



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

Value accrument and dwindling of an iconic Chinese export painting: a journey

Poel, R.H.M. van der; Westgeest, H.; Zijlmans, C.J.M.

Citation

Poel, R. H. M. van der. (2021). Value accrument and dwindling of an iconic Chinese export painting: a journey. In H. Westgeest & C. J. M. Zijlmans (Eds.), *PLURAL* (pp. 147-153). Amsterdam: Valiz. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3238893>

Version: Publisher's Version

License: [Creative Commons CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3238893>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

MIX & STIR

VALUE ACCRUEMENT AND DWINDLING OF AN ICONIC CHINESE EXPORT PAINTING A Journey

Rosalien van der Poel

INGREDIENTS

- Cultural Biography
- Confluence of Values: commodity/export, historical, artistic, and material values
- Interpretation related to 'layers' of use
- Revivification

In the nineteenth century, Chinese export paintings had a strong appeal to foreigners who were in China because of maritime trade. Dutch public collections comprising these kinds of paintings include a substantial number of works representing maritime topics.¹ Harbour views, such as those of Canton, are still signifiers of the historical China trade in our time. This important category of Chinese export paintings can be analysed both as representations and as commodities whose value and meaning were accrued through specific and economic forms of exchange. By mapping the 'cultural biography' of an iconic harbour view, which was in the Leiden Museum Volkenkunde and is currently in the Hong Kong Museum of Art, this essay shows that the value of this transcultural artwork lies in its movement and connected interpretations.² This approach of looking at the painting from a commodity perspective and treat it as an active player in the networks that connect it to human practices and current ideas and concepts, enables us to relate historical times of the Dutch China trade to present-day practices between the Netherlands and China. Even more, this case study gives us a new outlook on research into contemporary artworks from a global perspective.

1. Rosalien van der Poel, *Made for Trade—Made in China. Chinese Export Painting in Dutch Collections: Art and Commodity*, PhD diss., Leiden University, 2016.

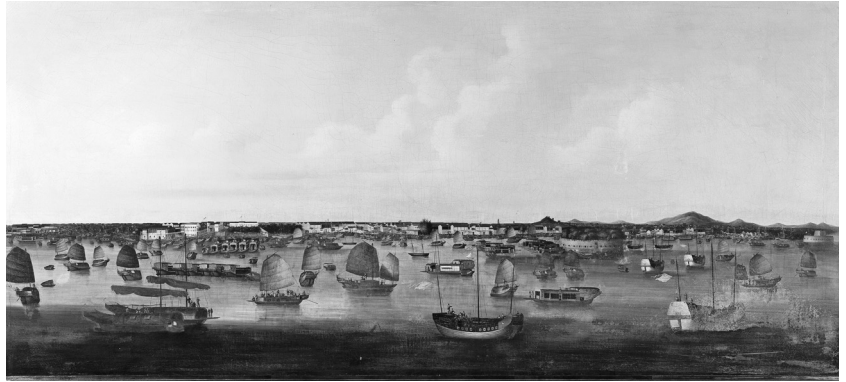
2. Igor Kopytoff brought the notion 'cultural biography' of objects to the fore in 'The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process', *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge, 1986), pp. 64–91.

Glorious but Overlooked Value – A Cultural Biography

From 1905 to 2018 the painting of a panoramic view of the Pearl River and the quay of Canton (ca. 1850, anonymous), central in this essay, was kept in the collection of Museum Volkenkunde in Leiden. The cultural biography of this large painting may reveal something about its function and use value over the course of time. That is to say, from the moment of purchase by its first owner, the Dutch government official, trader, and diplomat Tonco Modderman (1813–1858), in the mid-nineteenth century in China, to its current status as an educational and revealing object in the collection of the Hong Kong Museum of Art, accessible in its former glory for anyone who would like to learn about the past.

This remarkably wide panorama shows life on the Pearl River with hundreds of boats depicted in the foreground. The quay and its dwellings, as seen from the river, are depicted in the middle ground. Above this scene is a high sky, in which a light cloud cover can be discerned. The Western trading factories can be seen left of the centre. When we take a closer look at the composition of this painting it becomes clear that this constructed landscape combines different cultural conventions. On the one hand, because of its wideness and its multiple perspectives, this harbour view can be read almost like a Chinese handscroll, to be read from right to left. On the other hand, the composition of this painting is typical of seventeenth-century European landscape art, with two-thirds of the canvas used for the sky, a low horizon line and a mainly bird's-eye perspective. In this way, this representation of the thriving port city of Canton on this transcultural artwork displays the interweaving of local and global knowledge of painting conventions. Application of this integrated, shared painting style accrued value to the painting as an artwork and a commodity at the same time. Although many similar (but all slightly different) representations of this scene are known, in this case the individual authorship is recognizable and its historical and material value—the narrative makes this painting an interesting object to exhibit—gives this painting a genuine art connotation.³

3. Martyn Gregory, *Merchants and Mariners*. Catalogue 98 (London, 2018), pp. 98–100. Other panoramic paintings like *View on the Canton Waterfront* which can be attributed to Youqua on the strength of similarities, can be found in the collections of the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich (BHC 1785) and Guangdong Provincial Museum, to which is still attached the label of 'Youqua Painter / Old [China] Street No. 34', illustrated in Patrick Conner, *The Hongs of Canton: Western Merchants in South China 1700–1900, As Seen in Chinese Export Paintings* (London, 2009), pp. 182–83.



A Panoramic View of the Waterfront at Canton, anonymous, 1845–1855, oil on canvas, 87.5 × 200 cm, Hong Kong Museum of Art, inv.no. AH2018.0003.001.

Between 1843 and 1856, Tonco Modderman, the person who initially owned the work, lived alternately in Canton, Batavia, India, and Macao. In 1847 he married the Batavia-born Angelique Ardesch (1831-1852), who died in November 1852, while on board of a ship, the *Rotterdam*, bound for Holland. She left behind two children: Marie and Louise-Jacoba. Modderman's failing health forced him to leave Macao in 1856 and return to Holland, where he died in 1858.

Hypothetically, it is highly possible that Modderman obtained this Canton harbour view either in the years spanning his second Chinese and Macanese period in the 1850s, or in his Netherlands East Indies period in Batavia from 1846 to 1848, where he ran a household with his wife Angelique. Given what we do know, we can form a cultural biography with some degree of certainty. We must point out the highly attractive Chinese export art market itself, as a first meaningful and decisive cultural marker. In fact, this market was so remarkable that for this reason alone the painting was awarded a high use value as a commercial product and was judged to be of great worth. Its saleability and exchangeability were highly significant, perhaps even its main feature. In addition, it could have accomplished a commemorative and decorative function and an important means of self-fashioning and self-expression, both during Modderman's time in the East Indies trade society or in Chinese commercial circles, and

when he lived in his home country again. By analysing other cultural markers in the painting's biography, we notice a major change in its use value over the course of time as a result of various sociocultural and temporal aspects.

When Modderman passed away in 1858 it is likely that his daughter Louise Modderman (1852–1875) inherited the painting, so emblematic of an elite status. In 1871, when Modderman's daughter married Cornelis Leembruggen (1838–1905), she took this heirloom with her to furnish the walls of the huge family house in Leiden, where it hung until Cornelis died, in 1905. In this year, their son, Willem Leembruggen (1871–1925), the then director of the family's Leiden textile factory, inherited the canvas. In the same year, Willem moved to another, much smaller house; he subsequently donated the painting as a long-term loan to Museum Volkenkunde. This loan to the museum clarifies something about the private valuation put upon this work of art by its owner at that time and how, consequently, this particular meaning 'evaporated' from the painting. On the one hand, to put it negatively, the work could have been too big (no wall space in the new house), too dark, or in need of a restoration. On the other hand, to put it more positively, Willem's donation was given due to the trustworthy character of Museum Volkenkunde and its curators. He might have thought that this painting would be much better off in their care, rather than keeping it himself. In all cases, the upshot was the deliberate act of renouncing the painting, which subsequently accrued new use value. Appraised as an expression of wealth and trading successes of his ancestors, the painting was assigned a different value by Willem Leembruggen. Instead of treating the painting as an ordinary and saleable commodity and putting it up for auction at the art market, it was, however, considered to be a valuable item, worth preserving for future generations. Moreover, the family must have felt that *selling* the painting was, as the cultural anthropologist, Igor Kopytoff, calls it 'trading downward'.⁴ This idea springs from the idea that things called *art* or *historical objects* are superior to the world of commerce.

When looking at the total trajectory from production to consumption, this painting, for a long time languishing in the museum storeroom could be considered 'frozen' or as de-commodified.⁵ There is no living or

4. Kopytoff 1986 (see note 2), p. 82.

5. I came across the term 'freezing' in *Commodification: Things, Agency, and Identities (The Social Life of Thing Revisited)*, eds. Wim van Binsbergen and Peter Geschiere (Münster, 2005), which gave me an essential insight into the Dutch collections, many of which are currently 'deep frozen', or, in other words, 'overlooked and neglected', taken out circulation. Some scholars, however, believe that a work never can be 'frozen', because even when a work of art is overlooked and neglected, it always shares a dynamic cultural context. Once a work is accessible through the internet, so I argue, it is no longer 'frozen'.

COMMODITY AND KEEPSAKE

6. Paul Van Dongen, former curator China in Museum Volkenkunde (1984–2011), informed me (July 2011) that neither he, nor his predecessor, since the 1950s to 1984, had ever displayed this painting (inv. no. RV-360-B3-1).

7. This exhibition, held from 23 September 2017 to 18 March 2018, came about as the result of close cooperation between the Guangdong Museum in Guangzhou and Museum Oud Amelisweerd (MOA). ‘Made in China’ included twelve works by the Dutch artist Armando, ranging from drawings in ink to landscapes in oil. Armando’s view of landscape shows many similarities to the Chinese tradition. He was one of the few Western artists to create both horizontal and vertical landscapes, the latter of which display visual relationships similar to those of Chinese hanging scroll paintings. And the insignificance of mankind forms an important theme in his work, as it did for the Chinese landscape painters.

8. The walls of the two largest rooms on the ground floor are fully covered with Chinese wallpapers (1750–1770). They are unique in their size and in the fact that they have been kept in good condition at their original location.

institutional memory of the painting ever having been exhibited following its donation.⁶ This low status had nothing to do with identity marking or with unique, artistic, and historic value; rather, it had everything to do with priorities and strategies in collection management, whether or not motivated by valuation of Chinese export painting in general and/or by financial considerations. In turn, we can assume that these considerations were fed by ignorance of the museum management about the high use value of this artwork.

Provenance research and bringing the value of this painting and its narrative to the fore again and again since 2008 caused a turn in the cultural biography of this transcultural artwork. In 2017, when a curator from Museum Oud Amelisweerd (MOA), an eighteenth-century stately country estate near the City of Utrecht, was looking for an emblematic painting that depicted ‘everything’ about the historical China trade, we could not think of a better example than the piece central to this chapter. So, it happened that this painting was on show at the exhibition ‘Made in China. Armando and masterworks from the Qing Dynasty.’⁷ The artwork was exhibited with remarkable eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Chinese objects from the Guangdong Museum collection as they relate to the mansion’s famous Chinese wallpapers.⁸

While on display at MOA, the cultural biography of the *View of the Waterfront of Canton* got another exciting turn at the end of December 2017. At this time the members of the Leembruggen family formed a new interest in the status of the painting. It seemed that the exhibition in MOA has worked as a catalyst for the family to act. In this period, the Leembruggens broke the permanent loan contract with Museum Volkenkunde, got their painting back, explored the possibilities of conservation and thought about what to do next with it. It took only a short while for them to decide to put it up for sale in the art market. In November 2018 *View of the Waterfront of Canton* had been restored and was put on display, together with a companion piece *View of Honam*, at the exhibition ‘Merchants and Mariners. Historical pictures by Chinese and Western artists 1750–1970’ at the Hong Kong Maritime Museum. From here it was sold to the Hong Kong Museum of Art, where *View of the Waterfront of Canton* is publicly accessible

again. Thanks to the revivification of this nineteenth-century painting, the public can now learn about the historical China trade in the Pearl River Delta and the history of Guangzhou as an important port city.⁹

This biographical approach to the understanding of this painting argues that biographies of people and things are inseparable and will indicate current and future roles for this painting. The growing knowledge about the work has led to a higher valuation of this artwork now that it is back in circulation. In short, the painting functioned as an artistic commodity at the time and place of its production, until its inheritance by the Leembruggen family, when it became a ‘keepsake’ and a real identity marker for the people involved. It was a neglected and overlooked item during the time it was in the depot of the Leiden museum, from where it ‘escaped’ and in 2017 turned into a major art piece in a Dutch national heritage exhibition on Chinese-Dutch cultural interaction. Its life story after this is known by now.

This case study also provides ingredients for a new outlook on research into contemporary artworks from a global perspective. Chinese export paintings, likewise contemporary artworks, move around the world and, when objects move, so we learn from the writings of

9. This exhibition, organized by the London-based Martyn Gregory Gallery, was held from 8 to 17 November 2018. In the Hong Kong Museum of Art, the painting got a new title: *Panoramic View of the Waterfront at Canton* and inv. no. AH2018.0003.001. In the museum collection the artwork also became part of a set with its companion piece *View on Honam*, inv.no. AH2018.0003.002.



A Panoramic View of the Waterfront at Canton on display, Museum Oud Amelisweerd.



A Panoramic View of the Waterfront at Canton on display at 'Merchants and Mariners. Historical pictures by Chinese and Western artists 1750–1970', Hong Kong Maritime Museum.

10. *Writing Material Culture History*, eds. Anne Gerritsen and Giorgio Riello (London/ New York, 2015), pp. 6–7.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 8. Gerritsen uses this term (layers) when she writes about the presentation as well as the preservation and representation of material cultures in exhibitions, films, and museum displays.

Anne Gerritsen, 'they establish connections across space. ... Objects articulate exchange, taste, design and cultural understanding on a global scale.'¹⁰ The sketches of the biographical fragments of the painting and its owners show that the value of this work lies in its movement and connected interpretations. The time and place of its production and its cultural biography with some clear markers of value accrument along the journey the painting made from China to the museum in the Netherlands and back to the Chinese region again, allow the audience to become actively involved in the future shaping of this painting's meaning. Future interpretation of other worthwhile Chinese export paintings in Dutch collections for possible revivification includes awareness of the fact that these artworks are the result of different 'layers' of use, interpretation across space and restoration across time.¹¹ Likewise, how they are classified, archived, and labelled adds layers. The curators' responsibility to take care of and to prevent the run-down oil paintings from being further damaged, by keeping them 'frozen' on racks in the storerooms, conflicts with the curators' other social duties to valorize their research and display their collections to the public. Hopefully this essay will also be seen as a strong plea to take care of similar paintings and their otherwise dire fate.

COLOPHON

EDITORS

Helen Westgeest, Kitty Zijlmans

CONTRIBUTIONS BY

Thomas J. Berghuis, Elisabeth de Bièvre, John Clark, Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, Parisa Damandan, Wilfried van Damme, Sophie Ernst, Angèle Etoundi Essamba, Paul Faber, Claire Farago, Anne Gerritsen, Jacqueline Hoàng Nguyễn, Isabel Hoving, Stijn Huijts, Nancy Jouwe, Remy Jungerman, Sonja van Kerkhoff, Meta Knol, Frans-Willem Korsten, Katja Kwastek, Sybille Lammes, Charl Landvreugd, Gregor Langfeld, Chris Lee, Joo Yun Lee, Christa-Maria Lerm Hayes, Virginia MacKenny, Sarat Maharaj, Tirzo Martha, Kyveli Mavrokordopoulou, Larissa Mendoza Straffon, Ni Haifeng, Stéphanie Noach, Anja Novak, John Onians, Rob Perrée, Georges Petitjean, Rosalien van der Poel, Jennifer Pranolo, Lize van Robbroeck, Pippa Skotnes, Henk Slager, Rudi Struik, Eva-Maria Troelenberg, Leonor Veiga, Leon Wainwright, James Webb, Janneke Wesseling, Helen Westgeest, Carine Zaayman, Kitty Zijlmans, Robert Zwijnenberg

TRANSLATION

Janey Tucker (Perrée), Anna Yeadell (Knol, Landvreugd), Susan Pond (Huijts)

COPY-EDITING

Leo Reijnen

PROOFREADING

Elke Stevens

INDEX

Elke Stevens

IMAGE RESEARCH

the authors, Lotte Lara Schröder

GRAPHIC DESIGN

Lotte Lara Schröder
(incl. chapter openings, theme images, cover)

TYPEFACES

Ohno Blazeface by OH No Type Co.
Ginto Normal by Dinamo
Times New Roman MT Std

PAPER

Munken Print White 1.5 100 gr
Fedrigoni Arena Natural Rough 200 gr

LITHOGRAPHY

Mariska Bijl, Wilco Art Books,
Amsterdam

PRINTING AND BINDING

Wilco Art Books, Amersfoort

PUBLISHER

Valiz, Amsterdam 2021
Astrid Vorstermans & Pia Pol
www.valiz.nl



INTERNATIONAL DISTRIBUTION

BE/NL/LU: Centraal Boekhuis,
www.centraal.boekhuis.nl
Europe/Asia (except GB/IE):
Idea Books, www.ideabooks.nl
GB/IE: Anagram Books,
www.anagrambooks.com
USA/Canada/Latin America:
D.A.P., www.artbook.com
Australia: Perimeter Books,
www.perimeterbooks.com
Individual orders: www.valiz.nl;
info@valiz.nl

TEXTS



The texts of this book are licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivativesWorks 4.0 international licence.

You are free to: Share, copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format. The licensor cannot revoke these freedoms as long as you follow the license terms.

Under the following terms:

- Attribution
- NonCommercial
- NoDerivatives
- No additional restrictions

The full license can be found at creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0

This publication has been printed on FSC-certified paper by an FSC-certified printer. The FSC, Forest Stewardship Council promotes environmentally appropriate, socially beneficial, and economically viable management of the world's forests. [fsc.org](https://www.fsc.org)

FOR THE IMAGES: © ALL RIGHTS RESERVED, AMSTERDAM, 2021

For works of visual artists affiliated with a CISAC-organization the copyrights have been settled with Pictoright in Amsterdam.

© Pictoright, 2021

Since most of the images are directly related to the text, their use is permitted under citation right in this context.

We apologize for any inadvert errors or omissions. The author and the publisher have made every effort to secure permission to reproduce the listed material, texts, illustrations and photographs. Parties who nevertheless believe they can claim specific legal rights are invited to contact the publisher. info@valiz.nl

This book has been generously supported by the

- Mondriaan Fund
- Academy of Creative and Performing Arts (ACPA), University of the Arts, The Hague / Faculty of Humanities, Leiden University



Academie
Academy of
der
Creative and
Kunsten
Performing Arts



ISBN 978-94-93246-05-8
Printed and bound in the EU, 2021