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

Poel, R.H.M. van der

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**Author:** Poel, R.H.M. van der

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# Chapter 3

## Mapping Chinese export painting

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Whereas Chapter 2 set out to sketch the theoretical and methodical frame of reference, Chapter 3 aims to map the ‘state of the field’ with regard to the cultural context of Chinese export painting practice. This chapter consists of four parts. The first part briefly focuses on Dutch sea trading activities in and around China from a historical perspective. Secondly, given the unique nature of this category of Chinese paintings, it is necessary to define the terms ‘globalisation’ and ‘glocalisation’, both of which emerge when we study the westward movement of these paintings. Thirdly, the *modus operandi* of the export painting practice, revealed by the relevant documentary tradition, will be presented. This third part treats the most important actors of this global painting phenomenon: the painters and their studios, the market, the techniques, materials and the media in which they are executed. Furthermore, to frame the context of this artistic phenomenon more clearly, the last section of this chapter discusses different views of this kind of visual art, then and now, culminating in the concluding idea that Chinese export painting can be interpreted as a shared cultural visual repertoire.

### 3.1.

#### Dutch sea trade and China

To understand the arrival of Chinese export paintings in Dutch museum collections it is essential to take a closer look at the Dutch China trade practice in previous centuries. It is well known that the Dutch have been an important trading community with China through the ages. From the early seventeenth

century on, as Kaufmann puts it, China undoubtedly had “a huge impact on European cultures that was mediated through the United Provinces (Dutch Republic, 1581-1795).”<sup>1</sup> The early interest in China rapidly spread from the Netherlands throughout Europe, via the re-selling of porcelain in France, England, Germany and other countries, and through the publication of illustrated books depicting this unknown empire. The result of this was the genesis of a new European style called chinoiserie, a fashion that entered the European stage in the late seventeenth century and reached its height between 1740 and 1770.<sup>2</sup> This style, states Catherine Pagani, “had very little to do with China per se but rather reflected an idealized and highly decorative concept of the Far East, loosely combining motifs from Chinese, Japanese, and even Indian repertoires.”<sup>3</sup> This movement had a deep influence on interior design, architecture and decorative art. The idealised vision of the Chinese empire was expressed in the arts and gradually developed into an autonomous style, which, in turn, modified the European picture of the East. As chinoiserie expert Hugh Honour remarks in his seminal study *Chinoiserie: The vision of Cathay*, this style phenomenon declined once European eyes began to view it as the antithesis of Neoclassicism, the dominant movement from the late-eighteenth century to the end of the nineteenth century. Indeed, the fashion shifted from baroque and rococo chinoiserie style to a more neo-classical one.<sup>4</sup> Despite this downturn in European Chinese style, European commerce increased and, instead of buying Chinese-style

1 Kaufmann 2014, 207.

2 Pagani 2000, 105. The term ‘chinoiserie’ appeared much later in an 1883 issue of *Harper’s Magazine*. Oxford English Dictionary, Oxford: Clarendon, 1989. Catherine Pagani is Professor of Asian Art History and Associate Dean of the Graduate School, University of Alabama. She has published several articles on Chinese material culture in the eighteenth century.

3 Pagani 2000, 95–96.

4 Honour 1961, 175–177.



objects made by Europeans, Western merchants purchased actual Chinese objects and paintings from China. In fact, the extensive corpus of Chinese export art executed in the nineteenth century proves that after the peak of the chinoiserie fashion in the middle of the eighteenth century, international art exchange between China and the West showed no signs of decreasing.

In the years spanning this research, i.e. the long nineteenth century, the trading practice was not booming as it had been in the centuries before, when the Dutch East India Company (VOC) in the period 1602-1799 had a flourishing shipping link with Canton. This observation not only applies to principal trade products, but also to material culture transfer or exchanges linked to commerce, such as the trade in spices and tea. From the seventeenth century until the beginning of the eighteenth century, the VOC used Batavia as its base for the Chinese tea trade between Europe and Asia, with Chinese trade junks visiting the town every year. Until the eighteenth century, the VOC had been sending a limited number of ships directly to China, in response to the increasing European demand for tea.<sup>5</sup> In 1727, the company received permission to establish a so-called *hong* or *factorij* (trading post) in Canton and, together with traders from other European nations and America, they chased lucrative profits in all areas.<sup>6</sup> In 1728, the VOC started a direct shipping link between Holland and Canton.<sup>7</sup> The trading season usually lasted less than six months, from August to January. Western ships wanted to make the return voyage to Europe well before the monsoon winds in February changed direction. Those who remained in China in the months when no business was done usually visited their families in Macao. After the decline of the VOC at the end of the eighteenth century, France occupied Holland until 1813. This situation did little for the Dutch trade with Asia. Although all Dutch trade in Canton came

to a virtual standstill as a result of the Napoleonic Wars (1799-1815) and “when our independence went into hiding for a moment,” the flag on the Dutch factory in Canton was still flying, as the Dutch publicist Hendrik Muller (1859-1941) wrote in the magazine *De Gids*.<sup>8</sup> As we know from research of maritime historian Frank Broeze (1945-2001), one of the results of the French-English war – also fought on the oceans – was that Dutch ships were often taken by the English in this period or were required to seek refuge in neutral harbours, where they were confined to port.<sup>9</sup> Although the Americans went on trading until 1807 and the Indian country traders remained active throughout the whole period, trade in Canton diminished greatly during these years. Soon after the French period, from 1815 onwards, the Dutch made several attempts, using independent shipping firms, to regain hegemony of the European tea trade. However, these attempts were not very successful and suffered from a lack of continuity. After a fire in 1822, the Dutch factory in Canton was rebuilt on the same plot by the Netherlands Indies government, but different ships took on board the loads this time. The Dutch shipping, “destroyed during the Napoleonic era, had not recovered in an instant, and our world market for Chinese tea was gone, for good.”<sup>10</sup>

In 1824, the Netherlands Trading Society (NTS, 1824-1964), one of the forerunners of today's Dutch ABN AMRO banking company, started their sailing business in Asia. This initiative by the Dutch King William I, who was nicknamed the Merchant Monarch because of his active support for trade and industry, was aimed at stimulating Dutch maritime private trade, promoting commercial activities and expanding Dutch trade relations with Asia, especially with the Netherlands East Indies. As we can read in an archival document about the history of ABN AMRO, the king's objective was “to resuscitate the national economy in the wake of the period of French rule (1795-1813).”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Kaufmann 2014, 208.

<sup>6</sup> A trading post was often made up of buildings with several functions, such as warehouses, offices and accommodation.

<sup>7</sup> Cai 2004, 5.

<sup>8</sup> Muller 1917, 171-172. Hendrik Pieter Nicolaas Muller was a Dutch businessman, diplomat, explorer, publicist, and philanthropist. He wrote ‘Onze vaderen in China’ (Our Fathers in China) in *De Gids*, about the presence of the Dutch in China in the period 1585-1901. *De Gids* is the oldest literary and general cultural magazine in the Netherlands and one of the longest existing magazines of this kind in the world. It has existed since 1837 and pays attention to literature, philosophy, sociology, visual arts, politics, science, and history.

<sup>9</sup> Broeze 1977, 290.

<sup>10</sup> Muller 1917, 176.

<sup>11</sup> [https://abnamro.com, NHM\\_\(UK\).pdf](https://abnamro.com, NHM_(UK).pdf).

From 1825 to 1830, the NTS, the national import and export company set up to expand existing trade relations and open up new channels, undertook five expeditions directly to Canton.<sup>12</sup> Although this initiative was praiseworthy, their English and American rivals, who had taken over the China trade and dominated this field in Europe, overshadowed the Dutch. From research conducted by Blussé, Broeze et al. and Muller, we know that the Netherlands' pole position in the global tea trade was gone forever by the 1830s.<sup>13</sup> Exceptions to this decline were commercial enterprises based in Leiden, where wools like *laken* and *polemieten* were produced, and in tropical products from Java, like edible bird's nests, which funded their Chinese wares. Indeed, trading activities between Holland and China only continued on a small scale. After a while, in the 1840s, the Dutch regained some ground in the textile market. And, due to the so-called *Cultuurstelsel* (Cultivation System) introduced on Java in 1830, there was extensive trade with the Netherlands East Indies in various colonial products, including raw materials, dyes, spices, coffee, sugar and indigo. Consequently, the total picture of Dutch trade with China was not as desolate as some Dutch colonial officials depicted at that time. In 1843, Dutch colonial officers like Modderman, Hueser and Freyss were ordered by the NTS to investigate what the prospects were for the growth of trade between Holland and China in the years to come. Their reports concluded that the prospects looked rather dim.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, only a few years

later, in 1847, Muller discovered that Dutch ships were importing more than 3¼ million guilders worth of merchandise into China and exporting about 1¾ million guilders worth of Chinese goods.<sup>15</sup> People mainly bought tea and sent Dutch products (mostly tropical products from the Netherlands Indies) in return; however, there was almost no opium, unlike the Scottish Jardine Matheson & Co., or the American trading house Russell & Company. The NTS documents only record one consignment of 55 cases of opium.

1856 is an important year in the history of Dutch relations with Canton. During an uprising in Canton, the so-called Arrow War (1856-1860), which resulted in the Qing government opening up eight more treaty ports, all the consular buildings went up in flames, including the new Dutch commercial office, established in Canton in 1844 (which was serving as a consular building at this time). Consequently, Canton ceased to be home to the Dutch consulate after more than a century of trading there. From that moment, Dutch nineteenth-century trading activities on the South Chinese coast were undertaken either from the "significant Dutch house on the Praya Grande", which served as the Dutch consulate in Macao or, later, from the Dutch posts in Hong Kong and Amoy (Xiamen).<sup>16</sup> The last Dutch professional consul, Piet Hamel (1845-1900), was stationed in Amoy in China. He left the country in 1892.

In retrospect, as Ferry de Goey concludes in his paper 'The business of consuls; consuls and

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12 Broeze 1978, 40-65. First expedition: 1825-1826, supercarga M. v.d. Abeele, tea taster W. Loots, ships: *Jorina* (Varkevisser, Dorrepaal & Co., Rotterdam), captain F. Rietmeyer; *Vijf Gezusters* (Van Hoboken, Rotterdam), captain M.A. Jacometti; *Schoon Verbond* (Voûte & Co., Amsterdam), captain D. Kraijer; *Rotterdam* (H.J. Coster & Co., Amsterdam) captain T.S. Waters. Second expedition: 1826-1827, supercarga G.N. Stulen, tea taster P.E. Thueré, ships: *De Zeeuw* (Van de Broecke, Luteyn & Schouten, Middelburg), captain C. Riekels; *Ida Aleyda* (J.H. Bagman & Zoon, Amsterdam), captain C. Swaan; *Neerlands Koning* (Van Hoboken, Rotterdam), captain K. Schinkel; *Cornelis Houtman* (Gebr. Hartsen, Amsterdam), captain J. Duijff. Third expedition: 1827-1828, supercarga A. Meijer, tea taster J.I.L. Jacobson, ships: *Neerlands Koningin* (Varkevisser, Dorrepaal & Co., Rotterdam), captain W. Verloop; *Prins van Oranje* (Societeit van Nederlandsche Scheepsbouw en Scheepvaart), captain W. Blom; *Helena* (Nederlandsche Scheepsrederij, Amsterdam), captain D. Grim; *Stad Rotterdam* (Reederij van Vier Scheepen, Rotterdam), captain C. Poort. Fourth expedition: 1828-1829, supercarga A.H. Büchler, tea taster P.E. Thueré, ships: *Neerlands Koning* (Van Hoboken, Rotterdam), captain K. Schinkel; *Henrietta Klasina* (Nederlandsche Scheepsrederij, Amsterdam), captain L.T. Heijde; *Susanna* (Nederlandse Scheepsrederij, Amsterdam), captain P.C. de Roth; *Raymond* (J. Roelands & Co., Antwerpen) captain G. van den Broecke. Fifth expedition: 1829-1830, supercarga J. Valcke de Knuyt, tea taster J.I.L. Jacobson, ships: *Johanna Cornelia* (C. & A. Vlierboom, Rotterdam), captain P.S. Schuil; *Olivier van Noort* (Gebr. Hartsen, Amsterdam) captain J. Duijff.

13 Blussé 2004, 63-67. Broeze, Buijn and Gaastra 1977, 294-297. Muller 1917, 327-350.

14 Blussé 2004, 65.

15 Muller 1917, 346.

16 Ibid., 358.



businessmen', "the nineteenth century promised more to westerners than it delivered."<sup>17</sup> In the late nineteenth century, foreign enterprises became interested in China as a destination for – rather than a source of – products. As Frans-Paul van der Putten mentions in his study on the evolution of Dutch enterprise in South China in early twentieth century, various Dutch companies concentrated their agencies, branch offices or subsidiaries primarily in Hong Kong.<sup>18</sup> Other significant locations for Dutch business activities in this region were Guangzhou, Shantou and Xiamen. Many of them were specialised in specific colonial activities, such as banking, shipping, sugar and tobacco plantations in the Netherlands East Indies. These colonial enterprises had their headquarters in the Netherlands, but their assets and operations were entirely in 'the East'. As Geoffrey Jones declares in his book *Multinationals and global capitalism from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century*, in which he examines the role of entrepreneurs and firms in the creation of the global economy over the last two centuries, these enterprises, based in Dutch South Asia, were referred to as independent companies and they were the first Dutch companies to invest in China.<sup>19</sup>

Returning to the Dutch sea trade and China in the nineteenth century, the main focus for *Made for Trade*, we can conclude that the scope of the Dutch trading activities was still extensive, and Chinese export paintings in the Netherlands are silent witnesses to this. Notwithstanding the difficulties the Dutch had at that time in terms of maintaining their position on the world sea-trade market, the (colonised) Dutch East Indies trading stations and other cities on the Chinese southern coast were very important for facilitating Dutch operations in international and Asian waters and, besides their main trading products, make it possible for seafaring staff members to acquire emblematic objects (such as paintings) to remind them of their stay overthere.

### 3.2.

#### Things global-local and the nineteenth century

Having sketched the Dutch trade practice with China in the nineteenth century, based on the existing documentary sources, this chapter now moves on to characterising the time-specificity of this age with its transnational market exchange of commodities, accompanied by a migration of knowledge, technology and ideas. In this century, the notion of time and space differ quite strongly from how we perceive these ideas today. There were no prevailing technological conditions back then, which today free mankind from spatial and temporal restrictions, allowing us to easily maintain a global network of social relations.

A striking change in perspective on visual material in general at that time, arose with the genesis of photography in the 1840s, which, as Poole mentions in her analysis of the visual economy of the image world (mainly photographs) of peasants living in southern highland Peru, gave rise to "the domain of vision organised around the continual production and circulation of interchangeable or serialised image objects and visual experiences."<sup>20</sup> This means that when visual materials in earlier periods were scarce and not accessible to everyone, in this era, in general, mass-produced images – mainly through the rise of photography – "began to accrue value independently of the referential content or use value assigned to them as representations of particular persons, places, or objects."<sup>21</sup> Like photographs, most mass-produced Chinese export paintings can be considered as a new form of communication. Another feature that distinguishes the 'visual economy' in the nineteenth century – a time when Europe's economy and political systems were undergoing drastic changes – from its predecessors in the Enlightenment and the Renaissance, is the place of the observer. With the arrival of photography and ubiquitous printed material, the place of the human subject had to be, as Poole also argues, "rearticulated to accommodate this highly mobile or fluid field of vision."<sup>22</sup> In addition to these irreversible developments, the communication revolution,

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17 De Goey 2010, 26. Amongst other references he refers to 'The myth of the China market, 1890-1914'. *The American Historical Review*, vol. 73, 3, 1968.

18 Van der Putten 2004, 81-82.

19 Jones 2005, 21, 23-24.

20 Poole 1997, 9.

21 Ibid., 13.

22 Ibid., 9.

which heralded the arrival of the telegraph, the telephone and postal services, the expansion of colonial empires, the opening of the so-called treaty ports after the first Opium War in 1841, the transition from sail to steamships in the 1860s – with ships capable of travelling much further and more economically than ever before – and the changing of shipping routes following the opening of the Suez canal in 1869, are just some of the global changes that occurred. Furthermore, increasing trading activities yielded new commodity worlds with a spectacular decline in transport costs and commodity price convergence, in turn resulting in the formation of an integrated world market. The growing interconnectedness of the world through trade and travel in this century corresponded to the integration of local markets into world capitalism. In this regard, trade, with export art as its valuable and ever-associated by-product, formed the dominant mode of interconnection in Chinese-Dutch relations, with a constant flow of ideas, visual materials, goods, capital and people between these countries. These trade relations were characterised by exchange and not dependence, as is the case for countries with a colonial relationship.

In this same nineteenth century, the increasing prosperity of Europe and America brought about by industrial production and expanding imperial and world markets, led to the phenomenon of mass consumption.<sup>23</sup> Appadurai articulates this development in *Modernity at large. Cultural dimensions of globalization* as follows: “Globalization has shrunk the distance between elites, shifted key relations between producers and consumers [...], obscured the lines between temporary locales and imaginary national attachments.”<sup>24</sup> In the historical China trade era, middle-class and working-class consumers in home countries were increasingly able to purchase ‘exotic’ products. Various forms of advertisements and posters were used to foster domestic demand for a wide range of these kinds of products that reflected the newly

obtained status of people in these ‘lower’ classes. Chinese export painting studios regularly published lively advertisements in circulating newspapers in the home countries and in Canton, Macao and Hong Kong.<sup>25</sup>

Although no consensus exists regarding the definition of globalisation and its start, economic historians such as Kevin O’Rourke and Jeffrey Williamson and other scholars like Dennis Flynn and Arturo Giráldez all consider the nineteenth century as the era when the ultimate globalisation took place.<sup>26</sup> As global labour and migration historian Leo Lucassen argues, global convergence of prices and transport costs, and unprecedented geographical intercontinental mobility are characteristic of this period.<sup>27</sup> The limited definition of O’Rourke and Williamson of the term globalisation as “the integration of international commodity markets” counters the proposal of Flynn and Giráldez that “globalisation began when the Old World became directly connected with the Americas in 1571 via Manila,” when migrants established a world wide web of connections. In the article ‘From divergence to convergence – Migration and the process of globalisation’, Lucassen introduces another viewpoint.<sup>28</sup> He argues that the differentiated globalisation approach of David Held et al., which distinguishes between intensity, extensity, impact and velocity, offers the basis for further fruitful discussions.<sup>29</sup> Held’s distinctive approach can bridge the gap between, on the one hand, the rather one-dimensional market-oriented approach of economic historians and, on the other hand, the broad definition of globalisation, which lends itself inadequately to a formal test due to a lack of quantification. One viewpoint, according to Graeber, is that some postmodern neoliberals are convinced that the global market is “the single greatest and most monolithic system of measurement ever created, a totalizing system that subordinated everything – every object, every piece of land, every human capacity or relationship – on the planet to a

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23 Hazareesingh & Curry-Machado 2009, 4.

24 Appadurai 1996, 9–10. Although Appadurai’s statements are about the twentieth century, this view is also applicable to the increasingly globalising world in the second half of the nineteenth century.

25 English language newspapers in China: *Friend of China*, *Hong Kong Register*, *Hong Kong Telegraph*, *Canton Press*, *Canton Register*, and *Chinese Courier*. Lee Sai Chong 2005, 202, 219, 239, 244–250. Crossman 1991, 154. *The Illustrated London News* in England.

26 O’Rourke & Williamson 2002, 23–50. Flynn & Giráldez 2004, 81–108.

27 Lucassen 2007, 62.

28 Ibid.

29 Held 1999, 17.



single standard of value.”<sup>30</sup> Another point of view is that one can no longer even imagine that there is a single standard of value for the measuring of things.<sup>31</sup> Globalisation is, as Raymond Grew states, “an ubiquitous and imprecise term, its sources, direction, antiquity, and inevitability all subject to dispute.”<sup>32</sup> I agree with Sandip Hazareesingh and Jonathan Curry-Machado that we should be “realigning the lens away from teleological ideas about globalisation and the power projections of various imperialisms, and focus on thinking about the plurality of spatial linkages, networks, and connections, which were more than local, but less than global.”<sup>33</sup> In doing so, we can incorporate the recognition of the agency of all *actants* involved in a study of Chinese export painting, a phenomenon with global dimensions, grounded in local practices. Certainly, Chinese export paintings, as commodities, are primarily spread around the world detached from the temporally and spatially specific from the moment they left the painter’s studio in Canton. Thus, they immediately entered the world of globalisation and merged into different economic and sociocultural systems.

If we accept that, historically, globalisation is not a story of cultural homogenisation, then we can approach commodities as cultural phenomena that have multiple ‘social lives’. The varied movements embarked upon in the course of these life cycles – local, regional, across oceans and continents – make the commodity perspective a particularly apt mode of exploring global history and the global lives of things. As Hazareesingh and Curry-Machado write in the *Journal of Global History*, “this is particularly the case because their transformations were also connected with social changes over vast geographical areas, in infrastructures, technologies, economies [...], and patterns of consumption.”<sup>34</sup> They state, and this is evident, that the commodity perspective offers an approach to connections and comparisons – the two styles of modern global history as identified by Patrick O’Brien.<sup>35</sup>

Construction of new patterns of interconnec-

tedness and multilayered circuits “simultaneously link different areas of the world in different ways, from whichever location the circuit starts.”<sup>36</sup> By trading commodified goods around the world, China was fully participating in a global economy. In many cases, this globalisation was born of its domestic developments (think of the production of ceramics in the Jingdezhen community and specific paintings and other artistic export wares by Cantonese artists). This contact between China and the Western world, which took place through the mediation of various agents, such as emperors, sea trading merchants, priests and converts, government-administrative workers, explorers, ‘things-Chinese’-collectors, was also conducted in, for instance, Batavia as the main trading spot of the Dutch colony. This generated an important new pattern of connection in the Dutch-Chinese sea trade.

When we investigate the term ‘glocalisation’ within the framework of Chinese export painting we observe the same difficulty in coming to an explicit definition. Is glocalisation marked by the development of diverse, overlapping fields of global-local linkages, creating a condition of globalised (virtual) pan-locality, which anthropologist Appadurai describes in his chapter on disjuncture and difference in the global cultural economy, as deterritorialised global spatial scapes?<sup>37</sup> As Wayne Gabardi writes, and I partly agree with him, this broad definition represents a shift from a more territorialised learning process bound up with the nation-state society, to one more fluid and translocal.<sup>38</sup> Chinese export paintings, yet, will always be connected with a sense of space, however diverse and fluid the place – China or Dutch East Indies – is. Or, can glocalisation be explained more simply as the process by which local communities respond differently to global changes? I tend to follow another definition, given to us by Robert Lamb. In his clear online article ‘What is glocalisation?’, Lamb defines glocalisation as, “the ability of a culture, when it encounters other strong cultures, to absorb influences that naturally fit into and can enrich

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30 Graeber 2001, xi.

31 Ibid.

32 Grew 1999, 22.

33 Hazareesingh & Curry-Machado 2009, 5.

34 Ibid.

35 O’Brien 2006, 4-7.

36 Wang 2014-b, 391.

37 Appadurai 1996, 27-48.

38 Gabardi 2000, 33-34.

that culture, to resist those things that are truly alien and to compart-mentalise those things that, while different, can nevertheless be enjoyed and celebrated as different.”<sup>39</sup> Although we have serious doubts about whether Chinese export painters were touched by Western painting conventions like linear perspective and the use of shadows and colours, we are aware of another gratification, which came to the fore in this period; namely, the profitable business that arose alongside this painting production and its movements around the world. Lamb explains that “the marketing, funding and infrastructure behind a product may come from a global corporation, but the local level dictates what finished form that product will take. In this way, glocalisation is a bottom-up system of governance for globalisation.”<sup>40</sup> I agree with Lamb that, when taking the economic model of glocalisation as a guide, and applying this to larger cultural and political issues, you have a new way of looking at the world. The global economy, which was clearly present in the nineteenth century, did not lead to the destruction of the South Chinese local identity. On the contrary, in Canton, local peoples have always innovatively incorporated products and social forms for economic purposes. They ingeniously appropriated new techniques and materials to account for the taste of overseas merchants and seamen for the highly desired Chinese (exotic) goods, which can be considered as global commodities. With Chinese export paintings in mind, we turn to Dikötter, who tells us that “the local in this process of cultural bricolage was transformed just as much as the global was inflected to adjust to existing conditions.”<sup>41</sup>

The ultimate goal of thinking in terms of glocalisation is to ensure a globalised world as an integrated place, while also protecting the cultural heritage of local areas and, above all, let the agential ‘local’ be characteristic in its material output at the artistic production-end. However, further study must be done before we can wholly paste this definition onto the managed meeting of the growing global arena of the nineteenth century with those elements that make up the local culture – with all its values, beliefs and traditions – of southern Chinese port

cities. Indeed, we are forced to consider whether we can actually speak of ‘local culture’ in the case of Chinese export painting. This suggests a view of culture as an internally coherent system that can come into contact with another culture. Is it not more adequate to speak of the constitutively hybrid character of a cultural system itself? According to Jonathan Hay, questions of viewpoint and power are at issue when geographically widely separated cultures come into contact with each other, as in the case of the historical China trade.<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, problematising China as a monolithic unity and the ideological efficacy of the China concept are widely acknowledged. Moreover, we can argue that since the beginning of the nineteenth century the Chinese nation state, as a complex imperial and united cultural form, was increasingly on its last legs.

Finally, the description of this term by Paul Wildman and Iona Miller is appropriate when studying Chinese export painting:

*[g]localisation proposes both theory and practice for bridging global-local scales in an alternative equitable international system, using a mosaic of committed key actors. The meaning of globally accessible information and economy becomes organised in its local context. Intense local and extensive global interaction is a dynamic that operates in fractal embedded spatial and cultural dimensions to mobilise and interface social and economic interaction at the local, national and transnational levels, that is, glocal.*<sup>43</sup>

Yet, the historical China trade, with its major export goods like tea, porcelain and silk, engendered the derivative trade in export paintings as other desirable commodities. This created a strong and successful local painting industry with its own actors, who, in turn, were well embedded in that particular place of trade, full of global transnational and transcultural exchanges.

For now, this chapter does not intend to pursue the debates on globalisation and glocalisation further. We can conclude with Appadurai’s words in 1996: “Yet a framework for relating the global, the national, and the local has yet to emerge.”<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, it is

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39 Lamb 2015.

40 Ibid.

41 Dikötter 2006, 7.

42 Hay 1999-a, 7.

43 Wildman & Miller 2012, 840.



evident that, citing an idea from Dikötter, “there is always a complex and historically situated interplay between the global and the local and that historical agents have at least some capacity to appropriate cultural products and integrate them into their everyday routines and social practices.”<sup>45</sup> In the nineteenth century, when the Western countries and China were world partners, Cantonese export painters and their clients from around the world had this capacity in abundance and thus were able to play new and unfamiliar things over and over again. Their work was always evolving and always unchanging at the same time, with little mix and match. I consider the locally produced commodified paintings in this time of multilateral globalisation of exchanges as metaphors for the historical Chinese global trade that was taking place in that era. The next section will examine local and global aspects of Chinese export painting on the basis of the major actors in this artistic phenomenon.

### 3.3. **The *modus operandi* of a global painting practice and its products**

The cultural context of the Chinese export painting practice is largely known to us via the observations and accounts of contemporary foreign (English, French, Dutch, Swedish and American) inhabitants of Canton, Hong Kong and Macao, travellers to these harbour cities, and traders in all kind of goods.<sup>46</sup> These accounts, which carry the authority of the eyewitness, together with English- and Chinese-language newspapers from the time, give a good, although subjective, insight into the world of that time and provide us with a general description of this painting practice. Twenty-first-century (art)historians also try to unbundle the *modus operandi* of Chinese export painters.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Appadurai 1996, 188.

<sup>45</sup> Dikötter 2006, 261–265.

<sup>46</sup> Quotations form an important part of this chapter. Amongst others, this includes texts from visitors who were in China before and after the two Opium Wars (first: 1839–1842 and second: 1856–1860): De Guignes 1808; Downing 1838; Medhurst 1840; Borget 1845; Tiffany 1849; Lavollée 1853; Davis 1857; Fortune 1857; Yvan 1858; Hunter 1882; and Ball 1892. Given the paucity of Chinese language sources, these English- and French language observations form a significant contribution to knowledge in the West about China. Samuel Wells Williams’ *A Chinese Commercial Guide consisting of a Collection of Details and Regulations Respecting Foreign Trade with China*, from 1856 is apparently also an informative source, as are the records of Hendrik Muller (‘Onze vaderen in China’, 1917) about the trade history between the Netherlands and China.

<sup>47</sup> Clunas 1984; Crossman 1991; Garrett 2002; Lee Sai Chong 2005; Van Dyke 2005; Jiang 2007.

<sup>48</sup> Anne Gerritsen, 2 December 2014, *Material Agency Forum Archaeology*, Leiden University Libraries.

<sup>49</sup> That not only Europeans and Americans were eager to buy these kind of paintings is made evidently clear by the study of Jessica Lee Patterson on the several examples of Chinese reverse glass paintings in Thai Buddhist monasteries. Patterson 2016.

Due to the moderate quality and limited availability of scarce historical sources, the sketch of this global practice is comprised of fragments. As Anne Gerritsen states, however, in her lecture ‘Glueing the Pieces Together: Writing Global History from Shards?’, “Fragments and shards also have stories to tell as fragments. Writing a global history from a fragmentary record is perhaps a different kind of history.”<sup>48</sup> As a result of the growing interest in Chinese academia and the rapid museum expansion in the Pearl River delta, the production side of this phenomenon is high on the South Chinese research agenda. This will undoubtedly lead to new discoveries that can clarify and deepen the existing understanding of global connections across time and space, garnered from those fragments and shards already found. In this section of this chapter, I will provide a summary of those bits and pieces. The painters and their studios, the market with its specific components, and techniques and methods connected with Chinese export painting, will be treated in the following paragraphs. This general typification will make clear and concretise the specific character of the examined corpus.

#### **The export painters and their studios**

The eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Cantonese practice of Chinese export painters and their artworks was a special one. This ‘situated community’ was characterised by its locality, which was an important dimension of value. The producers of the paintings worked in a spatially-bound context that provided the frame within which various kinds of action could be initiated and conducted meaningfully, productively, reproductively, interpretively, or performatively. For the painters, it was clear beforehand that the artwork was being made for export to foreign countries.<sup>49</sup> Most of the

export paintings from China, which were produced in the years from 1750 to well into the nineteenth century for European and American markets, are unsigned. If a painting is signed, it does not necessarily mean that the artwork was made by that individual artist. The name can also mean that the painting was created by several artists in the studio of the signatory. The majority of the painters were thus anonymous. It is quite conceivable, though, that historical Chinese export painters, like their present-day ‘colleagues’ in Dafen village, were people with aspirations who were trying to make money to buy enough material to continue painting and to meet their costs for food and living.

Unfortunately, little is known about the training these painters had, what they thought of the art form and what they had in terms of (minimal) input on the final result. Whether there was a kind of a skills test or not when a painter knocked on a painting studio’s door, is also unknown. Their work was frequently described as belonging to the ‘Chinese school’.<sup>50</sup> As we analyse this ‘school’s’ products, it is clear that its painters were trained in a broad variety of painterly skills. It is assumed by renowned researchers of China export painting that many of the painters began as apprentices at the studios, as was the regular practice in other artisan-like professions at that time. Far from being studio workers, slavishly submitted to a commodification rat race, it is more likely, because of obvious differences in images – which, at first sight, seem similar – that Chinese export painters were capable of holding their own style, creatively engaging a selection of techniques and compositions in order to continue painting; something that they had been already been doing for a long time, but using different resources. According to surviving information from Charles Toogood Downing of the Royal College of Surgeons, who recorded his observations from the time that he stayed in Canton, while traveling with the British navy in 1836-1837, the perfection of the work “depends entirely upon the painter’s own taste.”<sup>51</sup> In 1972, the Irish University Press published a

photolithographic facsimile, retaining the original imprints of his records. In the same report, he writes that “a considerable portion of merit is due to the way in which the colours are laid on.”<sup>52</sup> This makes clear that the painters had input in terms of colour use. The painters, furthermore, were using various strategies to present their image as being as truthful (or saleable) as possible, while also, as Koon argues, “drawing on earlier pictorial schemes,” which was fully legitimate in the Chinese art practice.<sup>3</sup> In general, within a society, the set of culturally defined rules determines choices, but in Canton the export painters deliberately used design and colours that deviated from the prevailing conventions in the Chinese painting tradition.

Most artisans in Canton, who were involved in trade, belonged to one of the 27 guilds that accommodated all commercial activities.<sup>54</sup> A guild functioned as a kind of union that took care of issues, such as the number of people involved with a certain craft, working hours, quality standards, salaries and prices. There is no evidence that there was a guild for export painters. The fact there was no union for them to organise themselves and to work according to agreed circumstances made the individual painter vulnerable in many aspects and dependent on the whims of bosses and of the market.

From knowledge transferred by, among others, Downing, it is known that in the artists’ studios where paintings were made on glass, canvas and (pith) paper, media such as ivory and copper were also used in miniature portraits, landscapes and harbour views.<sup>55</sup> Precisely how many artists and studios were located in Canton is not known. Records of late-eighteenth-century travellers to China on the cultural context of the Chinese export painting practice are sorely missed, but the observations of Western visitors in the first half of the nineteenth century differ and are fragmented and give an ambiguous picture of export painting practice.<sup>56</sup> In 1816, as is written down in the *Tilden Papers*, Bryant Tilden (1781-1851), an American China trade merchant from Salem, mentioned that he knew

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50 Bradford 2005, 82.

51 Downing 1838; facsimile 1972, 99-100.

52 Ibid.

53 Koon 2014, 68.

54 Garrett 2002, 89.

55 Downing 1838; facsimile, 1972, 102.

56 Because a vast majority of the Dutch collections were produced in the late eighteenth century (think of the Royer Collection), it is regretful that I did not find relevant information or useable sources.

of about 30 painting studios in the vicinity of the foreign *hongs*, where he could buy his pith paper watercolours.<sup>57</sup> In 1835, *The Chinese Repository* also wrote that there were approximately 30 artists' studios in Canton.<sup>58</sup> In 1848, however, when the French daguerreotypist Jules Itier (1802-1877) wrote his extensive travelogue of his journey, upon his return to France after he stayed for several years in China, he mentioned Youqua's atelier:

*Il y a, dans Old-China Street, un magasin des plus renommés pour ses peintures à la gouache sur papier dit de riz, comme pour les dessins aut trait et les tableaux à l'huile qu'on y fabrique. Je me sers de ce mot, parce que 'est réellement une fabrique que l'atelier du célèbre Yom-qua.*<sup>59</sup>

This quote from Itier about painters working like factory workers indicates there were many of them. It was recorded some years after the first Opium War (1839-1842) and it gives us a sense of the large scale of this painting production.<sup>60</sup> It matches other records from that period, namely, also in 1848, Samuel Wells Williams recorded that the production of export paintings in Canton was carried out by "between two- and three thousand pairs of hands."<sup>61</sup> The way in which Williams described this painting practice says something about working in an assembly line with a division of labour and it shows a degree of disrespect for the hard-working individuals. We can assume that he saw the production as being done by 'working hands' and not by complete persons with brains and a heart, who were trying to personalise their own masterpiece within the limitations set. The same author subsequently wrote in the *Chinese Commercial Guide* that there were many details and regulations in respect of foreign trade in 1856 and that the number of oil paintings, watercolours and ivory engravings were so great that hundreds of people

were put to work in this branch of the industry:

*39. Pictures; oil paintings, rice paper pictures. There are many shops in Canton, Whampoa, and Hong Kong, where maps and charts are copied, and scenes in oil are made in large quantities, priced from \$ 3 to \$100 a piece; pictures and engravings are accurately copied, and some of the views and Chinese landscapes are well drawn. The paintings on pith paper are well known. [...] The copying of miniatures or engravings on ivory also forms a branch of industry of some importance; and the finer specimens of work of these artists are very beautiful. Outline designs in India ink, of the crafts and professions among the Chinese, are sold in books at a cheap price, and some of them are admirably designed. Of all these the number annually carried away is very great, and their manufacture furnishes employment to hundreds of workmen.*<sup>62</sup>

Further, in 1862, Félix-Sébastien Feuillet de Conches (1798-1887), French diplomat, journalist, writer and collector, wrote in his *Causeries d'un curieux*:

*L'atelier de Joé-Koa, à Canton, est tout à fait dans le même style. Plusieurs centaines d'ouvriers, plus qu'à-demis nus, à cause de la chaleur, y travaillent sous la direction de contremaîtres.*<sup>63</sup>

This observation by Feuillet de Conches makes clear that, as a master painter, Youqua had his studio firmly organised with men who supervised the other painters' work, in order to achieve the highly appreciated Youqua-quality that his customers expected. It is likely that the availability of cheap labour was an important aspect, just as it had been over the centuries throughout China and, certainly, it was essential in nineteenth-century China for competing with

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57 Crosmann 1991, 150. Bryant Tilden's papers are concerned with life and trading in China, in the second decade of the nineteenth century; they are held at the Peabody Essex Museum, Salem Massachusetts, US.

58 Lee Sai Chong 2005, 197. *The Chinese Repository*, October 1835, no. 6.

59 Itier 1848, 17. Translation: In Old China Street, there is one of the most renowned stores for his [Youqua] paintings in gouache on paper, called ricepaper, and for line drawings and oil paintings that are made there. I use that word (fabrique), because actually [think] the workshop of the celebrated Yom-qua is like a factory.

60 It is imaginable that the foreign trade (including the Chinese export painting market) in Canton benefitted too of the opening of Hong Kong harbour in 1842.

61 Williams 1848, 175, quoted in Clunas 1984, 81.

62 Williams 1856, 181.

63 Feuillet de Conches 1862, 147-148. Translation: Youqua's studio in Canton is quite in the same style [as Lamqua's]. Several hundreds of artists with bare backs because of the heat work there under the direction of the foremen.





Fig. 3.1. Tingqua's painting studio, Tingqua, gouache, c. 1835, 17.5 x 26.5 cm, Hong Kong Museum of Art.

foreign commodities.<sup>64</sup> It allowed affordability or speed of manufacture without sacrificing the quality of the piles of Chinese export paintings that were being exported to overseas markets in response to the huge demand.

Throughout the late eighteenth and the whole of the nineteenth century, the artists' studios in Canton were primarily located in Old and New (after 1822) China Street in the neighbourhood of the foreign factories.<sup>65</sup> Their position close to export businesses, together with other shops selling 'chinaware', provided them with a distinct advantage over more isolated small-scale Chinese ventures tucked away further into town. Normally, the Chinese shopping streets were filled with shops and workshops relating to one particular sort of trade. The situation in both China Streets was different: "The shops there were occupied by many trades for the foreigners' convenience."<sup>66</sup>

Just like texts, visual sources provide ambiguous information. Images are not neutral objective facts, rather they are always viewed or interpreted differently by different people. Thus, although the image in Figure 3.1. (1835) represents his own studio, where Western customers were allowed to walk in and were

persuaded to buy, in all probability Tingqua made an idealised scene. We see only three painters at work in a neatly furnished workshop. They all have the typical Chinese long queue and bold forehead, which indicates that the Manchurians were in power. They hold their brush in the typical Chinese painting manner (at an angle of 90 degrees to the forearm, with the brush straight on the paper). It looks like these painters are working individually on their own painting – no rows of hundreds of artists with bare backs in factory-like surroundings here. Indeed, this peek into this clean and quiet studio, probably, puts us on the wrong track and we can question this staged scene. Tingqua, active in the 1830s, showed his studio as packed with paintings from a diverse painting genres, but mainly portraits. Besides paintings on the wall, the studio is tastefully designed and furnished with displays of other artworks like porcelain and steatite-carved objects on stands, fans and literati painting. At the back of the room a tea boy appears from around the corner; the stairs to the master's sanctuary are clearly visible, and a colourful bird surveys the scene. The texts of the two couplets in Chinese characters on the right and left vertical blue signs read,

64 Dikötter 2006, 34.

65 Van Dyke 2013, 92-94.

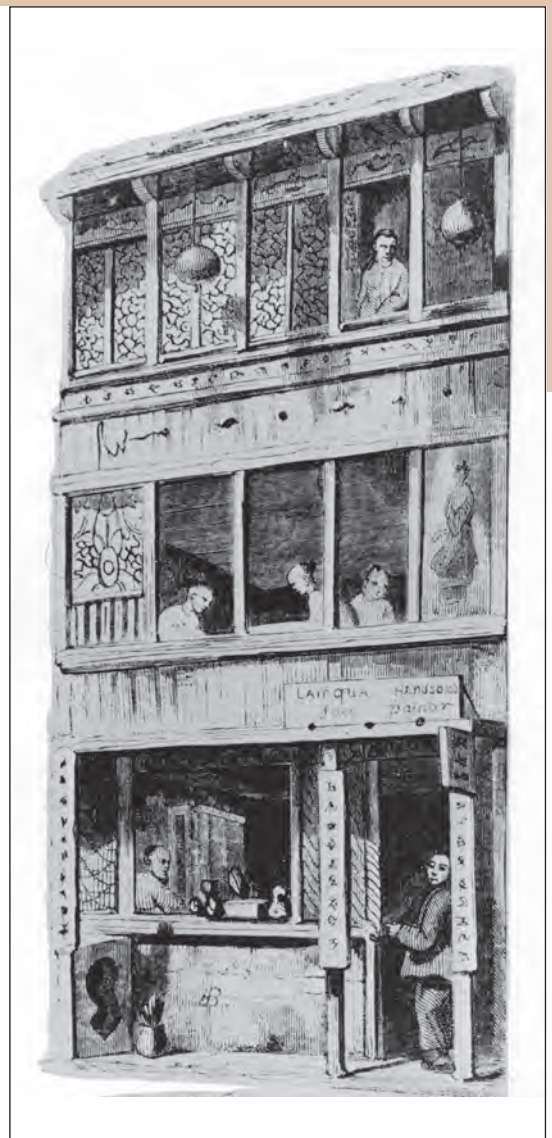
66 Garrett 2002, 90.

Fig. 3.2. Lamqua's painting studio 'handsome face-painter', engraving after Auguste Borget, 1845.

according to Guan Shu, on the right: 一帘花影云拖地 (*yì lián huā yǐng yún tuō dì*) and on the left: 半夜书声月在天 (*bàn yè shū shēng yuè zài tiān*), which means 'Study until midnight, the moon is still in the sky, but the sound of reading books can be heard.'<sup>67</sup> Additionally, the horizontal sign, from right to left, reads 靜觀自得 (*jìng guān zì dé*), saying 'Observe quietly/peacefully and be content'. Both the vertical couplets and horizontal board are related to education, so, according to Guan, they are often found in schools, and are designed to stimulate children to study hard. These texts are appropriate in this context, too, with apprentices to painting master Tingqua learning from this skilled employer. Furthermore, the balcony with flowering plants, benches and high open windows makes you feel you can be part of the scene. We can imagine customers meeting each other on the balcony while waiting for their painting to be finished. Tingqua applied a linear and a bird's eye perspective, with an elevated view of the studio from above, to show off his skills and to give the watercolour the right depth. Architectural aspects of the neighbouring houses are clearly visible through the open front windows. The view outside makes clear that we are not on the ground floor. Although Youqua executed his painting with diverse perspectives and no shade-working, it remains visually attractive with 'exotic' elements in sparkling colours. Most importantly, back home in Europe, it would portray more than words could express.

The studio of the renowned master painter Lamqua (act. 1820s-1855) could be found in Old China Street. Figure 3.2. shows the wooden façade of his shop-house, drawn by Auguste Borget during his stay in Canton in 1845, with sliding windows of finely carved fretwork. During the day, when the windows were often pulled back, as the drawing shows, visitors could see the bowed heads of the painters holding their brushes and pencils.

The detailed descriptions of the layout of his small studio, reveal that it comprised three storeys and had a shop displaying paintings ready for sale on the ground floor.<sup>68</sup> In all other Cantonese stores, which often only consisted of two storeys, Westerners were only granted access to the shop part on the ground floor, but this worked differently in the artists' studios. Via



Downing's records (1836-1837), we know that in the painter's studio "a stranger had access to any part where he may choose to wander, and different branches of the business are transacted on each of the floors."<sup>69</sup> Assumingly, this was also the case in Lamqua's day's about ten years later. William Heine (1827-1885), the official artist of Commodore Matthew C. Perry's expedition to Japan in 1853-54, wrote on one of his drawings of Old China Street and its inhabitants: "Mr Lainbque, handsome face-painter invites customers to be either portrayed in oil colors, after the fashion of the Fan-kwaes (foreign barbarians) or to purchase his Chinese paintings on rice paper, representing Chinese customs and manners; or birds, flowers, and

67 Email 7 June 2016. Guan Shu, teacher of Chinese language at Leiden University Academic Language Centre, has been very helpful with the translation of the texts on the blue signs on the side of Tingqua's studio.

68 Downing 1838; facsimile, 1972, 93-114. Borget 1845, 56-59. La Vollée 1852, 358-359.

69 Downing 1838, facsimile, 1972, 92.



butterflies, painted in most faithful and life-like style.”<sup>70</sup> The oil paintings hung on the wall and the watercolours on (pith) paper lay in piles in glass vitrines that were placed against the walls. Via a small staircase, a sort of ladder with wooden rungs, visitors could access the first floor. Here was the workshop, “where you see from eight to ten Chinese at work, with their sleeves turned up, and their long pigtails tied round their heads lest they should be in the way of their nice and delicate operations.”<sup>71</sup> Charles Hubert La Vollée, (1823-unkn.) another eyewitness from the time Lamqua was active in Canton (1820s-1855), wrote of his visit to Lamqua’s studio in 1853:

*Une vingtaine de jeunes gens sont là qui copient des dessins sur de grands rouleaux de papier blanc ou jaune, sur cette fine moelle que l’on s’obstine à appeler en Europe papier de riz, bien que le riz n’y soit pour rien. [...] Il aurait fallu passer toute une journée pour examiner en détail les tableaux, rouleaux, albums amoncelés dans la boutique de Lam-qua. C’est un immense commerce que celui des peintures.*<sup>72</sup>

The atelier dominus, the master’s atelier, where he received his clients, especially for the making of portraits, was located on the second floor. (Figure 3.3.) Paintings in all stages of progress often hung against the panelling and on the walls of this floor. Western visitors regularly came to take a look at the progress of their own portrait or that of others. In the West, great importance was attached to a portrait painted by a Chinese artist. “A portrait will have an additional value in the mother country, by having been painted by a Chinaman,” as Downing recorded in 1838.<sup>73</sup>

The talents of Chinese export painters from Canton were in demand. We know from the research undertaken by Werner Kraus that, as a

result, it was quite easy for them to find employment in other Chinese and Asian port cities in India, Indonesia and the Philippines.<sup>74</sup> They dominated the painting and print market in cities such as Hong Kong, Macao, Batavia, Manila and Surat. A number of descriptions are known that make clear that Chinese export artists had already exercised their painting skills in neighbouring Asian countries. At the end of the sixteenth century, Bishop Domingo de Salazar wrote to the Spanish king: “What arouses my wonder most is, when I arrived no Sanglely knew how to paint anything (that is, in the European fashion) but now they have so perfected themselves in the art that they have produced marvellous works with both the brush and chisel.”<sup>75</sup> In 1782, Josua van Jpern makes mention of a Chinese artist in Batavia named



Fig. 3.3. Lamqua in his studio, engraving after Auguste Borget, 1845.

70 Description of Old China street in Canton, in William Heine, *Graphic Scenes of the Japan Expedition*. Printed in colours and tints, with descriptive letterpress. New York: Sarony and Co., 1856. Heine was the official artist of Commodore Matthew C. Perry's expedition to Japan in 1853–54.

71 Downing, 1838; facsimile, 1972, 94.

72 La Vollée 1853, 360–362. Translation: Here were twenty youths copying drawings upon great rolls of white or yellow paper, or upon that fine pith we in Europe obstinately call rice paper although there is no rice in it. [...] It would take a day to review the pictures, the rolls of drawings and the albums heaped up in the shop of Lamqua. This picture business in China is immense.

73 Downing, 1838; facsimile, 1972, 114.

74 Kraus 2005.

75 Ibid., 66. Passage from a letter by Bishop Domingo de Salazar to the Spanish king at the end of the sixteenth century. The term ‘Sanglely’ was used by the Spanish in the Philippines until the nineteenth century to indicate a Chinese.



Hokki, who made drawings and watercolours for him.<sup>76</sup>

Another reminder of the presence of a Chinese export artist in Batavia, comes from Friedrich Baron von Wurmb: “We have a Chinese here, who has a very clever and steady hand for drawing and who is able to reproduce everything you place before his eyes with the utmost exactness, but notwithstanding all the trouble I took to teach him the right shading and colouring he is not able to reproduce these necessary qualities in his own paintings.”<sup>77</sup>

Furthermore, Caspar Schmalkalden, Sir Stamford Raffles, Marquis Wellesley and Edward Clive were seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Western patrons who either had Chinese artists in service, or commissioned them specifically to produce paintings, mainly of Indonesian flora and fauna.<sup>78</sup> In the Netherlands, we know of Jean Theodore Royer (1737-1807), an eighteenth-century collector, who was familiar with the expertise of the Chinese artists. From the 1770s, he ordered most of the paintings for his Chinese museum in The Hague from Canton. His extensive collection of almost 3000 objects, primarily from China and Japan, was bequeathed to the Dutch royal family at the end of 1914. His legacy was partially the reason for the establishment the Royal Cabinet of Rarities (See also Effert, Van Campen and Chapters 5 and 6).<sup>79</sup>

Several Western men in China, either merchants, draughtsmen, or missionaries, have written about their time in the Pearl River delta in the nineteenth century. These primary sources bear witness to the advance of the Chinese in the fine arts. One observation by the English missionary Walter Henry Medhurst (1796-1857) reads:

*We may observe that the graphical representations of the Chinese are not altogether despicable. It is true they lamentably fail in the*

*knowledge of perspective, and the differences of light and shade have not been much noticed by them, but their colours are vivid and striking, and in delineating flowers, animals, or the human countenance, they are sometimes very successful.*<sup>80</sup>

Another foreign merchant, Osmond Tiffany (1823-1895), who wrote about the quality of export paintings, recorded that “nothing can exceed the splendour of the colours employed in representing the trades, occupations, life, ceremonies, religions, etc. of the Chinese, which all appear in perfect truth in the productions.”<sup>81</sup> Their value, according to Tiffany, was not only in the appropriate colours, but also the in exact depiction of the figures and their price. Accordingly he wrote: “They cost, for the usual class of excellence, from one to two dollars a dozen; which is not high, when we consider their truth, the time spent upon them, and the variety of colours employed.”<sup>82</sup>

These nineteenth-century observations, on the one hand, give us the idea that those men, contrary to expectations, were surprised by the high quality and the truthfulness of the paintings. This considered truth, however, was a selective and subjective reality. It is known and a generally accepted idea that most paintings were idealised. On the other hand, the prevailing Western painting conventions predominate these observations, as these men appraise the performance of the paintings in terms of the lack of linear perspective and the assumed ignorance of the principles of light and shade in painting techniques. In my opinion, these aspects (varying perspectives and little to no light and shade-working) are applied purposefully and are what make Chinese export painting different and a fascinating art genre in its own right.

After the Opium Wars in 1842 and at the end of the 1850s, which resulted in the forced opening of several Chinese ports, according to

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76 Kraus 2005, 70. Josua van Jpern describes this in ‘Beschreibung eines weissen Negers von der Insel Bali’. This was the German edition of the first publication of the *Verhandeligen der Bataviaasch Genootschap van kunsten en wetenschappen*, Leipzig: Wengandsche-Buchhandlung, 1782, 352. Van Jpern worked as secretary to the Bataviaasch Genootschap van Kunsten en Wetenschappen (Batavian Society for Arts and Sciences).

77 Kraus 2005, 70. Friedrich von Wurmb describes this in ‘Briefe des herrn von Wurmb und des Herrn Baron von Wolzogen auf ihren Reisen nach Afrika und Ostindien in den Jahren 1774-1792’. Von Wurmb was responsible for the library of the Bataviaasch Genootschap van Kunsten en Wetenschappen.

78 Kraus 2005, 68-72.

79 Effert 2003, 2008. Van Campen 2000-a, -b, -c, 2002, 2010.

80 Medhurst 1840, 112-113. Read a more extensive summary of the compliments about the artistic expertise of the painters in Canton given by contemporary Western visitors in Mok 2005, 32-36.

81 Tiffany 1849, 84.

82 Ibid.

Kraus, the cycle of the China trade changed significantly, as did the corresponding clientele for export painting.<sup>83</sup> The emergence of photography in China and Hong Kong around the 1840s, immediately threatened the livelihood of a number of export painters. For those who were more innovative, the introduction of this new medium resulted in a rather promising business opportunity. They switched to running photography shops, where they expanded their painting practice by mixing techniques such as enlarging photographs and offering services like retouching negatives or photographic prints, tinting photographs, adding colour to the black-and-white (or sepia) images and painting on top of them to make portraits. Many painters advertised themselves as ‘artist and photographer’, ‘photographer and painter on canvas’, ‘photographer and portrait painter’, ‘photographer and ivory painter’, and so on.<sup>84</sup> It is known that the Cantonese export painters Lamqua and Sunqua (act. 1830-1865) already had studios based in Hong Kong in 1846.<sup>85</sup> In the rapidly increasing foreign trade in the British colony, a new kind of trade in export art was created, namely, the painting (copying) of daguerreotype images and the printing of a carte-de-visite, together with a photographic image of a Chinese painter.<sup>86</sup> This business caught the imagination of many and illustrations and photographs of painters performing this practice showed up in Western newspapers and weekly magazines. An engraving from a sketch by Charles Wirgman (1832-1891), an English artist and cartoonist and working as the ‘Special Artist in China’ for *The Illustrated London News*, shows the interior of a Chinese studio in Hong Kong, where, as we read in the accompanying text, “we have three brother artists at work.”<sup>87</sup> (Figure 3.4.) The caption reads further:

*The first is working at a miniature, from a daguerreotype, and beautifully he manages it.*

*The second is copying the same in oil. He holds his brush differently from a European, and rests his hand on a flat piece of wood. In his left hand he holds the daguerreotype which he is enlarging. The Chinese enlarge their pictures by squares, in the same manner as we do. The third is painting a view of Hong Kong for some merchant captain. Two ‘free and enlightened citizens’ are entering, with the intention of having their features handed down to posterity. Hong Kong is full of these painters. [...] Some of the native painters are extremely clever, and a few of them have engrafted European perspective upon Chinese minuteness and are consequently able to produce very creditable oil and watercolour pictures. Both their forte is copying miniatures from photographs: this they do to perfection, having been taught by Europeans. Some of their colours are well known and justly celebrated in Europe, perhaps none more so than the vermillion, though the most magnificent blue is made in great quantities.<sup>88</sup>*

Despite the affable ‘brother artists’ used by the editor of *The Illustrated London News*, the tendentious tone of voice of this article – Eurocentric, full of badinage and showing moral



Fig. 3.4. Chinese artists, Charles Wirgman, wood block print on paper, 28 x 40.5 cm, *The Illustrated London News*, 30 April 1859, 428, Hong Kong Museum of Art, inv.no. AH1980.0042.

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83 Kraus 2005, 73.

84 Gu 2013, 123.

85 Lee Sai Chong 2005, 242-246. In the years preceding the first Opium War, Lamqua and Sunqua managed large artists' studios in Canton. In his dissertation on this subject, Lee informs us extensively about them and the studios of other well-known Cantonese master painters, such as Tingqua, Fatqua, Tonqua, Puqua, Namcheong and Youqua.

86 Lee Sai Chong 2005, 243, 252-253. An example of this practice (a printed carte-de-visite with an image of a Chinese painter) was Pun-Lun, photographer and ivory painter, no. 56 Queen's Road, upstairs, opposite the Oriental Bank Hong Kong.

87 *The Illustrated London News*, April 30, 1859, 428. This newspaper is the first illustrated periodical in the world, which was printed for 161 years from 1842 to 2003. It is regarded as the finest pictorial example and historic social record of British and world events up to the early twenty first century. See: <http://www.iln.org.uk>.

88 *The Illustrated London News*, April 30, 1859, 428.

Fig. 3.5.a. Chinese artist copying a photograph for the export trade, anonymous, photo, 1860s.

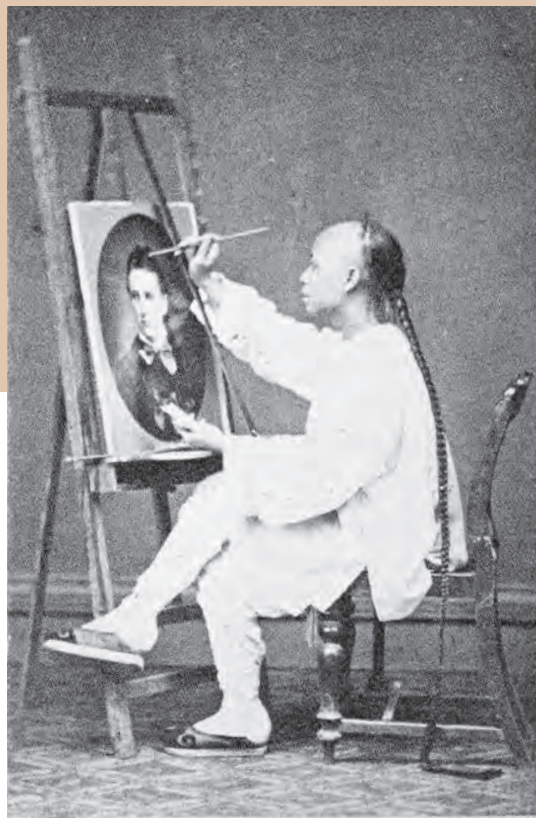


Fig. 3.5.b. A Hong Kong artist, John Thomson, photo, 1873.



and cultural superiority (“free and enlightened citizens”) – is noticeable.

Sea captains and naval officers no longer had to be there in person. They provided a daguerreotype and had full portraits of their loved ones or of themselves copied and enlarged in minute detail by Chinese painters. In his vivid description of a painters annex photo studio in the article ‘Hong-Kong photographers’ in the *British Journal of Photography*, pioneer and photographer, John Thomson (1837-1921) illustrates the fluid transition between these two art businesses:

*We are in a small room, the walls of which are hung with portraits, some in oil and of a large size, for the firm paints on canvas. [...] There are four or five artists at work in the light part of the room and verandah copying photographs, on a large scale, in oil. [...] There is an old man in this establishment. He is a miniature painter on ivory, whose work is held in high estimation for its delicacy, careful drawing, and beauty of coloring. His work is done chiefly from photographs. If the subject has to be enlarged he places over the photograph a piece of glass marked with small squares. Corresponding*

*squares of larger size are then penciled on the ivory and filled in from the photograph.*<sup>89</sup>

While the early daguerreotypes were mostly only available in monochrome colours, a Chinese studio artist could produce such a portrait on canvas or ivory, in any size wanted, in every colour of the rainbow with often stunning visual effects.

Other visual examples of this ‘copying practice’ by Chinese painters in the second half of the nineteenth century are given by photographers. (Figures 3.5.a. and 3.5.b.) Both examples are photographic portraits of a anonymous Chinese painter copying a photograph. The first one is tentatively dated in the 1860s, as Richard Vinograd argues in *Qing Encounters*, and the second is taken by the near-contemporary photographer Thomson, who, amongst other photographic accounts of his stay in Hong Kong in the early 1870s, captured ‘A Hong Kong artist’ in his studio.<sup>90</sup>

Both pictures stage a complex “contest of media, agencies, and cultures”.<sup>91</sup> Inspired by Vinograd’s view on the first photo, we can analyse the second one in the same way. The primary subject is a Chinese painter at work,

89 Thomson 1872, reprinted in Wue et al. 1997, 134.

90 Vinograd 2015, 20–21. Thomson 1873–4, vol. 1, plate IV; Thomson 1982, n.p.

91 Vinograd 2015, 20.



whose own subject is a Westerner or a Western family, whose portrait he holds in his hand while he paints an enlarged portrait in oils. We can assume that the Westerners commissioned the portrait in oil, but those responsible for this photographic portrait were the Western photographer and his potential viewers. The latter were the agents for this portrait and its 'ethnographic gaze', to which this Chinese painter is subjected. This 'gaze' is defined by artistic, historical and personal considerations. The first photo shows a European-style chair and easel, whereas both photos display a painter with the typical Chinese queue, which marks him as a subject of Manchurian rule. Furthermore, both present the Chinese manner of holding the brush, although applied to an upright rather than – in the Chinese way – a flat surface. The painter on both pictures is portrayed as a 'minor' copyist, probably subject to a semi-industrial (lesser) and mass reproductive labour practice. The idea that Western photographers and their implied viewers had a superior attitude towards such practices is inspired by the account of Thomson, which reads that these Chinese painters:

*drudge with imitative servile toil, copying Lamqua's or Chinnery's pieces, or anything, no matter what, just because it has to be finished and paid for within a given time, and at so much a square foot. [...] The occupation of these limners consists mainly in making enlarged copies of photographs. [...] These pictures would be fair works of art were the drawing good, and the brilliant colours properly arranged; but all the distortions of badly taken photographs are faithfully reproduced on an enlarged scale.*<sup>92</sup>

The pejorative notions in this account, together with the idea of an 'exotic' painter and the more familiar Western portrait subject who meets the viewer's gaze from the canvas with a kind of self-confidence and directness, formed the basis of the 'gaze' of many Western men at that time. Nevertheless, the Western sitter(s) is/are subject to the artistry of the Chinese painter as the agent of his/their image production. The Chinese painter's 'gaze', split between the photograph he

holds in his hand and the oil painting he makes, is something we can only speculate about. He could demonstrate his artistic skill in the medium of oil painting – one that is coded as superior to and more prestigious than photography, as Vinograd so strikingly analyses, because of "the very act of transfer that the photographer witnesses."<sup>93</sup> The implication of this act, then, is that the Western photographer could identify himself as a 'minor' "mechanical copyist of appearances."<sup>94</sup> This analysis of Vinograd links to my overarching argument that Chinese export paintings produced as commodities for Western commissioners can be conceived of as artworks, with intelligent and artistic efforts by the Chinese painters to ensure that the large oil paintings resemble the tiny photographs as much as possible. This is no small achievement and something that can only be done by real artists.

In the late nineteenth century, the famous painting practice in the coastal South Chinese port cities continued to hold a fascination for the people back in the West. *The Graphic*, another British illustrated newspaper, published a series of articles entitled 'Life in China'.<sup>95</sup> In the 11 January 1873 edition, in Part VII of this series, the newspaper showed an engraving of a Chinese portrait painter by the English artist William Bromley (1769-1842). (Figure 3.6.) While the text accompanying the illustration 'A Chinese artist' teaches *The Graphic* readers how to find the best Chinese artists in Canton and Hong Kong, informs them about the borrowing

Fig. 3.6. Chinese portrait painter, W. Bromley (painting), M. Harri (engraving), *The Graphic*, 11 January 1873, 35.



92 Thomson 1982, n.p.

93 Vinograd 2015, 21.

94 Ibid.

95 *The Graphic* was firstly published on 4 December 1869 and ran until 1932. This weekly covered home news and news from around the British empire, and devoted paid attention to literature, arts, sciences, the fashionable world, sport, music and opera. Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Graphic](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Graphic).

of European painting technics from the Jesuit missionaries, and says something about the imitation and the practice of “producing hideous copies of photographs in oil” in these cities, it also tells that:

*[T]here are still one or two artists who execute portraits from life, as in the case of the artist in our sketch, who, adhering to the conventional ideas of Chinese propriety in art, is careful to arrange every fold of his sister's dress with geometrical precision, and to avoid as much as*



Fig. 3.7.a. The urban professions of painting portraits and photographing. Tuhau ribao (Illustrated Daily News), ca. 1909–1910.

*possible shading in the face, as were he to introduce the shading deemed necessary by our prejudiced minds to give modelling and body to the figure, the work would, in all probability, be thrown on his hands as a failure, seeing that the Chinese cannot understand why one side of a face or feature should be darker than the other.*<sup>96</sup>

Again, this text shows a quite arrogant attitude of the British writer towards the Chinese painter (“the work would, in all probability, be thrown on his hands as a failure, when he painted shade-work”), who exhibits his sophisticated skills by producing a magnificently large and detailed oil painting. In addition, this subjective notion highlights the leading position, if not hegemony,

of European painting customs at that time.

As Oliver Moore writes in the *IIAS Newsletter*, in the late Qing, “the new medium of photography was addressed with highly traditional concepts borrowed from the manugraphic (hand-drawn) skills of painting. Indeed, the popularisation of photography was in part due to a highly durable conception that photographers did only what painters had done and continued to do, both naming their art *xiězhēn*.”<sup>97</sup> By using this term (*xiězhēn*) both photographer and painter considered their work as an accurate rendition of the depicted scene and/or as a painted portrait. It has been widely admitted that the early Chinese photographers had their background in (export) painting. Figure 3.7a. shows a visual from the Tuhau ribao (Pictorial Daily) depicting painting and photography side by side to accentuate the overlap between these two practices.<sup>98</sup> In the calligraphy, the last two characters on the right side read 写真, *xiě zhēn*.

Another example of the close connection between both artistic businesses in the last quarter of nineteenth-century China and Hong Kong, is the picture, taken by an anonymous photographer. (Figure 3.7.b.) It regularly happened that these kinds of photographs of a lady, with her bound ‘lily’ feet clearly visible, was enlarged and rendered into oil on canvas. Sometimes, a photographer-cum-painter ‘re-used’ his photowork for his other (painting) business and, inspired by the female sitters and the lucrative business that these kinds of paintings promised, put up his artwork up for sale to either Chinese or European customers. (See Figure 3.5.b.)

In the twenty-first century, there are still artists’ studios and workshops where mass production meets the Western demand for paintings from China. The mass production of copied oil paintings in Dafen, near the South-Chinese village of Shenzhen, is the most famous location for this kind of work.<sup>99</sup> Paintings in all sorts of sizes, figurative or abstract, are made to order and shipped to the West via major trading houses. Here, again, Western taste is central. Chinese painters turn out perfect copies of Western masterpieces; production amounts to millions of paintings per year. The success of the contemporary Chinese art in the global art market means Dafen painters also produce

<sup>96</sup> *The Graphic*, 11 January 1873, 35. See: <http://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk>.

<sup>97</sup> Moore 2007, 6.

<sup>98</sup> *Tuhau Ribao*, no. 134, 1909, 8; Gu 2013, 126; Moore 2007, 6.

<sup>99</sup> [www.dafenpainting.com](http://www.dafenpainting.com). Wong 2010, 2011 and 2013.

copies of works by Zhang Xiaogang, Yue Minjung, and Fang Lijun, or other Chinese master painters. In *Van Gogh on Demand*, about Dafen painting village, Winnie Won Yin Wong disentangles the interconnections between the worlds of traditional practice (that this present research refers to), contemporary Chinese art, mass production, and copying and art circulation in the global marketplace.<sup>100</sup> In her work about the practice of Dafen painters, who, as they did two centuries earlier, work mainly in a production line and largely disregard their self-creativity, Wong establishes a ‘beginning’ in terms of treating all kinds of issues of culture and art production in the late eighteenth century, in order “to draw out the most obvious – and Eurocentric – explanation for Dafen village’s existence.”<sup>101</sup>

Like Wong, I am convinced that this modern, large-scale export oil painting business grew out of the intensive historical China trade that, ever since that period, has linked the demand from Western consumers for paintings to the work of skilled Chinese painters. In addition to this opinion and at the same time deviating from the twenty-first century phenomenon, *Made for Trade* focuses on the virtually unknown eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Dutch collections with their Chinese subject matter, instead of the present-day production of artistic ‘copies’ of globally famous (Western and Chinese) masterpieces. The paintings from former days represent other functions and connected use values than the Dafen paintings of today. Here, I recall the trajectories and the varied contexts of the afterlife of the historical Chinese export paintings with their representational and social function, in which, meaning/value construction is an ongoing movement. Although the modern Dafen paintings certainly have artistic value, their economic value is another important element of this global business. We must wait for another era to discover whether these modern artworks have commodity/export value and historical value as the paintings studied for *Made for Trade* do, and whether they, because of their use value, must be saved and kept for future audiences.

### The export painting market

A cultural biography of this painting genre cannot be written without mention of the Chinese export art market itself. For Western seamen and other visitors from around the world, this ‘market’ with its lively studios, craftsmen and artists, was a highly attractive and fascinating place. Indeed, a large part of a painting’s meaning emits from its specific production arena with its omnifarious connotations for each individual buyer. In addition, we can say that this Chinese art market, with its quite open and visible economic transactions, ensured that the sphere of creation of these commodities was effectively visible to Western customers. Moreover, in contrast to so-called ‘tribal art’ gathered in former colonial collecting expeditions, current owners of Chinese export paintings do not have to worry about the moral and legal titles of a proportion of extant museum collections, or the question of who may be trusted with interpreting and presenting them. In this respect, Chinese export painting is free of controversy.

Just as in the marketplace (the forerunner of shopping malls and commercial plazas) hardly any buyer of Chinese export painting in the nineteenth century could know who really painted his painting, no painter could know who his work was ultimately intended for. This is also true for the contemporary painting practice in Dafen, so vividly described by Wong:

*without this knowledge, far-flung distribution and flexible production could fulfill for both producer and consumer the most Romantic of desires, enabling the painter to labor away with the conception that he is an independent artist, while allowing the buyer to trust that the painting he has bought may well be the work of an independent artist.*<sup>102</sup>

This conjunction at the two ends of the trajectory of a Chinese export painting as a commodity, rendered it quite possible for this painting genre to be produced and consumed as art with its accompanying aura, individuality, uniqueness and demand for creative authorship.<sup>103</sup>

Throughout the seventeenth century, the Dutch dominated trade between Europe and China. Conversely, the English dominated



Fig. 3.7.b. Portrait of a Chinese lady with bound feet and fan, anonymous, albumen print, ca. 1860, 21 x 17 cm.

100 Wong 2013.

101 Ibid., 37.

102 Ibid., 28.

103 Ibid., 29.



Chinese trade in the second half of the eighteenth century, while the Americans were the biggest commercial players in the nineteenth-century China trade, comprised principally of tea, silk and porcelain. Witness notes by contemporaries suggest that this trade was invariably accompanied by the purchase of Chinese export paintings. Large numbers of paintings were taken back to the West after their sea voyages. The numbers were so great that the imperial customs officials felt it necessary to allocate paintings of this sort a serial number of their own on export documents.<sup>104</sup> According to Clark, Chinese export paintings can be considered, in particular, as media in the visual trade culture in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: “These paintings are ‘just’ commercial paintings, produced by commercial artists.”<sup>105</sup> It is possible to think like this, but I would like to emphasise that Clark’s statement does not imply that these paintings are less valuable.

In terms of export duties, oil paintings were taxed individually and the watercolours and gouaches on (pith) paper per bundle of one hundred. Although by the end of the eighteenth century export paintings could be commissioned to order or bought in Canton, Kaufmann argues that it is “difficult to ascribe to the Dutch a

prime role in either the consumption or production of them and other kinds of export art.”<sup>106</sup> In the informative *Étude pratique du commerce d’exportation de la Chine*, written by four representatives of the French trade mission in China in the years 1845-1846, a number of pages are devoted to the various sorts of export paintings and the prices applicable at that time for the export of watercolours and gouaches on paper and on pith paper, oil paintings on canvas and reverse glass paintings to Europe and America.<sup>107</sup> It is known that all artists asked roughly the same prices, which were regulated according to the dimensions of the canvas or the paper and the number of sheets.<sup>108</sup>

Does the flourishing Chinese export market reveal anything about the local Dutch and international art markets in the nineteenth century? It certainly contrasts with the seventeenth century, when paintings travelled in a reverse direction from Holland to the East and to the West. At that time, ships full of oil paintings left Amsterdam for markets within and outside Europe.<sup>109</sup> However, no one uses the term ‘Dutch export painting’ for these artworks, or even those made especially for the market both at home and abroad. Is Chinese export painting (hardly intended for the local market)

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104 Williams 1856, 134-135. Article number 39 in the table of tax tariffs for Chinese export articles. Oil paintings per piece, watercolours per hundred pieces: ‘Chinese Duties: 0.10; Duties in Spanish currency: 0.14; Exchange of Duties in sycee: 0.15 1/2; Duties per cwt. of lb. in English currency: 0.06; Duties per 100 kilograms: 0.76’. These amounts conform to the tariff applicable in 1843. Cuadrado 1983, 125.

105 Personal communication, John Clark, 11 September 2007.

106 Kaufmann 2014, 219. Van Campen 2005, 18-41. Many of the produced Chinese export art goods found Dutch clients, but they were not made exclusively for Dutch clients.

107 Rondot 1849, 175-178. Oil paintings were available to buy in various price classes. Depending on the size and the kind of frame and whether the master painter himself or one of his pupils had made the painting, the prices in the 1840s ranged from five piastres (meagerly executed with a frame of yellowish wood) to ten (students of Youqua and Tingqua) and thirty (small Lamqua portraits) piastres. Foreigners had to pay two piasters and 75 cents to three piasters for a silk brocade covered album with twelve sheets of watercolours on pith paper. The same album with figures painted more elaborately cost four piastres; the albums with professions and street scenes, high dignitaries and mandarins in colourful costumes and executed in very fine details were sold for seven piastres per album. From remaining inventories of ships’ cargoes (Amiot & Cibot (1786, 365-366, quoted in Van Dongen 2001 (e-pub)) we know that in Canton, circa 1785, the average price for reverse glass paintings varied between eight and twelve dollars. ‘Dollars’ here refers to the Spanish-Mexican silver coinage from the period around 1800. At that time, these coins were the most important medium of payment in trade with the Chinese. According to the *Étude pratique du commerce d’exportation de la Chine*, in the 1840s these paintings, depending on their format, cost between one and five piastres per piece. A piastre is a unit of currency. At that time, one piastre equalled 5.48 French francs. The calculation of purchases and expenses also employed other monetary units from East and South-East Asia, such as the catty and the tael. A catty was a measure of weight used in connection with precious metals. It corresponds to circa 625 grams of silver. Each catty represented a value of sixteen taels. Every 1000 piastres were equivalent to 720 taels. In the historical China trade period, a tael was worth approximately 1.35 dollars.

108 Thomson 1873, vol. 1., 1982, n.p.

109 See the research project at the Amsterdam Centre for the Study of the Golden Age of the University of Amsterdam: *Artistic and economic competition in the Amsterdam art market c. 1630-1690: History painting in Amsterdam in Rembrandt’s time* (Sluiter 2009; Bok 2008).

comparable as a phenomenon with this earlier transnational movement? In attempting to answer this question, I have noticed that it is not so much a question of distinguishing or comparing two different painting conventions and styles, but rather it is a question of a unique phenomenon that, despite existing geographical borders, was created from existing trade and which seeped seamlessly through these boundaries. Chinese export painting reveals not only “the traces of the global in the local,” but, in fact, this phenomenon can be regarded as a material concept of the historical China trade, created *within* this global trade frame. This genre must be studied as a phenomenon in itself, with a clearly distinguishable specific use value and a specific function. These two transnational movements can only partially be compared. ‘Dutch export paintings’ were vaunted in their own country, in contrast to the Chinese paintings made for export. In the Netherlands at that time, paintings were not produced with the sole intention to export the product to distant places. Nor was the point that the taste of the ‘foreigner’ should be central to the manufacture. This contrasts with Chinese export painting practice, in which the Western clientele had a huge role in determining a number of aspects relating to production. The economic principle, however, and the idea of painting purely for the market place were on equal footing: the faster the production, the more could be sold. This meant more money in the coffers and the more successful the business. Presumably, financial profit was not the sole motive for the painters. Attaining fame and, in pursuit of this, artistic rivalry, must also have played an important role.

Turning back to the Chinese export painting market at the time of the historical China trade, it is known that in this very efficient market system of global dimensions, the sale of paintings and watercolours took place from the artists’ studios and were also displayed and sometimes sold in the homes of members of the *Cohong*. This umbrella organisation for Chinese merchants had operated as a type of guild since 1720.<sup>110</sup> A *hong* merchant was authorised to deal exclusively with foreigners from Europe and America, and from the ports of Asia, or with those foreigners who came from ‘beyond seas’ to

the port of Canton. The proper appellation was *yang hang shang*; that is: sea or ocean wholesale merchant. The members of the *Cohong* controlled all foreign trade in Canton after 1782.<sup>111</sup> In addition to making agreements on price, as John K. Fairbank’s research teaches us, “they guaranteed duties, negotiated with and restrained the foreigners, controlled smuggling [...], they also managed all the aspects of banking, acted as interpreting agencies, supported militia and educational institutions, and made all manners of presents and contributions to the authorities far and near.”<sup>112</sup> The Western captain-merchants often came to visit their Chinese counterparts and this was also an easy way to engage in private trade, outside of the official company accounts. Export paintings were mainly purchased as souvenirs and gifts and fulfilled an important role in the interiors of the owner’s homes. Although this mechanism was not so applicable to the (small) Dutch market, many of the acquired paintings, once they reached the West, were sold for considerable profit at auctions.<sup>113</sup> Just like their Western colleagues, Chinese *hong* merchants commissioned many portraits. This resulted in a different target group for the export painters. Portraits by Mouqua, Houqua, Chi Ying, Eshing and others, have since spread all over the world and, although not in the Netherlands, ended up in (museum)collections.

Generally in a transnational chain of supply and demand, it is an art dealer, the middleman, who provides the linkages between sellers and buyers at critical points along the trajectory of cross-cultural exchanges. They move, as Steiner puts it, “objects across the institutional obstacles which, in some cases, they themselves have constructed in order to restrict direct exchange.”<sup>114</sup> The nineteenth-century Chinese export painting market worked slightly differently than, for example, the contemporary art market in Côte d'Ivoire, where, so Steiner states, “supplies of art objects from villages are tapped by professional African traders who travel through rural communities in search of whatever they believe can be resold.”<sup>115</sup> With regard to the Chinese transcultural market, the producers were artists, designers, painters and sellers alike. They primarily sold their paintings

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<sup>110</sup> Garrett 2002, 89. For more information about the *Cohong* and its merchants see Van Dyke 2007, 2011.

<sup>111</sup> Wei 2011, 5.

<sup>112</sup> Fairbank 1953, 51.

<sup>113</sup> Wei 2011, 5.

<sup>114</sup> Steiner 1994, 131.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

directly to foreign consumers. In such cases, the shop assistant and the hong merchants could be considered as middlemen. It is known that during visits to the homes of Chinese *hong* merchants, who maintained cordial working relations with their foreign colleagues, Chinese export paintings were bought by these Western traders. In this sense, they functioned simultaneously as middlemen, private businessmen and as pioneers in cultural and economic exchange between China and the West. We can confidently say that this transcultural export painting market functioned *because of*, and not *in spite of* the Chinese painting shopkeepers. Besides their colourful painting practice, they also tried to sell the works and make money. Hardly any middlemen, in the sense of marketeers promoting the paintings, were needed for the art trade transactions. After Hong Kong opened up after the first Opium War in 1843, many painters moved their business or opened a second painting shop. Once photography had made its appearance in the second half of the nineteenth century, there was talk of ‘touters’. According to an observation by Thomson, the British photographer who was in Hong Kong in 1873, these often young boys were tasked with “scouring the shipping in the harbour and at the quay, with samples of, for example, enlarged painted copies of photographs, in order to find ready customers among the foreign sailors.”<sup>116</sup> Since the South-Chinese port cities had similar export painting businesses with similar clients and painters even had studios in more than one city, we can assume that the same practice was also happening in Canton.

Once the products moved outwards into the world of Western art markets art dealers re-emerge as important middlemen along the trajectory of the paintings. To understand how they found their way onto Dutch soil, this section briefly outlines the nineteenth-century Dutch art market for Chinese export paintings. The precise numbers of Chinese export paintings that entered the Netherlands awaits further research. Today, an inventory of Dutch collections reveals about 150 oil paintings (on glass and on canvas) and thousands of

watercolours and gouaches, the vast majority of which form the so-called Royer Collection (more about this later).<sup>117</sup>

Undoubtedly, more research can be done of ships’ lists, family archives and inventories of possessions with regard to who exactly the VOC and its successors, such as the *Nederlandsche Handels-Maatschappij* (The Netherlands Trading Society), transported Chinese export paintings for. It is clear that this transport was usually commissioned unofficially, otherwise it would be listed in the relevant archivalia; this is not the case.<sup>118</sup> Private merchants were frequently in charge of the purchase of export art from China (via the Dutch East Indies). The illegal and private trade or even smuggling obscures a clear view of the official trading goods, which were not specified in the ships’ commodities lists. Hence, it is a daunting task to map the commercial aspect of the nineteenth-century Dutch Chinese export painting market. In the Introduction to this dissertation I argued, therefore, that there was no thriving domestic trade in Chinese export paintings and that they were mainly collectibles for private use, in the Netherlands at that time.

The reference work, *The Provenance Index* of the Getty Information Institute by Fredericksen (ed.), which contains the corpus of paintings sold in the Netherlands during the first decade of the nineteenth century, reports that the Dutch market differed from those in Paris or London:

*in that it consisted almost exclusively of pieces produced within its own borders, whereas the British market, and to a lesser degree the French, was largely composed of works produced in other countries. This was partially owing to topography, since the Low Countries were less centrally placed than London or Paris for pan-European trade, but is also resulted from the enormous volume of pictures produced in the Netherlands, coupled with a very limited taste among the Dutch for the art of other countries.*<sup>119</sup>

Chinese export paintings were obviously not readily available at the major Dutch auctions houses in this period (the first decade of the nineteenth century).

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<sup>116</sup> Thomson 1873, vol. I. 1982, n.p.

<sup>117</sup> Van Campen 2000, 2002, 2005 and 2010.

<sup>118</sup> Communication Christiaan Jörg (2008). Field research in mentioned primary sources in the National Archive, The Hague Royal Library and the National Maritime Museum yielded little useful information in this regard. Literature research and reports from the five Dutch NTS expeditions to Canton in the years 1825–1830 also did not provide information about Dutch commissions for the production of Chinese export paintings.

<sup>119</sup> Fredericksen 1998, ix–x.

There are a number of other causes of the lack of transparency in relation to the economic aspects of the Chinese export painting market. Firstly, transactions were frequently negotiated verbally, rather than being recorded in writing. Secondly, just like the art trade everywhere else in the world, there were trade secrets, which resulted in a broad spectrum of transactions remaining shadowy. The sellers – at that time, the painters – like the art dealers today and the buyers over time did and do not speak readily of their commercial success or disclose the sources of their paintings or their network of clients. A third reason for the lack of transparency is the fact that when the ‘value’ of this art genre is addressed, it is frequently in relation to the artistic, historic and emotional value, rather than monetary value.

It is certainly not the case that most Chinese export paintings that came to the Netherlands initially ended up in museums. More often, they became part of private interiors, or entered the circuits of collectors and dealers. Until today they have been moving across national borders, up and down the social ladder. From the homes of China traders, missionaries, planters and officials in Indonesia, they followed the same routes, as Raymond Corbey writes in his work on tribal art traffic, “through flea markets, local auctions, and antique shops, and wound up in the networks of specialized dealers, at least if they did not get dumped with the rubbish when their owners passed away.”<sup>120</sup> At the beginning of the 1960s, the decolonisation of Indonesia brought with it a stream of people and objects to

the Netherlands. Returning with their families and their possessions, these people (sometimes ex-colonials from the East-Indies) donated or sold a great deal of their possessions and Chinese export paintings as part of the furniture. Furthermore, there was a movement in the Netherlands in the 1960s and 1970s against having lived ‘in the East,’ which had colonial connotations. Consequently, in these years much of this sort of artwork on the Dutch market came via auction houses and/or via donations to museums.<sup>121</sup>

### Techniques and methods

Although it is exceedingly difficult to trace the exact avenues through which the Western-style painting conventions were transmitted to and appropriated by Cantonese painters, it is known that these techniques (oil painting, linear perspective drawing, shade-working) were often passed on by the painters ‘on the spot’.<sup>122</sup> As the trades in Chinese export goods, as historian Joseph Ting states, were usually family run, it was common practice for Chinese artists to carry on their family trade or skill for generations.<sup>123</sup> With this (local) knowledge, the painting workshops embarked on mass production of ‘local subjects’ in both Chinese and European style for a predominantly foreign audience.<sup>124</sup> In *Ten Thousands Things*, Lothar Ledderose explains that production in modules is well-known in Chinese society. The use of this system exists in language, literature, architecture, philosophy and social organisations as well as in the visual arts.<sup>125</sup> Also among literati painters

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<sup>120</sup> Corbey 2000, 45.

<sup>121</sup> Personal conversation with Mrs Reinders Folmer, November 2014. This also can be seen in annual records of Dutch ethnological and maritime museums. In this period, many people (though not the parents of Mrs Reinders Folmer) were embarrassed about the fact that they had lived in Indonesia. At the time, there was a huge counterflow: ‘we don’t want anything to do with this’. By contrast, it was fashionable to, for example, support Cuba.

<sup>122</sup> Clunas 1997, 197–199. Fa-ti Fan 2004, 47–49.

<sup>123</sup> Ting 1982, 9. Guangzhou-born Joseph Ting studied Chinese literature and history at the Hong Kong University. He joined the Hong Kong Museum of Art as an Assistant Curator in 1979 and was appointed Chief Curator of the Hong Kong Museum of History in 1995. He retired in 2007 after serving for 28 years, during which he was instrumental in the planning and implementation of the new Hong Kong Museum of History, the Hong Kong Museum of Coastal Defence and the Dr Sun Yat-sen Museum.

<sup>124</sup> Appadurai 1996, 178–199. In his chapter 9, Appadurai addresses “related questions that have arisen in an ongoing series of writings about global cultural flows.” In this dissertation, the terms ‘local knowledge’ and ‘local subjects’ do not mean the production of locality in the context of the recognition of local indigenous representations by groups of people of the same cultural background who live in a deterritorialized world, diasporic, and transnational. Rather, it refers to the specific technical processes and their tangible results.

<sup>125</sup> Ledderose 2000, 2. Lothar Ledderose holds the chair of East Asian Art at Heidelberg University. He is an internationally renowned scholar of Chinese art and calligraphy. In his A.W. Mellon Lectures (1998), published in *Ten Thousand Things*, he investigated module systems in the production of, amongst other art forms, Chinese painting.



this system was everyday practice.<sup>126</sup> Copying the work of selected old masters was a good and illustrious way of learning to paint. Already, in the fifth century AD, the Chinese figure painter and critic Xie He (also known as Hsieh Ho), formulated six principles of Chinese painting. Number six reads ‘Transmission by copying’ or “the copying of models, not only from life but also the works of antiquity.”<sup>127</sup> For Chinese painters, the process of ‘transmitting’ was often experienced as a personal action at various levels. For that reason, as stated in the introductory text to the in 2008 organised exhibition *The tradition of re-presenting art: originality and reproduction in Chinese painting and calligraphy*, “some artists are very faithful in their imitation, while others add their own interpretation or that of others.”<sup>128</sup> Although this exhibition at the National Palace Museum displayed showpieces of early Chinese master painters and their followers, this explanation fits very well with the working methods of Chinese export artists. The high demand for export paintings was largely responsible for the standardisation and the copying of scenes. Whether it was with oil paint or watercolour, or whether it was on canvas, wood, paper or glass, the Chinese export painters used templates, grids and pattern books and divided the labour in order to meet the massive demand. This immense demand for paintings and images may have led to the employment of ‘substitute brushes’ (assistants) at the studios of, amongst others, the famous painters for Western customers like Puqua, Lamqua, Sunqua, Tingqua, and Youqua, who could reproduce the master’s style of brushwork for less discerning customers.<sup>129</sup>

In China, as Ledderose recalls, no great contradiction was or is seen between an original artwork and a newly made reproduction, in the way that Westerners see this. It is likely, because of their familiarity with module-production in

other societal domains, that Cantonese painters, who worked as part of a mass production line, regarded this as a normal way of working. For them, the art was in the shortening and the accelerating of the production process. The division of labour meant that painting, but also casting bronzes, making porcelain and lacquerware, weaving silks, building temples and pagoda’s and writing poems, had little to do with the Western concept of creativity. Rather, the creative aspect was about high levels of production and in thinking about how to increase the speed, so that the production process could be shortened.<sup>130</sup> After all, in the Pearl River delta the paintings had to be produced during the trading season. In addition to meeting this challenge, we can assume that the artistic input of the individual painter was to make a reproduction that accurately reflected the commissioned image(s). Ting, for example, emphasises that the artistic value primarily depended on the complexity and accuracy of the scene and the high quality of painterly execution. Painting had become a purely human mechanical act.<sup>131</sup> How this method of dividing up the work for a painting happened is recorded by Lavollée, a member of the French trade mission in China between 1843 and 1846, after his visit in 1844 to Lamqua’s studio in Old China Street:

*La peinture, en Chine, n’est pas un art, c’est une véritable industrie dans laquelle la division du travail est parfaitement entendue. Le même peintre sera toute sa vie des arbres, tel autre des figures, celui-ci les pieds et les mains; celui-là les costumes. Chacun acquiert ainsi, dans son genre, une certaine perfection, surtout pour la rectitude du trait et le fini des détails; mais nul ne serait capable d’entreprendre un tableau d’ensemble.*<sup>132</sup>

This quote, which demonstrates the old-fashioned Western trope, is an example of the

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<sup>126</sup> Ledderose 2000, 206. Cheng Zhengkui (1604-1676) painted some 300 landscape scroll paintings, all with the same title, *Dream Journey among Streams and Mountains (Jaingshan woyutu)*. The popular *Painting Manual of the Mustard Seed Garden (jieziyuan huazhuan)* is also a good example of this.

<sup>127</sup> <http://arts.cultural-china.com/en/62Arts13915.html>.

<sup>128</sup> [http://www.npm.gov.tw/exh96/re-presenting/intro\\_en.html](http://www.npm.gov.tw/exh96/re-presenting/intro_en.html). This exhibition in Taipeh was to be viewed from 1 January to 25 March 2008.

<sup>129</sup> Clunas 1997, 94.

<sup>130</sup> Ledderose 2000, 7.

<sup>131</sup> Ting 1982, 11.

<sup>132</sup> Lavollée 1853, 361. Translation: Painting in China is not an art, it is an industry in which the division of labour is commonplace. One artist makes trees all his life, another figures; this one draws feet and hands; that one costumes. Thus, each acquired a certain perfection, particularly in the straightness of the line and the finish of details, but none of them is capable of undertaking an entire painting.



Fig. 3.8. High dignitaries, watercolour on pith paper

a. From album with 12 images, anonymous, 19th century, 21 x 29 cm, The Hague Royal Academy of Fine Arts, inv.no. Z 53 (3).

b. From albums with 10 images, Youqua, 1850–1860, 33 x 25.5 cm, Wereldmuseum Rotterdam, inv.no. 191679.

c. From album with 11 images, anonymous, 19th century, 22.5 x 32 cm, The Hague Royal Academy of Fine Arts, inv.no. Z 53 (2).

d. From set of 16, anonymous, Youqua (?), 1840–1870, 20 x 12.5 cm, Museum Volkenkunde/ Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, inv.no. RV-360-7515n.

e. From album with 12 images, anonymous, watercolour on pith paper, 1851–1856,

27 x 18.5 cm, SAB-City Archives and Athenaeum Library Deventer, inv.no. DvT V.2.11.KL.

f. From set of 12, anonymous, 19th century, 12.5 x 9 cm, Museum Volkenkunde/ Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, inv.no. RV-1299-8g.

tenacious and the long-held idea in the Western world of the Chinese export painting production process. Reproductions have a negative connotation in the West. The vision of Walter Benjamin on printing techniques in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936) has previously been indicative and influential. According to him, an artwork loses its aura when it is reproduced using technical means. Using templates and setting up compositional lines before painting to shorten the production process was only one thing. Painters could show their skills through many more practices. The option to use different size

brushes, the choice of colour application, the question of adding accessories and compositional elements or not, or to establish a master-tutor relationship to train entrants in the field, are some of the other factors that transmitted their artistic originality and creativity.

Several authors emphasise that, exceptionally, early botanical watercolours as well as the less stereotypical export landscapes were often painted by one artist. Historical contemporary observations would have us believe that, generally, every artist working on a complete composition could choose elements from a collection of printed outlines: a boat, a person,





Fig. 3.9. Mandarins seated, watercolour on pith paper

a. From album with 11 images, anonymous, 19th century, 22.5 x 32 cm, The Hague Royal Academy of Fine Arts, inv.no. Z 53 (2).

b. From set of 12, anonymous, 1830–1865, 29 x 20 cm, Museum Volkenkunde/ Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, inv.no. RV-2133–6c.

c. From album with 12 images, anonymous, 1851–1856, 27 x 18.5 cm, SAB–City Archives and Athenaeum Library Deventer,

inv.no. DvT V.2.1.KL.

d. From album with 12 images, Youqua's studio), 1850–1860, 33 x 25.5 cm, Wereldmuseum Rotterdam, inv.no. 19166.2.

e. From set of 22, anonymous, Youqua (?), 1840–1870, 20 x 12.5 cm, Museum Volkenkunde/ Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, inv.no. RV-360–7517.

f. From album with 12 images, anonymous, 19th century, 22.5 x 32 cm, The Hague Royal Academy of Fine Arts, inv.no. Z 53 (3).

a bird, or something else that he liked.<sup>133</sup> Sometimes, even the process of woodblock printing was used as the first step of a painting, before the colour was applied.<sup>134</sup> This explains how the subjects depicted could be repeated so frequently by the same painter, without variation. Any number of techniques that suited their needs were used for this purpose: copying, tracing, employing ready-made sketches of trees, houses, people, boats, or animals assembled in different ways to produce a different scene.<sup>135</sup> Furthermore, the popular (limited) topics, which were painted time and again without using templates, indicate that the various compositions are clearly part of the painter's tacit knowledge. This kind of knowledge, based on his observations, experiences, insights and intuition, is internalised in a painter's whole being. In other words, tacit knowledge forms the basis for his individual insights, choices and steps in what

and how he paints (his explicit knowledge). He could count on it all the time, even when he is not aware of it.

That said, in certain watercolour painting studios the work was organised differently, as Figures 3.8. to 3.13 show. These watercolours from different albums and sets are expedient examples showing the individual traits of each image and the painter's own input in the end result. Although the type of figures, boats, flowers and ducks are comparable in terms of their Chinese subject matter and show constant elements, the execution, done by individual artists, varies greatly in all kinds of details. Constant elements in the Figures 3.8.a. to 3.8.f. depicting a lower rank Mandarin are the headgear with the button, the shoulder cap and his blueish gown. It is clearly visible that each painter executed this figure in his own style. In the Figures 3.9.a. to 3.9.f. the constants are the

<sup>133</sup> I did not come across any female Chinese export painters in the consulted sources.

<sup>134</sup> Tillotson 1987, 64. Ting 1982, 9–11. Crossman 1991, 187.

<sup>135</sup> Downing 1838; facsimile, 1972, 96–99.



same in the picture of a high-ranking Mandarin, recognisable by his dress and his headgear with a peacock feather and his sitting position. All the chairs and the facial expressions (with and without moustache), however, are different. The use of colours also varies. When examining the Figures 3.10.a. and 3.10.b. we see that the artists intended to paint a similar musical instrument, but the scenery the lady is put in differs quite a lot, as do the compositions. In the Figures 3.11.a. to 3.11.d. and in the Figures 3.12.a. to 3.12.d. with the boats and the flowers we discover the same number of similar aspects as aberrant ones. Lastly, the examples in the Figures 3.13.a. and 3.13.b. show a scene of two ducks in a landscape, identical but without any doubt as different as can be. Thus, the variation in details are to be found in: the adding of different motifs; in presenting the figure on the main stage (sitting or standing) with or without accessories and set in front of a blank backdrop, floating in the centre of the paper or on a patterned carpet with decorative furniture; in the expression of the faces; in colour rendering; the composition of individual elements, etc.

These paintings, although mass-produced, did not lose any of their strength as a form of visual documentation at the time of the historical China trade. The shift of a representation of a figure from one medium to another is a common practice when we look at the history of painting. The pictorial elements of an early print can be 'translated' into a watercolour. This 'translation', mostly done by individual hand-work, required deliberate forethought and a



Fig. 3.10. Music-making women, watercolour on pith paper  
a. From album with 12 images, anonymous, 19th



century, 34 x 22 cm, Tropenmuseum/ Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, inv.no. TM-3728-483 (Doo5515).  
b. From album with

12 images, anonymous, 1851-1856, 27 x 18.5 cm, SAB-City Archives and Athenaeum Library Deventer, inv.no. DvT V.9.11.KL

Fig. 3.11. Chinese riverboats, watercolour on pith paper  
a. From album with 72 images,

anonymous, 1850, 38 x 48 cm, Maritime Museum Rotterdam, inv.no. P4411-10.  
b. From album with 72 images,

anonymous, 1850, 38 x 48 cm, Maritime Museum Rotterdam, inv.no. P4411-14.  
c. From set of 12, anonymous, Sunqua (?), 1830-1865, 21.5 x 30.5 cm, Museum Volkenkunde/ Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, inv.no. RV-328-4e.  
d. From set of 12, anonymous, 19th century, 20 x 29 cm, Museum Volkenkunde/ Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, inv.no. RV-2133-31.





Fig. 3.12. Flowers with vegetables and insects (from set of 12), anonymous, watercolour on Bodhi tree leaf, 19th century, 12 x c. 10 cm, Museum Volkenkunde/ Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, inv.no. clockwise: RV-1299-9c, 9f, 9d and 9k.



Fig. 3.13. Birds, water-colour on pith paper a. From set of 12, anonymous, Sunqua (?), 1830-1865, 21 x 32.5 cm,

Museum Volkenkunde/ Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, inv.no. RV-328-3h. b. From set of 12, anonymous, 19th

century, 20 x 29 cm, Museum Volkenkunde/ Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, inv.no. RV-2133-4d.



developed sense of compositional design. In addition, the use of colour, as is shown by these examples, is lively and harmonious and this testifies to the export artists' quite developed taste. Ting adds in this regard that Chinese export painters often demonstrated Western conventions in their techniques with respect to perspective and colour use. In landscape paintings and harbour views this Western painting style was combined with a more typical Chinese one in the representation of rocks, trees and mountains.<sup>136</sup> These were often rendered with traditionally Chinese simple but strong brushstrokes, made with multiple-headed brushes or by using minute dots. In this way, artists showcased their skills in traditional and higher regarded painting, before making their move to the new trade. This alternate use of Western and Chinese painting techniques frequently imbued the paintings with a strange, mysterious, incoherent, but also fascinating atmosphere.

#### Strainers, frames and brushes

To reduce the movement of the canvas, the display of Chinese export oil paintings requires supplementary support. The tenter to which the canvas of an export oil painting is attached is a recognisable feature of a Chinese export painting.<sup>137</sup> It is comprised of four parts of thin wood, held together in the corners with two or four bamboo pins, the so-called fixed-corner strainer. (Figures 3.14. and 3.15.) In addition, the inner edge of the frame is slightly bevelled, so that about two to three centimetres is in contact with the canvas. This contrasts with the European tenter, which had corner pieces that fitted perfectly against each other, and small wooden wedges (keys) in the interior corners of the stretcher that could lengthen or shorten the construction if necessary. The fixed-corner strainers cannot be expanded. This stiffness often causes slackening of the canvas as it impairs the textile fibres. Many of the Chinese export oil paintings in Dutch collections have become slack on their original strainer and a number have been removed from their original tenter and transferred to a new support. What also happened frequently is that the canvas was brought from China as a mere canvas and framed on its arrival in the Netherlands or in Batavia. In most cases, a tenter with wedges for

expansion purposes was used, as Figure 3.16 shows.

The frame was often made of hardwood and sometimes painted black with a gilt edge. They could be elaborately carved wood and gilt frames (Figure 3.17.a.), but could also take the form of a natural, flat frame with a bevelled edge. Occasionally, there were rosettes or similar floral decorations applied to the corners. The most popular frame was the so-called Chinese Chippendale.<sup>138</sup> (Figure 3.17.b.) This framed the majority of the harbour views and portraits that were produced between 1830 and 1880. The frames were mostly brown-black painted lacquer and had a flat inside edge that was worked with gilt or gold leaf. In the nineteenth century, there was another type of frame: a richly embellished and lavishly decorated openwork wooden frame decorated with landscapes and Chinese figures in pavilions and gardens.<sup>139</sup> (Figure 3.18.)

As the American Institute for Conservation of Art and Historic Works writes on their website: "Stretchers and strainers are the foundation of a painting's structure. A thorough examination of a stretcher or strainer can serve as a valuable means of understanding the technique of the artist, determining if the painting has undergone



Figs. 3.14. and 3.15.  
Original Chinese fixed-corner strainers.

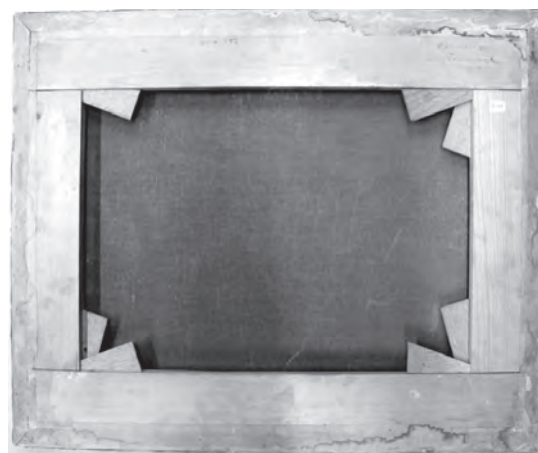


Fig. 3.16. European  
19th century tenter  
with two wedges in  
each corner.

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<sup>136</sup> Ting 1982, 9.

<sup>137</sup> Bradford 2005, 82.

<sup>138</sup> Crossman 1991, 409.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.



Fig. 3.17.a. Gilded frame, elaborately carved.



previous conservation or restoration treatments or if the painting was cut from a larger work.”<sup>140</sup> Original tenters can also reveal something about the age of a painting; this makes the loss of original frames extra unfortunate.

There is no direct evidence about the sort of brushes (single and multi-headed) that were used for painting with oils or watercolours. It is assumed, because no information exists to the contrary, that different types were used and that export artists used the same brushes as artists who painted in the Chinese amateur style. These were brushes made with fur or hair with varying degrees of hardness, such as weasel-, marten-, wolf-, deer-, goat- and rabbit hair, mixed with hemp. These hairs were carefully embedded or glued into a cone shape, or onto a bamboo, wood or even ivory or porcelain shaft.<sup>141</sup> The brushes with stiffer hairs were probably used for the outlines, while the watercolours were applied

with the longhaired, soft brushes. The Figures 3.3. to 3.6., 3.19. and 3.20., which are made by both Chinese and Western artists, provide supporting evidence for the way in which export painters applied the paint. This method changed, depending on which medium they were working with. Canvasses for oil paintings, for example, stood vertically on the artist's easel or stands on benches, but for watercolours and reverse glass paintings the paints were mostly applied horizontally. Interestingly, the painters held their brushes at an angle of 90 degrees to the forearm, with the brush hairs directly on the surface to be painted and the painting arm resting on a flat block of wood. This method was also used in ink calligraphy.

#### The paintings – formal aspects

Looking at the research corpus, we can divide the paintings into different categories and into a range of qualities, all produced to sell on various markets and to diverse clients. In the Dutch collections we can distinguish unique singular paintings, identical pairs on different media, companion pieces, obvious sets of oil paintings or gouaches and albums with watercolours. They are executed in oil on canvas, paper, *Bodhi* tree (*Ficus Religiosa*) leaves, bone or copper, as a reverse glass painting, watercolour or gouache on regular Chinese or European paper, or on Chinese pith paper made from the *Tetrapanax Papyrifera* (*tóng cáo zhǐ*).<sup>142</sup> Almost all export paintings, either individually authored by a well-known Chinese master or produced anonymously, represent a Chinese subject matter.

Fig. 3.17.b. Chinese Chippendale frame.



Fig. 3.18. Chinese richly decorated frame.



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<sup>140</sup> [http://www.conservation-wiki.com/wiki/PSG\\_Stretchers\\_and\\_Strainers\\_-\\_I.\\_Introduction#ref2](http://www.conservation-wiki.com/wiki/PSG_Stretchers_and_Strainers_-_I._Introduction#ref2).

<sup>141</sup> Clunas 1984, 38.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 15. Pith paper is often wrongly called 'rice paper'. This paper has nothing to do with rice, but it is probably called rice paper because people believed that the rice plant was used in the manufacture of pith paper, or because it looks like the edible rice paper that is used in cooking. Currently, a soft type of Chinese paper is sold in the West as 'rice paper'.



In the following section, I will deal with the media that feature most commonly in the Dutch collections: oil paintings, watercolours and gouaches on paper and reverse glass paintings.

### **Oil paintings**

China had no tradition of painting with oils. While in Europe artists experimented with the manufacture and use of various materials, in the nineteenth century Chinese artists continued mostly to use water-based (ink) media, which they had been working with for generations.<sup>143</sup> Although oil paints were introduced to the imperial court in 1699 by the Italian missionary and painter Gherardini, we read in Jourdain and Jenyns that, at that time, this was not a widespread medium beyond these walls.<sup>144</sup> Even when the use of oil paint became quotidian in Canton it was still only used in paintings for Western clients. It seems that most export oil paintings copied certain compositional elements from Western prints or from fellow export artists. Still in the 1840s in the *Étude pratique de commerce d'exportation de la Chine*, we read

that “les peintures à l’huile représentent généralement des vues d’habitations chinoise, les vues de Macao, de Bocca Tigris, de Wham-pou et des factories de Canton et une foule de suets copiés d’après des gravures européennes.”<sup>145</sup>

Particular subjects were painted time and again, each time identically: ships portraits with the island of Lin Tin, Whampoa or Hong Kong as recurring backgrounds; the compositional treatment of Chinese junks and other boats in the familiar views of the harbours of Canton, Whampoa, Bocca Tigris or Macao; fixed elements such as twisted trees and branches, rocks, trees and groups of people in the landscape; and familiar decor such as a red curtain hung next to an open window and the furniture of captains and naval officers.

A clear example of a topic that was repeatedly painted is provided by two paintings both rendered in oil, but on different supports, in the collection of Museum Volkenkunde. (Figures 3.21. and 3.22.) One is painted on glass and carries the title *The hunt* while the other has a canvas support and is entitled *Winter landscape*



Fig. 3.19. Export painter copying a Western engraving on to the reverse of a sheet of glass (from set of 100 images of trades and occupations of Canton), anonymous, watercolour on paper, c. 1790, 42 x 35 cm, Victoria and Albert Museum London, inv.no. D 107.1898.

Fig. 3.20. Export oil painter, anonymous, gouache on paper, c. 1800, 37.5 x 29.8 cm, private collection.

143 Koon 2014, 54–64. Bradford 2005, 85. Yang & Barnhard 1997, 251–297. Clunas 1997, 191–199.

144 Jourdain & Jenyns 1967, 34.

145 Rondot 1849, 177. Translation: The oil paintings generally depict Chinese livings (homes), views of Macao, of Bocca Tigris, of Whampoa and the factories (*hongs*) of Canton and a variety of subjects, copied after European engravings.





Fig. 3.21. *The hunt* (from set of 19), anonymous, oil on glass, 1785-1790, 52.5 x 81 cm, Museum Volkenkunde/Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, inv.no. RV-360-1120.

Fig. 3.22. *Winter landscape in Tartary* (from set of 3), oil on canvas, c. 1820s, 72 x 102 cm, Museum Volkenkunde/Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, inv.no. RV-360-1134.



in *Tartary*.<sup>146</sup>

Although, likely not produced at the same time (respectively 1785-1790 and c. 1820s), both show a hunting scene with figures in a wintry, mountainous landscape with matching elements. We also see some dogs, a pagoda and a walled residence in the distance. For centuries hunting, as a recreation, was a privilege reserved for people of the highest circles. The Chinese emperors organised great annual hunting parties

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<sup>146</sup> Both paintings belong to the grouped of paintings conveyed from the The Hague Royal Cabinet of Rarities to Museum Volkenkunde in 1883. The reverse glass painting, dated circa 1785-1790, is part of a set of nineteen glass paintings. This set includes a wide range topics: the Emperor ploughing, a dragon boat race, the roadstead of Whampoa, view on the Quay of Canton with Western trading houses, from left to right: Denmark, Spain, France, Sweden, England and Holland, a palace feast, kowtowing, terrace scene near to the river and fruit tree, hunting scene, the emperor's audience, kite-flying beside the river, All Souls (or All Hallows), the rice harvest, from clay to pot, bride and groom, at the tea plantation, a summer garden scene, the silk-spinning workshop, and domestic bliss. The whereabouts of the oil painting on canvas before arriving at the Royal Cabinet of Rarities is still subject of my ongoing research to its provenance.

<sup>147</sup> Van Dongen 2001, 15.

<sup>148</sup> Rawski & Rawson 2005, 188-189.

<sup>149</sup> Garrett 1994, 44.

near their summer residence in Jehol (present-day Chengde), north of the Great Wall. These hunting parties equalled military manoeuvres in their size.<sup>147</sup> The hunting parties shown here, however, are different and do not refer to these imperial practices. Rather, they refer to Manchurian practices, when the ruling elite left the city for leisure time in the mountains. One of their leisure activities was hunting. The specific place where this tableau is set, with its fantasy-like overhanging rocky crags, the lake, house and path, is unknown.

To the left on the painting a simple dwelling with a couple of young trees is visible. Two men, one with a musket, are walking in the left foreground. They appear to be going out hunting although there is no prey visible. They wear long blue outfits with trimmed collars. The jackets are buttoned to the throat and closed with a belt. They wear calf-length stockings of quilted cotton and black shoes. A dog accompanies them on a lead. It is a typically English hunting breed, and could have wandered in from a seventeenth century British landscape painting with a hunting party. Perhaps the album of watercolours by the court painter Ignatius Sichelbart (Ai Qimeng, 1708-1780) with ten different dogs was known in Canton.<sup>148</sup> Two dogs of the same breed are being walked by the man and woman depicted centrally. The man in the middle of the painting has a falcon on his left shoulder. The falcon is a bird of prey used in hunting. The man is wearing a short, light-brown quilted winter jacket trimmed with fur and with a round insignia on the chest. This badge indicates the imperial status of this high Mandarin. A *chao dai* is visible under his short jacket. This is a belt worn by high Manchu Imperial or military officials.<sup>149</sup> Usually, a couple of wallets, containing a compass, toothpicks, provisions, or a knife in a sheath, were suspended from this type of belt. The man is standing together with a woman on a wooden bridge on poles. He is speaking with the woman,



who lifts her long robe slightly. The significance of this gesture is unclear. The woman is wearing a short, quilted sleeveless jacket with a round embroidered decoration on the back. The woman's hair is pinned up and decorated with hair ornaments. It was not customary in China for women to accompany a hunting party. To the right of the painting a path leads up into the mountains. A man pushing a one-wheeled wheelbarrow with a package tied to it is walking along the path. Deeper into the mountains, in the middle of the painting, a pagoda and a walled residence are visible.

These paintings employ colour to effect atmospheric perspective. The figures in the foreground are stronger in colour than the elements in the background. The rocks are painted in a Chinese manner. The sun would appear to be low in the sky, in view of the long shadows cast by the figures and the dogs. The images are, however, not identical. The four figures behind the trees in the middle of the reverse glass painting do not appear in the painting on canvas and the trees are also grouped differently. Both paintings show evidence of two painters, who have searched for an authentic composition of their own choice. In turn, this observation says something about the artistic value of these paintings, about the painter – no slavish copier of supplied examples – about the insight in composition, colour-use and rendering of the different elements in the depicted scenes on different media. These distinct elements let the individual painter speak explicitly, as an artist.

#### Watercolours and gouaches on paper

Regarding painting on paper, in general we can say that in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (circa 1780 through to the 1820s) painting was mainly done on imported European paper. This paper came primarily from paper merchants such as the London firms Whatman and Cowan and Son and from the Dutch paper manufacturer Van Gelder.<sup>150</sup> Prior to about 1780 and then later, circa the 1820s, it was the norm to use cheaper 'ordinary' Chinese



paper (*mianlin zhi*), which was made from cotton or from the mulberry plant.<sup>151</sup> The sheets of the many so-called Royer albums in the Leiden Museum Volkenkunde, which contain almost 3000 watercolours painted in the 1770s, are painted, like early Chinese wallpaper, on regular Chinese paper.

Extant paintings on pith paper largely date from after the 1820s, when the demand for cheaper paintings was high. This paper, with a white, velvety appearance was mainly used for watercolours and was made from the inner core of the *Tetrapanax Papyrifera* (*tongcao zhi*).<sup>152</sup> After the pith was cut from the spongy trunk of the tree, in very thin and long strips (as a kind of veneer), it was soaked for a long time in water. It was then cut into small pieces, rolled out and pressed into flat, square pieces, and subsequently dried and worked into a suitable medium for the watercolours. (Figure 3.23.)

As an article in the *ICOM Ethnographic Conservation Newsletter* by Fei Wen Tsai informs us, pith paper was very suitable as a substrate for watercolour paintings due to "its ability to maintain vivid colors and to produce raise images after absorbing water-based media, creating a special effect."<sup>153</sup> In addition to being used for watercolours, this paper was mainly used in the making of artificial flowers and in Chinese medicine. The ICOM research reports

Fig. 3.23. Mode of cutting sheets of rice paper [sic] (from set of 12, illustrating pith production), F. Reeve, imp., 1850, 16.3 x 10.2 cm, Harvard University Botany Libraries.

150 Crossman 1991, 177, 386–387. Clunas 1984, 49, 77.

151 Van Campen 2010, 46. In this article, Van Campen refutes the long-held assumption that Chinese watercolours in early European albums were painted on imported paper. I agree with him that these early albums are almost certainly the Puqua sets from circa 1790. Around this time, these kinds of albums already had a good reputation and, for this reason, were European paper was introduced. Earlier paintings were still produced on ordinary Chinese paper. The Puqua sets are known worldwide. By contrast, the Royer albums are (still) practically unknown on a wider scale.

152 Clunas 1984, 15.

153 Fei 1999.

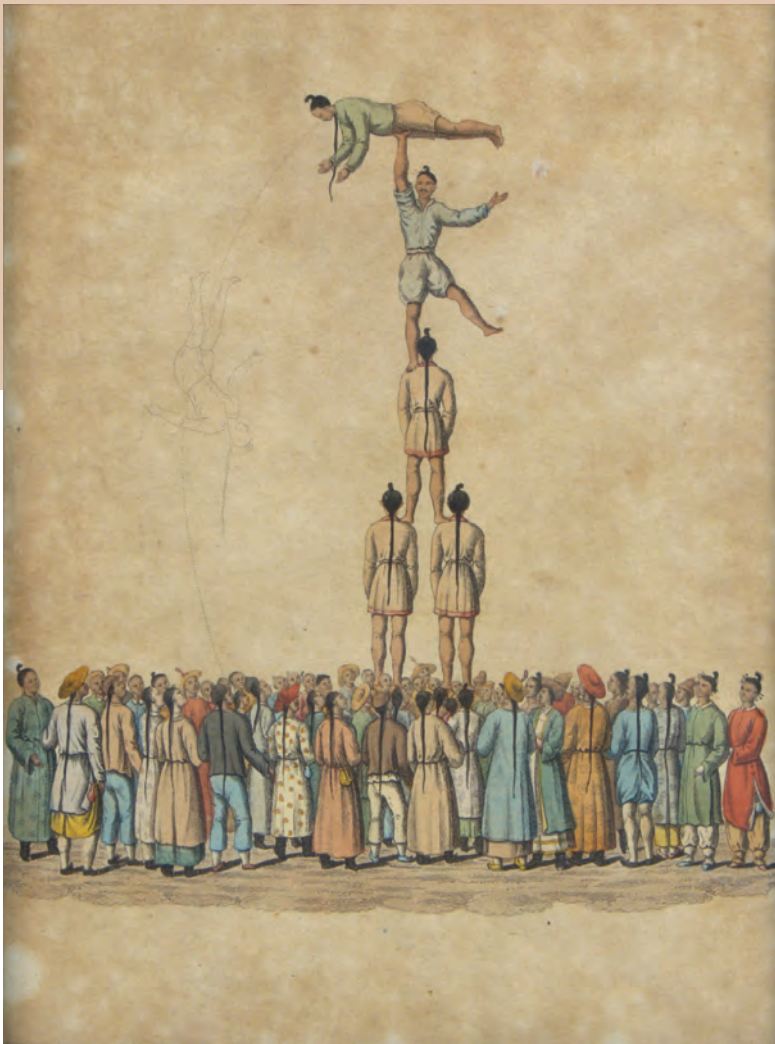


Fig. 3.24. Street scene with acrobat troupe, gouache on paper, 19th century, 23 x 18.5 cm, Museum Volkenkunde/Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, inv.no. 7082-S-451-1611.

further that “[C]ommonly, a pith paper painting is mounted in the following way: After images are painted on the pith paper (which may be done on both sides of the pith), paste is applied at the back of the four corners and the painting is lined with a sheet of paper. Four strips of textile (usually silk) are pasted around the image to form a frame. The mounted pith painting is then bound into an album.”<sup>154</sup>

Before a watercolour was painted on pith paper, the paper first had to be treated with a solution of alum.<sup>155</sup> This was done by planing

and bleaching the paper, as Clunas describes in *Chinese Export Watercolours*, which made the paper very smooth; this, in turn, best reflected the colours. Sometimes, this mix with alum was applied seven or eight times. The next step in the process was establishing the outline. The paper was laid on a model of the scene to be painted; the transparent paper allowed the figure, tree, bird, boat, etc., to be outlined with black paint or with a silver or metal needle (silverpoint-technique). Once this part of the process was completed, the colour pigments were prepared. These were always densely opaque and were carefully mixed with water, alum and glue. By dripping water or sprinkling powder onto the drying paint, the painter enhanced the illusion of three-dimensionality through texture and tonal graduation, as well as merging the contour line with the colour pigment.<sup>156</sup>

Besides watercolours on pith paper, many of the watercolours in the Dutch collections are executed on Chinese *xuan* paper, renowned for being soft and fine textured, or thin bamboo paper, sometimes also first sized with alum and animal glue and, after drying, brushed with a lead white (lead sulphide) ground, before preparing the outline.

Downing, an important eyewitness in the 1830s, who regularly visited Lamqua’s studio and recorded the painting process extensively, describes the artist’s tools as including, among other things, a small stove that kept the glue warm. Once the colours were ready, the artist applied the colours, just like in oil painting, in layers. Often, when depicting skin, the pigment was applied to the back of the painting, in order to achieve the effect of transparency, as if painting on ivory: “where flesh is to be represented, the pigment is put on on the reverse side of the picture, so as to produce that beautiful effect of transparency practised with such success by our miniature painters on ivory.”<sup>157</sup> This paper was then pasted onto ordinary Chinese or European paper and ‘framed’ with a light-coloured silk ribbon.

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

<sup>155</sup> Downing 1838; facsimile, 1972, 114. Crossman 1991, 177.

<sup>156</sup> Claypool, 2015, 37. Wan Qingli connects this process to the humid climate of Canton, where paint after application easily degraded. Wan 2005, 148.

<sup>157</sup> Downing 1838; facsimile, 1972, 99.

<sup>158</sup> Museum Nusantara has been closed since January 2013. A part of its collection will return to Indonesia. This painting (Figure 3.24) is appraised as valuable to be incorporated in the Collectie Nederland (amongst other Dutch museums: Prinsenhof in Delft and Museum Volkenkunde in Leiden) currently belongs to the collection of Museum Volkenkunde/National Museum of World Cultures. Emails of Nico Schaap, registrar of Prinsenhof Delft, 15 October 2015, and of Joke Leijfeldt, research associate Indonesia Museum Volkenkunde, 27 September 2016.



Watercolours could be purchased either as loose leaves, or as sets of twelve leaves bound in an album. Although singular ones exist, most watercolours are meticulously executed with templates as part of a mass production line. A singular exemplar in the Dutch collections is the former Museum Nusantara image (Figure 3.24.) depicting an acrobatic performance troupe.<sup>158</sup> This painting is lively and full of action. We can assume that the ‘movement’ in the presented scene emerged from the mind of the painter, who used his drawing pencil to lightly sketch the way the upper acrobat will travel when he is tossed to the ground.

The cardboard covers of the albums were – whether or not they featured a studio seal on the inside – sometimes covered with embroidered silk or with woven textile with geometric patterns, or sometimes with paper in bright colours.<sup>159</sup> This is also true of most of the albums in the Dutch collections. (Figures 3.25.a to 3.25.e.)

#### Reverse glass paintings

The technique of reverse glass painting, as researched and described in *Sensitive Plates* by Paul van Dongen, former curator China at the Museum Volkenkunde in Leiden, and in ‘Chinese Glass Paintings in Bangkok Monasteries’ by Jessica Lee Patterson, has been in Europe for centuries.<sup>160</sup> It is generally believed that the technique went from Europe to China, where already in the 1730s reverse glass paintings were being produced in Canton. The transport of six reverse glass paintings (‘6 Glass Pictures’) from Canton to England in 1739 is noted in the *MS account book* of captain Bootle of the English East India Company (EIC).<sup>161</sup> The EIC day registers also provide information about this early practice: “Purchased from Quouqua in 1738: 18 painted glass with lacquer’d frames and 6 painted glass with rosewood frames.”<sup>162</sup> This suggests that paintings on this medium were amongst the earliest examples of Chinese export art. We know via their writings that many contemporary eyewitnesses were intrigued by the procedure of this special painting



Fig. 3.25. Covers of albums with Chinese export watercolours on pith paper.

Left:

a. Album with 12 images of women making music and doing homecrafts, anonymous, 1830–1865, 25.5 x 21.5 cm, Tropenmuseum/ Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, inv.no. TM-A-778of.

b. Album with 12 images of men, street traders and occupations, anonymous, c. 1850, 29.9 x 19.4 cm, Zeeuws Museum Middelburg, Zeeuws Genootschap (Zealandish Society), inv.no. G3610. Right: c. Album with 32 images of Chinese people practicing

various professions, anonymous, 1773–1776, 27 x 28.5 cm, Museum Volkenkunde/ Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, inv.no. RV-360-377. d. Album with 7 images of Chinese ships, Sunqua, 1830–1865, 23.5 x 33 cm, Tropenmuseum/ Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, inv.no. TM-A-778oe. e. Album with 12 images of Chinese harbour cities, anonymous, c. 1850, 25.7 x 35.2 cm, Maritime Museum Rotterdam, inv.no. P1711.

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<sup>159</sup> Cobb 1956, 243.

<sup>160</sup> Van Dongen 2001. Patterson 2016. The technique of painting on glass has existed in some parts of Europe (mainly South-East) and Russia since the Middle Ages. The earliest surviving examples even date from the Roman Empire (Patterson 2016, 155).

<sup>161</sup> Jourdain & Jenyns 1950, 64. Conner 1998, 420, *MS account book* G/12/44, India Office Library and Records, ff. 153–156 (British Library, London).

<sup>162</sup> Email Paul A. Van Dyke (Sun Yat-sen University Guangzhou), 15 May 2008, with short list of Cantonese artists, a number of which features in the day registers of the Dutch East India Company of 1762–1763. Van Dyke and Cynthia Vialle (Leiden University) have translated these registers into English and they were published in 2008.





Fig. 3.26. Rice harvest, anonymous, oil on glass, 1785-1790, 52.5 x 81 cm, Museum Volkenkunde/ Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, inv.no. RV-360-1125.

technique.<sup>163</sup>

In comparison to 'normal' paintings, reverse glass paintings are created in reverse order (mirror image).<sup>164</sup> The Chinese painter worked backwards, painting the image in reverse and laying down the highlights and foreground features first. Van Dongen explains this process as follows: "The things which, seen in perspective, are closest to the viewer, or somewhere close, are painted in first. Where necessary the background or ground is applied in a subsequent phase over the picture already painted. For this reason the reverse side of a glass painting shows much less detail than the front side."<sup>165</sup> Thus, the painter begins with the finishing touch and ends with the foundation. This means that to paint on mirrors, therefore, a painter first outlines his subject and has to remove the reflecting layer of quick-tin or quicksilver amalgam on the reverse side of the mirror that he does not want. Then he paints with oil colour paint and works in a reverse order, in comparison with the 'normal' painting method.

A closer examination of a group of Chinese reverse glass paintings in Winterthur Museum in 2007 revealed that the paintings are created with thin, translucent paint layers.<sup>166</sup> Highlights and shadows are painted in the same plane. In the words of Van Dongen: "Particular details to be represented, and which were in fact sited in, or

on, another material, had to be painted first on the surface of the glass. Only then could the ground, or background, be painted over or around it."<sup>167</sup> Furthermore, Van Dongen, after his research into the way the paint was applied, observed that:

*[P]artly for the sake of convenience, and partly to avoid having successive layers of paint lying too thickly on top of each other, the painters tried to apply as many sections of the picture as possible in the first layer(s) on the glass. This means that the paintings on glass can also be viewed as puzzles composed of smaller and larger areas of colour, and lines, which must accord with each other down to the smallest detail in form and colour, and must fit into each other with the utmost precision. This care was all the more necessary because, owing to the order of the painting, it was impossible to use overpainting for re-touching or correcting forms once they had been applied to the glass. This was another factor increasing the difficulty of this painting technique, in comparison with other forms of painting.*<sup>168</sup>

This observation means that to achieve precision, the painter must think very carefully in advance, before applying his paint. Moreover, any painter aiming to consistently deliver high quality work, must have mastered the right skills for an attractive colour palette and possess a steady hand for self-assured lines and paint application.

Regular glass was favoured for this type of colour painting- and ink work, rather than mirror glass, which was thicker and did not show the colours as well and was more complex to work on. Furthermore, the reflective amalgam layer of tin or mercury on the back of mirror glass first had to be scraped away, before the transparent space could be painted on.

Reverse glass paintings were often made using models or templates. Three of the reverse glass paintings of a set of 19 in the Museum Volkenkunde, which can be dated 1785-1790, have "small and fragile remnants" of small black

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<sup>163</sup> Amiot & Cibot 1786, 163-166. Pierre-Martial Cibot (1727-1780) was a French Jesuit missionary at the Imperial court in Peking and lived for twenty years in China. Many of his notes and observations on the history and literature of the Chinese were published in the *Mémoires concernant l'histoire, etc.*, at the time the chief source of information in Europe regarding China and its people. De Guignes 1808, quoted in Jourdain & Jennyns 1950, 34.

<sup>164</sup> Van Dongen 2001, 30-31.

<sup>165</sup> Van Dongen 2001, [http://volkenkunde.nl/sites/default/files/attachements/sensitive\\_plates.pdf](http://volkenkunde.nl/sites/default/files/attachements/sensitive_plates.pdf).

<sup>166</sup> McGinn et al. 2010, 281. [www.winterthur.org/pdfs/winterthur\\_primer\\_glass.pdf](http://www.winterthur.org/pdfs/winterthur_primer_glass.pdf).

<sup>167</sup> Van Dongen 2001, [http://volkenkunde.nl/sites/default/files/attachements/sensitive\\_plates.pdf](http://volkenkunde.nl/sites/default/files/attachements/sensitive_plates.pdf).

<sup>168</sup> Ibid.

ink lines on the front of the glass plate.<sup>169</sup> These ink lines once formed part of the draft of the image that was subsequently painted and then coloured in on the reverse side of the same sheet of glass. Figure 3.26. is such a painting and shows small lines in black ink along the edge of the painting, where there was once a frame.<sup>170</sup> Probably, the ink sketch on *Rice harvest* had been working as a kind of ‘colour plate’, but it is not known whether the painter added new compositional elements after the ink drawing had been set up. I argue, in tandem with the ideas of Van Dongen and on the basis of research by Mary McGinn, Winterthur Museum painting restorer, that the black lines were added after the glass had been originally framed.<sup>171</sup> Scholar Crossman asserts too that reverse glass paintings were painted at least in part after they were fitted in the frames.<sup>172</sup> A framed sheet of glass could be placed on a table, front-side up, without causing any harm to the glass. In addition to this advantage of framing before painting the glass, the edges of the frame served as support for the flat piece of wood used by the painter to paint the image (see Figure 3.19.). After the painting was finished, the painter only needed to wipe away the ink lines from the front. It is quite possible that, in doing so, some lines remained, especially along the edges of the frame.

To frame the characteristic Chinese export painting phenomenon, so far I have sketched its *modus operandi* and brought together its (im-) material features, many of which I assume are known to specialists in the field. I compose this framework through, amongst other things, written observations of contemporary (subjective) eyewitnesses, the art works themselves, archival documents and secondary literature concerning this topic. Building further on the analyses of the theoretical concepts ‘transcultural’ and ‘cultural translation’ discussed in Chapter 2, this chapter continues to

frame Chinese export painting further in order to allocate ‘shared cultural visual repertoire’ as an appropriate and relevant denomination for this painting genre.

### 3.4.

#### A shared cultural visual repertoire

To map the Chinese export painting phenomenon more precisely, *Made for Trade* needs to find out what the main actors in the Chinese export painting arena thought about the artistry of this art genre. To answer this question, this section will treat different views on Chinese art in general and this type of art in particular. The final paragraph ‘shared material culture’, is preceded with reflections on art from China, the Chinese view on this export painting genre, the topic ‘local modernity’, the Western perception and representation of Chinese subject matter, and the idea that this art genre can be conceived as emblematic of the historical China trade.

#### Art from China

What precisely is to be considered as art from China? This question has been variously answered throughout the course of time. Clunas argues that depending on who was making the distinction, objects, written documents, paintings and sculptures, were, or were not, included within the category of ‘art’ or ‘labelled as art’.<sup>173</sup> For example, the Chinese elite regarded calligraphy and ink painting as the highest artistic expressions possible, while in Europe these forms of Chinese art were barely noticed. On the other hand, in Europe, Chinese sculpture and (studio-produced) ceramics were seen much more as art forms than paintings on paper or on canvas. It was in Europe that the term ‘Chinese art’ was introduced in the nineteenth century. Presently, when going through auction or exhibition catalogues and monographs of various museum objects of Chinese art, this term includes calligraphy, scroll

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169 Van Dongen 2001, 31. Mr M. de Keijzer of the Physics department of the Central Research Laboratory for Objects of Art and Science, Amsterdam, has carried out technical research on the used binding agents, paint samples (indigo and ochre mixed with silicon for the colours blue and green/yellow) and pigments. During his research he also discovered remnants of tiny black ink lines. Besides this painting, two more copies of the same set in Museum Volkenkunde show such ink lines: inv.nos. 360-1120 and 360-1121.

170 The original wooden frames of all paintings of the set of 19 have disappeared, for unknown reasons. In 2001, before these paintings were exhibited in the Sikkens Schildermuseum in Sassenheim and in Museum Volkenkunde, new frames have replaced the original ones. These new frames approximate to the forms of the traditional Chinese framing which probably surrounded the paintings in former times.

171 Van Dongen 2001, [http://volkenkunde.nl/sites/default/files/attachements/sensitive\\_plates.pdf](http://volkenkunde.nl/sites/default/files/attachements/sensitive_plates.pdf). McGinn 2010, 282.

172 Crossman 1991, 208.

173 Clunas 1997, 9-13.

painting and other forms of painting, sculpture, ceramics, architecture, bronzes, jade, pottery, prints, porcelain, lacquerwork, silk, silver, jewellery, and objects of other materials. Using the term ‘Chinese art’ stresses that continuity exists in Chinese art history with regard to stylistic development and the function of objects. This notion emphasises the agreement in the art world that Chinese art is different from art within the Western artistic tradition. At the same time, though, using the term ‘Chinese art’ minimises, even denies, the differences in the seven thousand-year-long history of China, between places lying at great distances from one another across an enormous territory. The climate, ecological circumstances, social and religious views, the ethnic composition of the ruling class, the geographical locations of political power and the population centres, etc., have all undergone many changes during the long history of the territory we now call China. For this reason, we can better speak of ‘art from China’.

Chinese artworks, utensils and other artefacts of material culture from China were not always seen as art at the time of their production, but through conscious emphasis on their aesthetic effects they later came to be considered art. As we know from a reference by the eighteenth-century English sculptor, John Flaxman, who owned some Chinese paintings and is quoted in Laurence Binyon’s book *Chinese paintings in English collections*, he prized these ‘decorative paintings’ for the beauty of their colouring. For Binyon (1869-1943) it was clear from the reference to the colours of the paintings that they were not what Frances Wood calls “literati monochromes.”<sup>174</sup> Instead, Binyon – in 1927 – doubted “if they were paintings of the true Chinese tradition” and that

*[I]t is much more probable that they were specimens of those albums of paintings on rice paper, which have been made in Canton for two centuries and more, as souvenirs for the foreigner: albums of flowers and birds,*

*landscapes, costumes, boats, etc. There are a great number of these albums in England, in the possession of families whose members have been merchants in the Far East. These paintings are pretty things, but they are the work of artisans; they betray a certain influence from Europe, and can hardly count as belonging to that great and ancient tradition which is the supreme national art of China.*<sup>175</sup>

Binyon’s observations tell us something about his one-dimensional view of Chinese painting, his knowledge about literati painting and, at the same time, his ignorance of the use value of these Cantonese export paintings at the time of their production. In the Netherlands of the nineteenth century, export paintings from China, amongst other collectibles, were certainly seen as ‘art from China’.<sup>176</sup> Maybe they were not always seen as ‘serious’ or ‘high’ art, but this flow of exchange reached a record level during that period.<sup>177</sup> Furthermore, most paintings are not necessarily artworks with someone’s name attached, but true objects of art in their own form, justifiably kept in museums of all kinds all around the world. Moreover, with the knowledge we have now and the abundance of them in Dutch public collections, I argue that the artistic value of these so-called rice paper [sic] paintings is evident; not to mention the many genre and landscape paintings rendered in oil on canvas or as reverse glass paintings. Indeed, in terms of overall artistic quality, they often surpass their watercolour ‘cousins’.

#### A Chinese view

It is known that this art form, from the time of production in Canton to long after, was not highly regarded within China. In the systematic overview of this subject, *Western Painting and Canton Port during the Qing Period (Qingday yanghua yu Guangzhou kou’an)*, by the Guangzhou-based historian Jiang, we can learn about the concept of Western-style painting in the poetry of the Lingnan area in the Qing period (1644-1911).<sup>178</sup> Although there was a

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<sup>174</sup> Wood 2008, 77.

<sup>175</sup> Binyon 1927, 2.

<sup>176</sup> Cai & Blussé 2004, 55.

<sup>177</sup> The split between ‘art’ or ‘not art’ is another way to look at material culture and what can be objects of daily use or objects that are commonly seen as art with symbolic or aesthetic qualities. However, I will not pay a great deal of attention to this contrast in relation to these paintings as a specific subject for research.

<sup>178</sup> Jiang 2007, 70–109. I want to express my gratitude to Guan Shu, teacher Chinese language at Leiden University Academic Language Centre, for translating some of these poems into English. Guangdong was the core province in the Lingnan area, at the Qing a successful trading spot. Also Fujian, Taiwan and Guangxi provinces belong to this area.



certain influence on intellectuals, in general we can say that Western-style painting had no obvious effect on Lingnan traditional literati painting. Initially, the contemporary poets did not understand Western painting techniques, which “are elusive and subtle.”<sup>179</sup> They think that Western painting’s lifelike realism, made by perspective, shading projection, colour and other techniques, is as unimaginative as custom work is for craftsmen: “vulgar, only specific items and no mood.”<sup>180</sup> Moreover, “real illusion often makes the illusion more horrific.”<sup>181</sup>

Naturalistic art does not fit within Chinese people’s high aesthetic realm, in which the invisible universe, with its elegant shape and spirit, is the highest level of art. Moreover, there is no need to stand at a fixed viewpoint to see the world.<sup>182</sup> Chinese audiences looked for and valued different things in art: traditionally, for example, Chinese painting had close literary associations, and the ‘brush-manner’ looked for was a calligrapher’s skill.<sup>183</sup> Cai’s ‘Shadow of oceangoing ships on the cultural landscape of South China’ incorporates a poem by Chen Gongyin (1631-1700) from the *Collection of Works of Dulutang*. This poem was written during his stay in in Guangzhou and reads:

*The Western style of painting is starkly different from the norm –*

*Misty and hazy, it never reveals the true image. It is like the Magician who played the illusory trick,*

*Asking Emperor Wu of Han Dynasty to look at Madam Li through a heavy curtain.*

*Painting strokes are interwoven to form patterns,*

*Mainly on the background but not the core.*

*It is like copying the calligraphy of the Jin and Tang periods.*

*The essence of which lies in the inkless strokes.*<sup>184</sup>

Despite the fact that most literati poets considered Chinese painting elegant and Western

painting vulgar, they did not always belittle and ridicule Western paintings. In fact, later, they showed a considerable degree of recognition and appreciation of these paintings. Furthermore, some of them point out that Chinese painting should learn from Western painting.<sup>185</sup> Then, in their poems, the Lingnan poets showed a more deep and clear understanding of Western painting and found applicable words and verses for accurate descriptions of the techniques used.<sup>186</sup>

As we learn from Wang Cheng-hua’s article ‘A global perspective on eighteenth-century Chinese art and visual culture’, some artistic treatises paid attention to the feature of verisimilitude.<sup>187</sup> In treatises by prominent eighteenth-century literati painters such as Tangdai (1673-ca. 1754) and Zou Yigui (1686-1772), “dexterous pictorial skills that can capture accurate physical properties of the depicted objects and scenes are deemed valuable because they help achieve verisimilitude, which in turn leads to the reality of visual representation.”<sup>188</sup> That said, the new perception of this artistic style did not convince everyone. The same Chinese court official and painter Zou and the Chinese landscape painter Zhang Geng (1685-1760), who was active outside the court, criticised Western painters and epitomised the objection to Western art by describing it as unscholarly. They expressed quite well the prevailing opinion about Western-style paintings under scholars and literati painters at that time, with their statements, respectively: “Western painters have no brush-manner whatsoever; although they possess skill, they are simply artisans (*chiang*) and cannot consequently be classified as quality painters” and “no amount of skill could compensate for want of intelligence in art.”<sup>189</sup> Even in 1988, Tao Yongbai (1937-), author of *1700-1985 Chinese Oil Paintings*, expressed her feeling about trade (export) painting as: “it cannot reach the level of ‘high art’, but is close to the kitschy quality of calendar poster

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179 Jiang 2007, 84, Cheng Jiu Fashi (1637-1722).

180 Ibid., 82.

181 Ibid., Huang Qiong Wen (n.y.).

182 Ibid., 90-94, Chen Gongyin (1631-1700), Zhu Kuntian (n.y.) and, amongst others, painter Wu Li (1632-1718).

183 Cai 2005, 26.

184 Chen Gongyin, quoted in Cai 2005, 26.

185 Jiang 2007, 97, Wong Fanggang (1733-1818).

186 Ibid., 89, Wong Fanggang (1733-1818) and Tao Yuan Zao (n.y.).

187 Wang, 2014-b, 391.

188 Ibid.

189 Sullivan 1989, 80. Ting, 1982, 8.

painting.”<sup>190</sup> By contrast, Westerners brought these specific paintings, along with tea, porcelain and silk, back from China to Europe and America in great numbers, following their trade missions.

While this genre of painting was definitely not highly valued in China during the time it was produced, current opinion about them has changed considerably. In recent years, in the region where the artworks were produced 200 years ago, several important retrospectives of Chinese export (painting) art have been organised.<sup>191</sup> Furthermore, major auction houses such as Christie’s and Sotheby’s organise many successful auctions in Hong Kong, Shanghai and Beijing every year, in which Chinese export (reverse glass) paintings or albums of watercolours form part of the auction listing.<sup>192</sup> As Cai states in the richly illustrated catalogue *Chinese Export Fine Art in the Qing Dynasty from Guangdong Museum*: “After several hundred years of vicissitudes, export paintings, once exported to foreign countries (mainly Europe and America) as handicrafts, are now upgraded to works of art. Having turned from the ‘vulgar’ to ‘elegance’, it can be called a miracle in Guangzhou Port cultural history.”<sup>193</sup> The road from two centuries of Chinese history, from ‘China trade’ to ‘China rise’ was bumpy, but it led to this renewed Chinese point of view.

#### Local modernity

As a category of material culture, this art is usually understood in terms of the adaptation of Chinese producers to the foreign market. At this point, the economic value of this category of art comes to the fore. In part, it was this adaption that made this art trade commercially successful. Yet, the identification of Chinese export painting with the foreign market alone is little more than

an unexamined assumption, just as its role as a conduit for the entry of foreign ideas into China has barely been researched. We must not overestimate the gulf between typically Western characteristics and Chinese aspects of the various forms of painting, styles and subject matter in the historical discourse about East-West interactions in relation to Chinese export paintings. Kristina Kleutghen is convinced that in China “consumers along the entire social spectrum enjoyed a diverse range of domestically produced occidentalizing works of Chinese art.”<sup>194</sup> These were not the imported ‘ocean goods’ (洋货, *yáng huò*), as Western imports were known, but rather innovative works of Chinese art, in which interpretations and adaptations of Western ideas coincided with Chinese traditions. In bringing together different styles, subjects, materials, forms and techniques, Chinese artists showed what they did and did not value in terms of Western art and objects. The argument that Chinese export painting is an example of Chinese ‘occidenterie’ signifying the West in order “to meet domestic consumer demand for Western objects,” as Kleutghen explains in her article on Chinese occidenterie, is legitimate.<sup>195</sup> “The dual nature exemplifies the possibilities for art produced in Guangzhou, previously identified as export art,” as she states, “to be reconsidered within the realm of occidenterie.”<sup>196</sup> The subjects of Chinese export paintings, the materials used – sometimes silk and porcelain – blended the familiar and the foreign for both Chinese and Western viewers.

We may assume that Chinese artists not only slavishly copied foreign pieces, but also developed a style that was a unique synthesis of Western and Chinese aesthetics. The Western origin of material and artistic techniques such as oil paints, linear perspective and chiaroscuro

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<sup>190</sup> Taoi 1988, 1–2, quoted in Lee Sai Chong 1996, 7.

<sup>191</sup> In 2001, Guangzhou Museum in collaboration with Zhongshan University organised *Views from the West – Collection of nineteenth century pith paper watercolours donated by Mr. Ifan Williams to the City of Guangzhou*. The Guangzhou Museum of Art presented *Souvenir from Canton – Chinese export paintings from the Victoria and Albert Museum* in 2003. In 2005, *East meets West: Cultural relics from the Pearl River delta region* could be seen in the Hong Kong Museum of History, the Guangzhou Museum of Art and in the Macao Tower. Also in this context are: *Artistic inclusion of the East and West*, an exhibition in the Hong Kong Museum of Art about Western painting traditions in Chinese export painting in 2011 and *Chinese export fine art in the Qing Dynasty from Guangdong Museum* in 2013 in the Guangdong Museum in Guangzhou.

<sup>192</sup> See [www.christies.com](http://www.christies.com) and [www.sothebys.com](http://www.sothebys.com).

<sup>193</sup> Cai 2013, 17.

<sup>194</sup> Kleutghen 2014, 117. Kristina Kleutghen is Assistant Professor of Art History and Archaeology at Washington University in St. Louis. Her research centres on foreign contact in late Imperial Chinese art.

<sup>195</sup> Kleutghen 2014, 119.

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

are undeniable. I concur with Thorp and Vinograd who also argue that the fact that these techniques were adopted in China is more the result of a deliberate and careful choice and appropriation than a case of Chinese export painters passively absorbing Western influences.<sup>197</sup> As Michael Baxandall posits in his *Patterns or Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures*, influence is a controversial concept that:

*is a curse of art criticism primarily because of its wrong-headed grammatical prejudice about who is the agent and who the patient: it seems to reverse the active/passive relation which the historical actor experiences and the inferential beholder will wish to take into account. If one says that X influenced Y it does seem that one is saying that X did something to Y rather than that Y did something to X. But in the consideration of good pictures and painters the second is always the more lively reality.*<sup>198</sup>

In this respect, we must also recall Clark's theory in his influential publication *Modern Asian Art*. He emphasises the importance of the concept of 'local modernity', a concept which makes clear that the new artistic (Western) codes reflected the prevailing desire and demand. Together with many others, myself included, Clark is not an advocate of the stereotypical East-West dichotomy, but is of the opinion that the transfer of Western art conventions in China was a dynamic process with its own characteristics. The annexation of Western-style painting in China was not merely a copy of the Western model, but rather had to do with the fact that these new codes were a response to the then prevailing desire and the 'right' conditions for the Chinese 'receiver'. In other words, the method by which Chinese culture made Western art codes its own was selective.<sup>199</sup> After all, the classical Chinese painting practice was so powerful that it would not simply disappear

from the scene; Western-style painting could exist on the same stage without any danger. Moreover, the flourishing trade with foreign countries required depictions partly painted in a style understandable for the buyers. However, the South Chinese export painters selected carefully and adopted techniques that would enhance the representations and enliven their compositions.<sup>200</sup> Surely, these paintings sold much better.

#### **Western perception,**

##### **representation of Chinese subject matter**

During the period in which the trade in Chinese export paintings took place – roughly between 1750 and 1900 – the Western perception of China changed.<sup>201</sup> In the eighteenth century, China was generally seen as a peace-loving, well organised country with competent, diligent and wise inhabitants and there was a genuine interest in this mysterious place. In the nineteenth century, a vision emerged that mixed broad admiration of China's special qualities with a revulsion and a fascination for the darker side of Chinese society. The loss of two Opium Wars (1839-1842 en 1856-1860), with humiliating consequences for the Chinese authorities and the continued refusal to embrace Western values or to respond to the repeating requests for further access to the country, and to convert to Christianity, had, according to Clunas, lowered China's prestige in Western eyes. Indeed, compared to Japan, whose artistic success in the middle of the nineteenth century was held in high regard by Western writers and artists, China was increasingly seen as moribund and decadent.<sup>202</sup> This change in Western attitude, I concur with Clunas, was reflected in the subjects represented in export paintings: from subjects that emphasise the romantic, exotic and gracious nature of China, to themes with a (negative) message that accentuate the inferior, barbarous character of the Chinese people. Some themes offer a valuable opportunity to "look at how

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197 Thorp & Vinograd 2001, 357.

198 Baxandall 1885, quoted in Heinrich 1999, 239.

199 Clark 1998, 29-43.

200 Cahill 2010, 69.

201 Robertson 2005, 179. Clunas 1984, 96-99.

202 Clunas 1984, 96. For his dissertation *Het paviljoen van porselein* (The porcelain pavilion), the Dutch literary scholar Arie Pos analysed the Dutch literary chinoiserie and the European image of China from 1250 to 2007 (Pos 2008). In his analyses on the downturn of the positive and romantic China image, he makes clear that from the end of the eighteenth century the utopian view of the Heavenly Empire changed and shifted into a negative direction. During the nineteenth century Europeans were increasingly convinced that the level of civilisation in China was dropping and was considered backwards and barbarous compared to civilised Europe. Pos 2008, 122, 148-149.



Fig. 3.27. Chinese man with an ulcerous tumor of the left cheek, Lamqua, oil on board, 1830–1850, 61 x 47 cm, Cushing/Whitney Medical Historical Library Yale University, portrait no. 38.

Westerners and Chinese might have conceived of – and attempted to shape – Chinese identity.”<sup>203</sup> On the eve of the first Opium War, the balance of power between traditional China and the modern West shifted clearly westward. For example, Ari Larissa Heinrich argues in his study on a series of medical portraits that accompanied the American Reverend Peter Parker on his fundraising mission to medical schools and Protestant authorities in the West in the 1830s, that Lamqua’s portraiture can be considered as “an important ideological resource concerning visions of a newly emerging and increasingly racialized Chinese identity.”<sup>204</sup> (Figure 3.27.) Furthermore, according to Heinrich, “we see both the creation and pathologization of an image of Chinese identity based on certain Chinese ‘characteristics’: insensibility to pain, the inadequacy of native medicine, a cultural inability to perform either amputation or autopsy, a belief in the spirits of the dead, and superstition in general.”<sup>205</sup> Heinrich concludes his study with the idea that this particular Lamqua series “represents one stage in the process of gradual ‘medicalization’ of Chinese identity in visual representation that coincides with the emergence and establishments of the idea of a racialized Chinese self-identity.”<sup>206</sup> Although we can consider this series of medical portraits as a representation of the superiority of Western medicine and/or Western ideology and as visuals associating the Chinese character with pathology (‘China you are sick; we can heal you through the ministrations of the missionary medical men’), I seriously wonder if this was the primary underlying intention of Parker’s commission. These paintings were primarily used to promote his missionary enterprise and to support his ‘begging-for-money tour’ around the United States for his hospital in China. It is, however, imaginable that they had this side effect (of pathologising the Chinese people) at the time of their production and it is not



surprising that the afterlife of these paintings evokes new meanings in the twenty-first century. But to relate them to the stereotype concept of the ‘Sick Man of Asia’ – a term only in use since 1895 – is farfetched.<sup>207</sup>

In terms of the representation of the different subject matter, we can say that, around 1800, depictions were especially accurate and detailed, and that, around 1900, many of the images were predominantly imaginative and exotic. According to Dawn Odell, the Chinese developed an early “ethnographic gaze” in response to Western demand and produced scenes of China that were attractive to Western taste, but had little to do with objective or scientific reality.<sup>208</sup> European ‘ethnographic’ prints of Chinese subjects were used, for instance, to decorate porcelain from China, or were copied on paper or canvas.<sup>209</sup> According to

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<sup>203</sup> Heinrich 1999, 240.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid.

<sup>205</sup> Heinrich 2008, 70.

<sup>206</sup> Heinrich 1999, 242.

<sup>207</sup> The concept of the ‘Sick man of Asia’, so I learned from Chu Pingyi (Chu 2010, 356), refers to the ruling Chinese dynasty at the end of the nineteenth century. In the first place, the referent was not the physical characteristics of the Chinese people. “The main source”, so Chu states, “for this metaphor derived from the political situation of the Turkish empire.” At the turn of the century, late Qing intellectuals projected this sick-man image onto the Chinese people to inspire political reforms and self-strengthening.

<sup>208</sup> Odell 2002, 156–158.

<sup>209</sup> It is known that prints by Johannes Nieuhof (1668) were seen in the eighteenth century were used as examples for decorations on Western ceramics or on *Amsterdams Bont*, but were not used as decoration on Chinese porcelain.

Odell, these “ethnographic hybrids”, were no longer meant to demystify China, but were meant rather to emphasise China’s exotic nature.<sup>210</sup>

It is to be expected that misconceptions exist in the representation of a foreign culture, but it is amazing that Chinese painters were so willing to subvert and misrepresent elements of their own culture. Clunas’ opinion is that there was more to it than simply satisfying the Western customer.<sup>211</sup> He sees a link between a tilt in the balance of the relationship between China and the West and the trivialisation of the representation of Chinese culture: from accurate records around 1800 to meaningless, showy scenes around 1900.<sup>212</sup> I think this link can not be made so directly. Rather, it is the case that the extensive and voracious home market in Europe made Western buyers in Canton less critical, which inevitably led to a decline in the quality of export products. Although some images on pith paper could also be seen as ‘a callous statement of disregard’, it seems that the change, over the years, in the representation of the subjects was primarily designed to promote sale and aimed to satisfy their customers’ curiosity (and perception) of China. When foreign buyers commissioned their own ‘Chinese’ paintings, local producers lost the capacity to stick to their own tradition. Despite losing this aspect of creativity, the production and exchange remained resilient. These new ways apparently thrived economically without completely destroying the producers’ dignity.

#### Emblems of the historical China trade

Chinese export paintings can be regarded within a global trade frame. They grew out of this trade and can be regarded as commodities with a specific use value (as previously mentioned). To explain the use, function and symbolic meaning of Chinese export paintings, if they are treated as exchange items, it is the exchange itself that utterly determines much of Canton’s export painting production, and not the initial intentions of the Chinese painters, the producers. Furthermore, we cannot say that Chinese export paintings have a ‘personalised’ life story or that they ‘export’ a part of a person’s renown. Like Ter Keurs’ observations on wooden bowls (*on*) – the major trade items of the Siassi – Chinese

export paintings do not literally circulate in the trade system.<sup>213</sup> They do not serve their purpose as trade items in a circular exchange network. In the flourishing trade system of yesteryear they were not intended to return to their producers. Indeed, those producers had no or no great interest in their consumers. The export painting business flourished especially in the heyday of the historical China trade, which is in the first half of the nineteenth century. For the producers in Canton, the paintings were ‘lost’ the moment they were sold. What goods were purchased with the money they received in return for a painting is unknown. Maybe they used it to buy new painting materials or to pay the wages of the studio painters, or, who knows, to purchase opium, as this addictive substance was quite popular at that time all over the south of China. That said, we have no ethnographic information to support such an argument.

The proposition that Chinese export paintings in the nineteenth century were not made for the purpose of circulating in the trade system, which would see them return to the place of production, still stands. Currently, however, in the twenty-first century, there are more and more examples of Chinese export paintings returning to the place where, two centuries ago, they were made. In the Pearl River delta an increasing number of people are keener than ever before in Chinese history to find this kind of painting to put on display in brand-new China export trade or maritime museums and to study this phenomenon in new established research institutes and major universities. These institutions now consider the informative images as silent witnesses to the social and cultural history of the South Chinese port city of Guangzhou.<sup>214</sup> In Europe, too, collectors of this genre of Chinese art are increasingly donating (parts of) their collection to museums in Guangzhou. Now that the conservation practices in Chinese museums have significantly improved in comparison to a decade ago, as a European or American collector you can be assured that the paintings are more than welcome back. In this respect, Chinese export paintings are no longer ‘lost’ on the periphery of the trade networks.

The fact that the paintings referred to in this research came from China, and are very much recognisable as such, meant that their value

210 Odell 2002, 156–158.

211 Clunas 1984, 69.

212 Ibid.

213 Ter Keurs 2006, 119–120.

214 Chen 2003, 10–12.

within the Dutch-Chinese trade system was of the utmost importance. The full meaning of them can only be understood, not simply by looking at them as static symbolic images, but by studying them as icons of a particular period that travel along art trade trajectories and via successive family members, to be used again in other contexts.

#### **Shared material culture**

The subject of Chinese export painting with its multifaceted aspects has hitherto always been treated in comparison with the subject of Western-style painting or that of Chinese literati painting. I suggest that it is time to change our angle of approach and consider Chinese export paintings as the results of a material and visual culture originating from an integrated economy between the West and China, such as the dynamic in the nineteenth century. This type of painting can be viewed as a product of this integration, composed and full of combinations that together created this new genre: a shared Chinese-Western (EurAsian) product. I follow Gerritsen, who says that adopting this approach has a number of advantages.<sup>215</sup> Firstly, this notion prevents any implicit or explicit value judgement being made about the way in which various techniques are used, or how painting styles and compositions are created, or how Chinese export paintings are created in comparison with the painting conventions in the West or in China at that time. Differences can certainly be distinguished. It is more interesting, however, when we compare and treat on equal terms the different processes that comprise painting, rather than the products themselves. Secondly, with such an integrated approach, we can avoid the idea that history and its material culture must be assigned to particular countries. As is generally known, narratives, people, goods, ideas and knowledge are not bound by national borders. On the contrary, they seep through them repeatedly making connections between shared aspects in history and in material culture. Thinking about the diffuse global trajectories of goods, etc., in this way creates, at the very least, the potential for “a shared, global, material culture.”<sup>216</sup>

In general, we can say that in their material

form and function Chinese export paintings fused Chinese and Western cultures. They acted as a physical artifact out of the intercultural China trade process. It is true that at the very beginning of their biography, Chinese sellers and Western buyers attached different meanings to these paintings, but each side found them useful in dealing with and making sense of the other.<sup>217</sup> As recalled by Timothy Shannon, Nicolas Thomas calls them “entangled objects”; that is, physical embodiments of the differing ways buyers and sellers in Canton perceived each other.<sup>218</sup> On the one hand, Western buyers regarded a Chinese export painting or album as a gift, as barter, as a souvenir, reminding them of the dangers and hardships (possibly from one of the opium wars), or as a collector’s item, a precious and sentimental keepsake. It has never convincingly been proven whether these paintings occurred in acts of negotiation and business exchange between Chinese and Westerners in this historical China trade period. Chinese sellers, on the other hand, used export painting as a means to earn money and as a symbol of their high quality painting skills. Both groups granted these paintings some, albeit different kind of significance and value.

As a separate genre within Chinese export art, export paintings were, on the one hand, identified as common merchandise, while, on the other hand, they were simultaneously regarded as artistic products. Until today, these paintings still speak to many people. The precision with which these paintings were made is an important element in their value as historical documents.<sup>219</sup> We see not only a representation of the contact between two different cultures, we also know and see that the images are made by representatives of the one culture, who make use of some of the imagery of the other culture. When we try to deal with these paintings at the point of their production and examine the paintings in detail, it is essential, according to Conner, to continue to involve the context of the painters and to analyse the situation in which the artist found himself; that is to say, why he made this particular painting, which paintings he had to paint and whether he was more or less skilled at depicting them.<sup>220</sup> I fully agree with this.

Chinese export paintings possess a special

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<sup>215</sup> Gerritsen 2013, 38.

<sup>216</sup> Gerritsen 2014, 14.

<sup>217</sup> Shannon 2005, 593.

<sup>218</sup> Thomas quoted in Shannon 2005, 593.

<sup>219</sup> Conner 2002, 76.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid.



historic value, more than just an art historical one.<sup>221</sup> Over time, these paintings have become rare and valuable documents in the investigation of both Chinese-Western exchange and the subjects of the images themselves. As Crossman states, they also fulfilled a need of Western merchants and travellers to show those at home where they had been or had sometimes lived for years.<sup>222</sup> Words often failed to describe Chinese lives back in the West. The paintings, with their visual richness, played an important role in revealing all aspects of Chinese life, and currently they are increasingly coming to the fore in social- and cultural historic research.

Around the world, there are quite a number of people who classify only a select number of paintings as meeting a relatively high artistic standard and consider the paintings referred to in this research as rather stiff, painted by, as Wang et al. unelegantly call them, “jobbing painters in workshops based on the same master copy, and of no great artistic merit.”<sup>223</sup> Although the value of Chinese export paintings is not about a relatively high artistic standard and the fairly conservative level of content and form in most of the images per se, we must recognise their uniqueness in terms of fitting into two aesthetic value systems. For instance, the combination of Western painting conventions such as plasticity, linear-perspective, foreshortening of figures, composition and the use of colour and shadow, with a more Chinese ‘hand’ in the representation of rocks, trees and mountains with meticulous brushwork, sometimes clearly done with multi-headed brushes, the lavish colours and the Chinese subject matter. The traits of this genre certainly meant it was highly attractive to its Western buyers. Another striking feature of the dialogue between the ideas on aesthetics is the difference in attitude towards authenticity and copying. Although, on the one hand, the mass production established an enduring image of the historical China trade, it is known that the reproduction of artworks made by division of labour and separation of tasks traditionally had a pejorative connotation in the Western art value system.<sup>224</sup>

By contrast, the Chinese did not judge this reproduction process in such categorical negative terms.<sup>225</sup> Since module and mass production is common practice in Chinese language, literature and architecture, philosophy and social organisations, the Chinese have no problem with working with templates as part of an assembly line in executing their paintings. On the contrary, as Ledderose states: “it helps them to organize their production process and allows them to attract customers of different economic means. A workshop specializing in paintings [...] that can offer a choice of sets in different sizes and with more (or fewer) figures and motifs will be able to appeal to a wide range of clients.”<sup>226</sup> In no other area of Chinese export art are the differences between these aesthetic value systems more fundamental, and the compromises which follow from the confrontation between the individual cultural particularities more interesting, than in painting. A painting (whatever genre) always depicts a three-dimensional thing, both human and/or inanimate, on its canvas.<sup>227</sup> The elegance of Chinese export painting can be found in the integration of different painting conventions, mediated into a new and mixed painting style in its own right. Moreover, the large repertoire in subject matter and media used for an export painting of everyone’s choice and ditto budget, the specific cultural production arena with its own traits (commercial trading market with commodities, blended, interweaving ideas about esthetics, the use of integrated and shared concepts in design and execution of art, which resulted in EurAsian art), makes Chinese export painting a shared material culture between all trading nationalities and international manners and mechanisms at work in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Pearl River delta.

### 3.5. Conclusion

This chapter has addressed four connected issues to map the phenomenon of Chinese export painting: the Dutch trade with China in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; the

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221 Cai & Blussé 2004, 55.

222 Crossman 1991, 183, 202.

223 Wang et al. 2011, 29.

224 Ledderose 2000, 7.

225 Ibid. Recent research has uncovered that in the arts of the European Middle Ages reproduction could indeed be used as a means to define an artistic tradition and even to reinforce the impact of specific works. See also: Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence* (1994).

226 Ledderose 2000, 6.

227 Coltman 2015, 17.

examination of the concepts globalisation and glocalisation; the major ‘protagonists’ active in this painting market, including the techniques used, working methods, and formal aspects of the paintings; and, lastly some viewpoints that lead to the conclusion that these paintings must be treated as a shared cultural visual repertoire, as emblems of a historical period of time, and forever connected to a global trade frame of mainly Western audiences. The interesting process in which space was created to mix existing visual conventions in China with a foreign visual language, resulted in this transcultural, integrated painting genre with works of art that, notwithstanding the low status at the time and place of their production, have transformed from ‘vulgar’ to ‘elegant’.

In former times, translation, in one way or another, allowed Western buyers of Chinese export paintings, on their return home, to journey back to adventurous times on the other side of our globe. The question is whether, in recent times, when translating, literally, these transcultural artworks into intelligible language, viewers, curators, collectors and connoisseurs are able to experience the same audacity, once they are connected with this specific cultural heritage? As translation is an ongoing cultural act with temporal and spatial properties, present *actants* – either the paintings themselves or human activity around them – could work towards a positive answer on this question. For my part, I am more than happy to contribute to achieving this.

Chinese export paintings were produced with specific audiences and aims in mind, but the painters seldom controlled who ultimately saw them. What is indisputable, however, is that through the fusion of Western and Chinese painting conventions and technology a unique own painting style has been created of remarkable innovation and enduring beauty. Yet, as Shannon states, regarding the use value of an Indian tomahawk, “this hybridity also created ambiguity.”<sup>228</sup> The world of Chinese export paintings, with its multiple discourses and interdependencies, has shaped ambiguous understandings of what China means. Can these paintings be understood as a “more complex negotiation between two cultures?” as Harish

Trivedi so aptly calls it?<sup>229</sup> Indeed, they played a role in mediating between cultures, but, and I will borrow the words of Shannon again, “they obscured as much as they clarified each side’s perception of the other.”<sup>230</sup>

The following chapter sheds light on the Dutch corpus, its meaning and use value. The concepts of ‘sites’ and ‘modalities’, as highlighted in Chapter 2, are essential for the qualification and evaluation of visual material. Besides study of the (sets of) paintings themselves, a broad variation of documentary sources on the distinguished genres are also taken into account to appreciate the joint Dutch collections. In doing so, as we shall see, ambiguity regularly rears its head.

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228 Shannon 2005, 623.

229 Trivedi 2005. Harish Trivedi, professor of English at the University of Delhi, is the author of *Colonial Transactions: English Literature and India* (1993), and has co-edited *Interrogating Postcolonialism* (1996), *Postcolonial Translations* (1998) and *Literature and Nation: Britain and India 1800–1990* (with Richard Allen, 2000). He also translates from Hindi into English.

230 Trivedi 2005.

