying and selling processes that facilitate the decorating or refurbishing of the many newly built Chinese museums). At this point, the circle closes with surviving ‘primary’ meanings. For the producer of the paintings, as well as the user – though not the authentic user, rather the new ones – and for me and other researchers, the static matter of these things results in a new material complex, one that is alive and kicking.

2.5. Transcultural lenses on Chinese export painting

Before I conclude this chapter by selecting those aforementioned theoretical concepts that are useful for supporting my argument that Chinese export paintings must not be conceived purely as commodities, but as valuable artworks too, an analysis of the concepts ‘transcultural’ and ‘cultural translation’ is necessary. In doing so, their artistic value will be revealed and understood.

The strongly centralised production of Chinese export paintings originated in the Pearl River delta, where, until the mid-nineteenth century, Canton and Macao became centres of the trading system that linked China to the rest of the world. These cities, together with Hong Kong, Shanghai, Ningbo, Amoy (Xiamen) and Fuzhou after 1842, as Jonathan Hay writes in his article ‘Toward a Theory of the Intercultural’, can be interpreted as “the most striking examples of transitional spaces within which cultural syncretism are embodied in the dynamic form of artistic commodities.”⁸⁴ These ports of trade acted at times as neutral enclaves in which merchants of different countries could do business according to pre-established exchange rates. Regarding Chinese export paintings, I agree with Hay that we can speak of the

constitutively hybrid character of a cultural system in which, to a certain extent, questions of viewpoint and power are at issue. This is particularly the case when geographically widely separated cultures come into contact with each other.⁸⁵

The relationship between ‘the West’ and China during the period that this research deals with was a transcultural and interconnected one. The art that was born of the interactive connections between local, national and transnational markets is the subject of this study. When we observe Chinese export paintings as art different from both Chinese literati art and Western Renaissance art, it discourages any examination of the dynamic exchange relation between these two realities. It is precisely this interaction that is interesting. A view of parallel objects that never meet, as Foucault states, “proves inadequate to the explication of their dynamic relation.”⁸⁶ The emphasis is thus on the exchange promoted by comparisons in order to find answers to questions such as that also posed by Jennifer Purtle: “what meanings and what cultural and economic values accrue to an object when it exists without borders?”⁸⁷

The demand for pictorial material seems to have been part of the China trade from its very beginning in the late seventeenth century.⁸⁸ This prolific trade situation led to the creation of new forms of material culture and revealed an elaborate process of cross-cultural exchange, or, more generally, a mediation of knowledge. The result of this dynamic connections around the world is *inter alia*, EurAsian objects. Anna Grasskamp, introduces this term (with a capital A for Asian) in her article ‘EurAsian layers: Netherlandish surfaces and early modern Chinese artefacts’.⁸⁹ The use of a capital E and an capital A in ‘EurAsian’ indicates a division, a mixture and a oneness of cultural formats at the same time, covering the whole ‘EurAsian’ territory. In addition, the use of two capitals (E and A) expresses that Europe and Asia each has their own dignity. Moreover, the use of the term ‘EurAsian’ signifies the interactive cultural dynamics between European and Asian countries in which “complex polarities simultaneously complement and oppose each other and merge.”⁹⁰

84 Hay 1999-a, 7.

85 Hay 1999-a, 7.

86 Foucault’s insights into power are discussed in Seigel 2005, 65.

87 Purtle 2009, 131.

88 Huang & Sargent 1999, 14.

89 Grasskamp 2015, 363-399.

90 *Ibid.*, 363.

Indeed, the recursive trajectories of cultural interactions through the ages between Europe and China often make it impossible to pin objects on their geographical or cultural origin. These EurAsian objects, including paintings, were produced and exchanged in transitional spaces like Canton at the time of the historical China trade and before. To explain this term, Grasskamp highlights some striking examples, including some of the Chinese export painting examples in the collection of the Amsterdam Rijksmuseum.⁹¹ With an analysis of these Rijksmuseum sets of painted enamel plaques on copper and on porcelain, Grasskamp carefully dissects the different ‘layers’ as a result and as samples of “an active visual and material communication between European and Chinese artists.”⁹² Her article proves that the characteristics of some genres of the Chinese export paintings studied for this dissertation, with combined European and Asian material and visual elements as their main feature, can be treated as a category in their own right, as “a newly entangled unity.”⁹³

As the mid-nineteenth century passed, and more Chinese harbour cities had to open up for international trading activities after China lost the two so-called Opium Wars (1839-1842 and 1856-1860) a kind of romanticism associated with the historical China trade from Canton disappeared. Accordingly, the production of paintings and drawings from the Pearl River delta slowed. So Chinese export paintings, as referred to in *Made for Trade*, were produced during a limited period and flourished during a particular period of Chinese history, “disappearing without a trace, leaving no influence at all on the development of recent Chinese painting” as Wang, Lo, Song and Wood controversially posit in the introduction of *Chinese Export Paintings of the Qing Period in The British Library*.⁹⁴ In contrast to Wang et al., however, and in tandem with Winnie Wong’s opinion that the modern, large-scale export oil painting business in Dafen village grew out of the intensive historical China trade, other scholars at the end of the twentieth century

realised that Chinese export paintings were an important ‘precursor’ to the academic style of oil painting occurring at the art academies.⁹⁵ For the first time, in 1988, Tao Yongbai wrote about an export painting, a self-portrait of Lamqua, in a historic overview of Chinese oil painting in a Chinese-language publication.⁹⁶ According to Clark, although there was an antipathy towards the artworks of these painters, who did not work within the esteemed literati discourse, at the same time there was little opposition.⁹⁷ The wide spread of Chinese painters across Asian harbour cities, where Westerners continued to order visual artistic products to bring back home, the rapid adoption of Western-style paintings by other urban classes than the literati artists, the general use of a similar pictorial style in China for advertisements in the 1920s, nationalistic propaganda in the 1930s and communistic posters in the 1950s, are, according to him, remarkable. In addition, the European academic realism in painting at the beginning of the twentieth century was accepted with ease in China. Was the way already prepared by export painting? Although the products of export art were rarely distributed in China, the expertise and techniques possessed by many of the painters who worked in the export art branch undoubtedly left traces. I concur with Clark that it is difficult to maintain that the mass production of Chinese export paintings and the specialist role that this type of painting was assigned had little bearing on the popular artistic style among the Chinese or on the organisation of Chinese local-illustration workshops. Follow-up research is necessary to determine the possible influence of Chinese export painting on the transition to modern Chinese painting. But this is truly another project.⁹⁸

Cultural translatability

Through the ages, records of Western contemporary eyewitnesses such as Jesuits, traders, explorers and scientists have manufactured an exotic image of China. This image, so powerfully rooted in our cultural imagination, cannot provide the Chinese

91 Inv.nos. AK-NM-6620-A, C and D; and AK-NM-6612-A, AK-NM-6614-A.

92 Grasskamp 2015, 374.

93 Ibid., 363.

94 Wang et al. 2011, 29.

95 Wong 2011, 37. Clark 1998, 59.

96 Clark 1998, 68. Tao Yongbai 1988.

97 Clark 1998, 58-59.

98 For a serious start at research into these artistic transitional developments in Chinese painting, the work of Wang Cheng-hua 2014-a and 2014-b is worth mentioning.

perspective on the encounter between two different cultures, because it comes from sources they did not produce. In all likelihood, the material record is different. The paintings exchanged in the China trade shaped the image of a China and its people that is romanticised and often far from the truth. The Chinese artists and other stakeholders in the export painting trade likely tell their own, different story about the appreciation of this painting genre and the meaning of the multifarious themes that they had to paint. Like the premise of this research, most of these hybrid paintings executed in multiple visual languages cannot be thought of as being Chinese or being Western; rather, they form a shared cultural repertoire and gain an interesting mixed design of Chinese genres (subject matter) with a fairly Western touch.

Since cultures are regarded as flowing processes and not as static entities, they have become time-bound and transformative. This point is not irrelevant when we search for a new outlook on Chinese export paintings and endeavour to translate them. The term ‘culture’, as Robert Young also argues, cannot describe the entirety of a people’s aesthetic practices. When doing so, using the idea of a singular culture, it destroys the heterogeneity of the practices that can be described as cultures and its cultural productions, as there are – among others – language, myth, arts, rituals and religions.⁹⁹ Chinese export paintings were not primarily constituted of signs or codes, but of cultural aspects. With its particular culture-specific traits, a Chinese export painting in effect functioned, to a degree, as a vehicle of Chinese culture. But, we must seriously wonder about the extent to which culture is something that can be translated at all and if objects, let alone paintings, can serve as vehicles in order to understand a culture? The concept of cultural translation offers us, as Young states in his essay on the question of the relation of hybridity and cultural translation, “a

means for thinking about the ways in which cultures are transported, transmitted, reinterpreted and re-aligned through local languages.”¹⁰⁰ It enables us to focus, he continues, on “dynamic processes of interaction among different cultures that appear to characterize our contemporary era.”¹⁰¹ It is the material result of these processes, referring to these paintings, which can perform as specific acts of cultural translation. These acts “involve a mediation between some notion of a particular and a universal.”¹⁰² In Chapter 6, in which a set of Chinese export winter landscapes is ‘translated’, we see that cultural universalities and particularities determine the integrated, blended character of these paintings. Without particularities as “elements of residual strangeness of differences,” the depicted scenes would be, in Young’s words again: “a simple melange, fusion, resolution of the difference between the other and the same.”¹⁰³ As we shall discover, this is not the case.

As is known, the cultural context in which these paintings were produced was not unambiguous. In the cultural system of Canton, there was, as Micol Seigel expresses, “no exact equation between sign (symbol) and signified in one place.”¹⁰⁴ Indeed, the symbolic meaning of the images on the export paintings for consumers (‘look, this is China’) had no equivalent meaning, let alone equivalent words, in the Western cultural systems for which these paintings were primarily produced. A painting of the quay of Canton (sign: warehouses of foreign trade nations in China in the nineteenth century) meant much more for the buyer and his descendants than what was shown (signifier: grandfather’s travels to the East and his stories). Thus, the painting (the material thing) is a “constitutive symbol” and with its symbolic role ascribed to it at the time of its production and during its afterlife, is itself active.¹⁰⁵ The painting is a ‘force’ in its own right. We can

99 Young 2012, 159. Robert J.C. Young is Julius Silver Professor of English and Comparative Literature at New York University. He is an influential scholar in the field of Anglophone and postcolonial literatures, which involves research that also crosses over into areas of history, theory, philosophy, anthropology and translation studies. He has published many articles and books including *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West* (1990), *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Culture, Theory and Race* (1995), *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (2001), and *The Idea of English Ethnicity* (2008).

100 Ibid., 156.

101 Ibid.

102 Ibid., 159.

103 Ibid., 156.

104 Seigel 2005, 66. Micol Seigel is Associate Professor at the Department of American Studies and History, College of Arts and Science, Indiana University, Bloomington.

105 Renfrew 2005, 89.

assume that for the Chinese painters involved, the sign and signified were more in line with each other, namely as a piece of art or as a commodity through which they could demonstrate their painting skills and earn money. There is simply no way of trying to reconcile multiple locations when the people involved speak different languages and if I, as the researcher, stand at another historical vantage point, since discourses change over time. It is far more interesting to explore interactions than the evaluation of similarities and differences. Or, as Lydia Liu puts it, “elevating connections over contrasts.”¹⁰⁶ We must consider cross-national comparison as a subject rather than a method.

When we follow Bhabha’s theory on cultural translation, in which ‘natives’ become new migrants, translate their own culture into that of the new host community and become interveners in the hegemonic cultures that they find themselves confronted with, the translation is entirely foreignising.¹⁰⁷ In the translation, then, the ‘foreignness’ of a word foregrounds or stages the cultural difference. To some extent, we can treat Chinese export painters and, vice versa, foreign merchants, as ‘natives’. But, operating in transitional spaces, as mediators involved in agential processes of intervention and interaction, within the dynamics of divergent painting conventions, their mutual translation efforts resulted in an entwined artistic style with paintings having their inherent features. The problem then, or rather the pitfall, with translating Chinese export paintings, from the time of their production to today, is that we must use our own language to explain the spirit of these works, without knowing what the makers thought about their products and what their intentions were. Another difficulty is translating paintings that are produced in a visual language that is already multiple within a transitional space, like the export art practice in the harbour cities in the Pearl River delta that originated within a mixed culture that was neither discrete, nor bound. To follow this latter perspective for my research, and I agree with Young on this point, requires two ways of thinking.¹⁰⁸ Firstly, the ‘language’ of Chinese export paintings seen and understood through times and spaces, must be considered as “fluid, moving, mixed and without fixed boundaries.”

These paintings are ever changing products, created in a continually interactive relation to other visual material, people, ideas and knowledge (techniques). Secondly, we can say that Western customers and Western-style painting with all its specifications, transformed the visual language of the prevailing (literati) Chinese painting practice into the new ‘language’ of a distinguishing Chinese art genre. However, this transformation never led to assimilation of the existing practice. On the contrary, the particularity of Chinese painting culture has never been dissolved. The conversion, so to speak, led to the genesis of a unique painting style that, because of the choice of subject matter, functioned partly as a valuable translation of Chinese culture. It is too great a leap to assert that these paintings are translations, or vehicles, of Chinese culture – we know, after all, that it largely concerns idealised representations – but there are many ‘particularities’ of Chinese culture condensed into a broad range of subjects.

It seems that this kind of painting is actually untranslatable when it comes to ‘cultural translation’. Again, I borrow an idea from Young, influenced by Walter Benjamin, to explain this point, by arguing that the so-called target culture (the West) “is required to translate itself into the ‘foreign’ idiom of the source (China) in order to effect understanding.”¹⁰⁹ The hybrid painting style, full of non-Chinese but not entirely Western elements, contains untranslatable aspects that do not flawlessly correspond to painting conventions on the part of Western consumers. This has not proved, however, to be an insurmountable problem. In contrast, Chinese export painters with their excellent feel for their client’s penchant for Chinese art had the right qualities to create a new, attractive art form that integrated the ‘foreign’. Whether or not it is 100% ‘translatable’ to either side, did not matter. The hybrid appeal of these paintings as results of shared cultural enterprises highly intrigued Western audiences and, at the same time, did the Chinese painters no harm, as we now know. This style might even be called a marketing strategy in modern terminology and is the outcome of deliberate decisions to please the buyers, as Mok convincingly states, after judging many written comments by contented customers, who gave

106 Liu, quoted in Seigel 2005, 66.

107 Bhabha 1994, 227.

108 Young 2012, 169–170.

109 Ibid., 171.

valuable information on the pleasing aspects of Chinese export painting.¹¹⁰ One side of the chain aimed to obtain colourful, exotic and minute presentations of Chinese life in all its facets, while the other side's ambition was to sell and make money. It is generally known that both sides successfully achieved these major goals.

2.6.

Conclusion

This chapter presented a number of coherent theoretical concepts that can be helpful for approaching Chinese export paintings in general and the Dutch corpus in particular, in a new way. In conclusion, the most fitting angles and useful concepts and 'tools' are selected to give this shared cultural repertoire the right place and status in relation to its appreciated use value. *Made for Trade* combines these multiple concepts and will apply them appropriately, depending on the discussed genre or topic. The related concepts are applicable to the argumentation in this dissertation to underscore the strength and value of Chinese export painting. Primarily, this study examines the 'sites' (production, painting itself, reception) and the 'modalities' (subject matter, techniques, composition, social element) at stake when evaluating the Dutch corpus. Further, from this macro visual analysis model (sites and modalities), *Made for Trade* unravels the notions 'value' and 'transcultural' in a bid to find answers and arguments to understand the current status and the meaning of the Dutch collections.

With Chinese export paintings accruing different values through time and space, and throughout their afterlife, a discrepancy between different systems of value must be ascertained. To understand this, the term 'value' must be conceived in all its possible meanings. On the one hand, there is the Chinese trade value system of the South Chinese harbour cities in the nineteenth century, based on supply and demand. Apparently, this fact *an sich* is ambiguously used in the course of time to evaluate Chinese export paintings in the Western world. On the other hand, after being sold, a painting, at least when it was bought for circulation in the art market system, enters the Western trade value system, which is based on taste-setting trends, gallery prices, and auction records.¹¹¹ Or, when valued as an identity marker for former China-goers and their

descendants, a painting (collection) accrues worth in a different way. To discover the mechanisms at work in the paintings' life, writing a cultural biography is an appropriate tool for disclosing the related stories about its representational, historical-documentary, identity-enhancing, symbolic and/or merchandising function. When owning such artworks, as museums do, it is important to know these stories. That is why *Made for Trade* uses this biographical angle, with its closely linked materiality-aspect, as an instrument to expand the knowledge of the Dutch collections.

These paintings are tangible elements of a visual economy which emanated from the historical Dutch trade with China and Indonesia, at the heart of an ever-changing material (global) complex. To argue that Chinese export painting can be seen as an art form in its own right with the idiosyncrasies of the works, this dissertation highlights that the transcultural character of this painting phenomenon is its most important feature. In essence, it is the composite, integrated, EurAsian appearance that certifies their success as 'shared' artworks and their (current) high appraisal at the art market. Although this painting genre strongly refers to China and its trade with Western seafaring countries, the works are able to negotiate between multiple cultures. The variety in subject matter literally demonstrates transcultural exchange and, at the same time, the paintings themselves are material exponents of this exchange. Their interpretation, however, will differ depending on their sites of location, on the people involved with their conservation, and on the prevailing *zeitgeist*.

Using an interdisciplinary approach, and combining the various values of this transcultural painting genre, I can determine a fresh and innovative attitude to the Dutch collections with their specific art-commodity character. Insights from the art theoretical perspective (Rose), anthropology (Kopytoff, Poole and Ter Keurs), symmetrical archaeology (Olsen), and translation studies (Young), enables us to understand these paintings in their complexity and their speciality. Once, the one-dimensional art history perspective dismissed these kinds of artworks because they did not fit both the Western and Chinese artistic canons with their strict conventions and rules. Currently, it is precisely this multilayered character, which creates the strong own position

110 Mok 2014, 36.

111 Steiner 1994, 68.

of this art genre that moves between different cultural paradigmas, and which arouses the high appreciation of it today. So what once was seen as a weakness is now, in contrast, conceived as powerful. The connected narratives that will emanate from the corpus, when approaching these paintings in this way, will make the Dutch collections more rich, valuable and better understood. As a result, finally, this shared cultural repertoire can contribute to raising this issue higher on the agenda of decision makers at the sites where they are kept.