

**THE SOCIAL STATUS AND THOUGHT OF MERCHANTS IN  
MING CHINA, 1368-1644: A FORAY IN CLARIFYING THE  
SOCIAL EFFECTS OF THE COMMERCIALIZATION OF MING  
CHINA**

by

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## **Abstract**

Recent proponents of non-Eurocentric approaches to the study of development in non-Western areas in the early modern period have seized on late imperial China (1368-1911) as an example of an indigenous trajectory of development that disputes the primacy of early modern Europe in some theories. The commercialization of Ming China (1368-1644) is sometimes appropriated in their arguments. But at times the term “commercialization” is not particularly well-defined in the case of sixteenth and seventeenth century China. In order to strengthen the arguments against Eurocentric assessments of non-Western development, this thesis covers some aspects of Ming commerce and society that are sometimes not captured by the term commercialization. In particular, it focuses on more ‘personal’ dimensions often neglected by references to the commercialization of China’s economy and society in the latter half of the Ming period. Aspects that will be discussed include: social change and social mobility, higher-ranking officials’ views of commerce and merchants, and the identity of merchants as seen in merchant manuals. The application of some recent research by other scholars of Ming China and my readings of some sources dating from the period, I hope, will add nuances to our understanding of Ming commerce and society and furthermore contribute to a detailed approach to the non-Eurocentric writing of a comparative history of development in the early modern world.

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## Abbreviations

CHC	<i>The Cambridge History of China</i>
DMB	<i>Dictionary of Ming Biography</i>
ECCP	<i>Eminent Chinese of the Ch'ing Period</i>
KSYLXM	《客商一览醒迷》 <i>Bringing Merchants to Their Senses</i>
HMJSWB	《皇明经世文编》 <i>Collected Statecraft Writings of the Ming Period</i>
HMMCJL	《皇明名臣经济录》 <i>Collected Statecraft Writings by Ming Officials</i>
MHD	《明会典》 <i>Collected Statutory Information of the Ming Dynasty</i>
MS	《明史》 <i>The History of the Ming Dynasty</i>
MSL	《明实录》 <i>The Veritable Records of the Ming Emperors</i>
SSLY	《士商类要》 <i>Compendium for Gentry and Merchants</i>

## Chapter 1

### Introduction

In the middle of the sixteenth century, a county gazetteer from the Jiangbei region made a curious report of recent developments in local customs (风俗) :

“Pei was originally called Gaoli in Han times. Its people were violent, but because of Pei’s proximity to Lu [the birthplace of Confucius] its people acquired a touch of the sage’s wisdom. Despite ravages by the Mongol Yuan, the civility of the present [Ming] dynasty reached all corners, and for over one hundred years lived in simplicity. What past gazetteers recorded, remains true for the most part. *But winds from afar have colored the county, and personal relationships and judgments of good and bad have recently changed. This county lies in the middle of busy north-south traffic, and outsiders from all directions have gathered and mingled here; the population is becoming increasingly extravagant, reverent of power, and the wealthy is becoming increasingly arrogant.* Only in marriages do they not speak of wealth, and they remember to educate their children. Most commendably, the practice of bringing groundless accusations against officials has not appeared in over one hundred years. Even though the good and bad of local culture are driven and transformed by broader cultural context, officials should be heartened by this opportunity to spread culture to this area!”<sup>1</sup>

Although couched in the language of official rhetoric, the gazetteer’s observation raises questions about the social status of commerce and merchants, anxieties about consumption, and the relationship between merchants and the state. That the gazetteer wrote about social change in the middle of the passage with a hint of apprehension suggests that commerce and merchants were viewed with a degree of suspicion. The tepid admission of the arrival of outsiders and the local

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<sup>1</sup> *Gazetteer of Pei County* (1543), 1: 13b-14a. The middle of this passage is italicized for emphasis. The original Chinese reads: 沛本汉高里，民尚霸习，以其去鲁不远，犹有先圣遗风，虽遭胡元之变，而国朝文教四被，风俗还淳，百余年来民熙如也，旧志所载大略亦尽。但风渐气染，人情靡当，美恶所趋近亦有不同者。县当南北通衢，四方之民杂处其间，人情日渐奢侈、颇尚势力、财雄挟肘，气相当高；独婚不论财、人知教子，百年未告讦官长之风，最为得之。虽俗之美恶固风使然，而转化导之机亦在，上之人鼓舞何如耳。

population's subsequent increasingly extravagant and power-orientated behavior, moreover, suggests that levels of consumption and patterns of consumption were changing. And the contrast between the apprehension of the middle part of this quotation and the optimism of the last part suggests that local scholar-officials, who were responsible for writing provincial gazetteers, had mixed feelings towards commerce and a paternalistic view of their official responsibilities to the local people.

All these themes are relevant to our understanding of society in Ming China (1368-1644). They help us address some issues not often captured by scholarly references to the commercialization of society in this period. While commercialization is an extremely helpful term that bundles together disparate trends in the social and economic development of China in the *longue durée*, usually from Song China (960-1278) to the eighteenth century, the meaning of commercialization as used in some scholarly works on Ming China is somewhat problematic. In general, the term commercialization is often invoked in conjunction with observations about Ming population growth, the development of industries and market towns, the spread of the consumption of elaborately prepared goods and services, and the expansion of long-distance domestic trade and foreign trade.<sup>2</sup> In other words, commercialization refers to the preconditions as well as the processes involved in the increase in production and the increase in the social significance of the market forces that allocated and consumed the goods produced and the

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<sup>2</sup> For an example, see the subsection on rural commercialization by Martin Heijdra in his chapter in the CHC. Martin Heijdra, "The socio-economic development of rural China during the Ming," in Denis Twitchett and Fredrick W. Mote, eds., *The Cambridge History of China* Vol. 8 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 496-503.

services performed.<sup>3</sup> This approach to Chinese society and economy accurately gives the impression that society and economy underwent significant changes during the Ming period.<sup>4</sup> But broad strokes about the development of commerce and commerce's effects on Ming culture and society can easily let particular nuances escape from our view. As David Faure, a historian of South China has stated, research on past Chinese society should be based more on local history supported by fieldwork.<sup>5</sup> An implication of this view is that we cannot confidently speak about the commerce of the entire area of China without brushing aside the particularities of individual locations. I agree with Faure on the importance of local history and fieldwork, and I would further suggest that generalizations about late imperial China's commerce also brush aside nuances about social status and nuances that inform us about the different beliefs of different strata and substrata of late imperial Chinese society. Andre Gunder Frank's *ReORIENT*, for instance, was quick to point to the commercialization of Ming society to argue that sixteenth and seventeenth century China was a magnet for world supplies of silver.<sup>6</sup> For Frank, Ming China was an example of a non-Western society that had its own trajectory of development and it is therefore inappropriate

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<sup>3</sup> Timothy Brook defined commercialization as "the transformation of trade from the collection of surplus to the circulation of commodities produced for commercial sale; it alters the distribution not just of economic resources but of social power as well, and this alteration is manifested in culture, among other spheres." Timothy Brook, *The Confusions of Pleasure: Commerce and Culture in Ming China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 264n13.

<sup>4</sup> An example of this change was the growth in demand for fashionable items, which is vividly portrayed in Brook, *The Confusions of Pleasure*, 218-237. The late Ming demand for fashion stood in stark contrast to the frugal and rustic social order of the early Ming that is portrayed in Brook, *The Confusions of Pleasure*, 65-85.

<sup>5</sup> David Faure, *Emperor and Ancestor: State and Lineage in South China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), Ch. 23. See particularly his last comment on p.368.

<sup>6</sup> Andre Gunder Frank, *ReORIENT: Global Economy in the Asian Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 108-117, 218-224.



to rely on certain Western theoretical concepts of development, particularly those of the nineteenth century such as Karl Marx's enigmatic "Asiatic mode of production," to guide research in the development of non-Western societies of the past. Similarly, R. Bin Wong has argued that the experiences of early modern Europe are of limited help in supplying adequate theoretical frameworks for analyzing the trajectories of development in regions outside of Europe.<sup>7</sup> While I am convinced by Frank's and Bin Wong's general argument that some conceptual frameworks based on Western experiences are procrustean and cannot accurately capture historical developments in regions outside western Europe and parts of the Americas, I nonetheless find that they have occasionally made rather sweeping generalizations about the non-Western regions for which they wished to find a better explanatory framework. Frank, for instance, appeared to assume that the large inflow of silver into sixteenth and seventeenth century China was the catalyst and also the result of Ming China's commercial expansion and the subsequent exportation of goods into the global market.<sup>8</sup> It is not certain that this was in fact the case, and the large quantities of imported silver perhaps were quickly absorbed into the state sector to pay for the late sixteenth-century and early seventeenth-century Ming state's spiraling defense expenditure.<sup>9</sup> Although Bin Wong, in contrast, did not conflate the different effects of the

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<sup>7</sup> R. Bin Wong, *China Transformed: Historical Change and the Limits of Western Experience* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997). See particularly pp.4-7.

<sup>8</sup> See particularly Frank, 111-117.

<sup>9</sup> The work of the Chinese scholar Liang Fangzhong (梁方仲) pointed out that silver was first and foremost used as the means of payment for Ming taxes. Thus the importation of large amounts of foreign silver *conveniently lent* more silver specie to Ming economic actors to pay taxes and government fees, but it would be an exaggeration to deduce from the importation of silver that general *economic growth* spurred China's demand for silver, or that this importation of silver fuelled general prosperity in Ming China. More likely, silver continuously recycled back into various state treasuries to pay for the ever rising and

imported silver on the Ming economy, some of his claims about late imperial Chinese officials' acceptance of commerce were stated without mentioning that some scholar-officials were slow to warm up to commerce.<sup>10</sup> My criticisms are not meant to make Frank's and Bin Wong's arguments appear unsound. Instead I think that in order to strengthen their general argument that some Eurogenic theories of development were Eurocentric,<sup>11</sup> we should add nuance to our views of the commercialization that occurred in late imperial China.

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unrelenting costs of defense and other items of expenditure; hence, much of the imported silver probably did not easily circulate, expand the money supply, or fuel the private development of industry and commerce. See Liang Fangzhong 梁方仲, 《梁方仲文集》, Liu Zhiwei 刘志伟, ed. (Guangzhou: Sun Yat-sen University Press, 2004), 25-26, 216-222. See also Richard von Glahn *Fountain of Fortune: Money and Monetary Policy in China, 1000-1700* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 257.

<sup>10</sup> See particularly his subsection "Chinese Political Economy in the Late Imperial Period," in Bin Wong, 135-139. One scholar-official who had an overwhelmingly positive view of commerce was Lu Ji (陆楫 DMB: 1515-1552) whose essay praising the consumption of luxury items was markedly different from the majority of scholar-officials who viewed extravagance with disdain. In particular, Lu thought, contrary to many scholar-officials, that the trade in luxuries provided employment and was a sign of prosperity instead of decadence. But Lu Ji's positive view might have been unique and certainly not widely shared by other scholar-officials. See Joanna Handlin Smith, "Social Hierarchy and Merchant Philanthropy as Perceived in Several Late-Ming and Early-Qing Texts," in *The Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 41:3 (1998), 423n19. The text of Lu's essay is reproduced in Fu Yiling 傅衣凌, 《明清农村社会经济明代社会经济变迁论》 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2007 [1959, 1981]), 336-337. To my knowledge, Lu Ji was first brought to modern scholars' attention by the Sinologist Yang Lien-sheng, who also produced an English translation and discussion of Lu's defense of luxury in "Economic Justifications for Spending – An Uncommon Idea in Traditional China," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 20:1/2 (Jun 1957), 36-52.

<sup>11</sup> The distinction between "Eurogenic" and "Eurocentric" is borrowed from Chow Kai-wing's defense of his comparative work on early modern Chinese and European publishing and print culture. See Chow's "Preface to the Paperback Edition" in Kai-wing Chow, *Publishing, Culture, and Power in Early Modern China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), xi-xiii.

This thesis focuses on one of the two Chinese dynasties, the Ming Dynasty, of which late imperial China (1368-1911) was composed.<sup>12</sup> Because our focus on the Ming economy tend to privilege large scale impersonal forces such as population growth, the development of industries and market towns, and the importation of silver, it would be useful to explore some aspects of Ming society and commerce that directly changed the lives of parts of the population. But due to the paucity of biographical information on the lives of the non-elite, a biographical and narrative approach would be inappropriate and might easily fall victim to the privileging of elite views and voices. In writing this thesis, I have opted to write thematically and rely on the work of other scholars, which are supplemented by my own reading of reprints of Ming period sources. Some of the narratives and research that I draw on such as the work of Ho Ping-ti and Ray Huang are several decades old, while other works such as the work of the Chinese scholar Wu Xuande (2009) and the Taiwanese economist Lai Jiancheng (2008) are fresh from the printing press. Some of the more ‘personal’ aspects of Ming commerce that are explored in this thesis are: the upward social mobility of merchants, state-merchant relations, and the thoughts of minor merchants. They are the focus of Chapters 2, 3, and 4, respectively.

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<sup>12</sup> These two dynasties were the Ming (1368-1644) and the Qing (1644-1911). While the terms “late imperial China” and “early modern China” bind the Ming and Qing periods into a larger unit of periodization, in some topics it is in fact very difficult to write on both dynasties. In the research on Ming and Qing salt administration, for instance, the two dynasties underwent different reforms of the salt administration that confronted quite different problems. Thus in some cases, particularly in cases where we hope to uncover historical nuances, it would be more fruitful to focus on one dynasty rather than two. I am aware that there is general disagreement among China specialists on whether to characterize these two dynasties as “late imperial” or “early modern,” but at present I do not have an opinion that strongly favors either term and so I prefer to use them interchangeably.

Changes in sixteenth and seventeenth century social significance and social status of commerce and merchants did not arise spontaneously. In order to understand the conditions faced by merchants in sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it is necessary to appreciate the ways in which conventional thought in Chinese political economy denigrated merchants and favored scholar-officials and farmers. The following is a brief discussion of merchants' place in Chinese society before the Ming period.

### **Scholar-Officials and Merchants before the Ming**

The earliest references to a social group denoted by the Chinese character *shi* (士), later to denote exclusively scholar-officials, date from the Spring and Autumn period (8<sup>th</sup> – 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE). At this time China was divided into over one hundred princely states and geographically limited to an area from modern-day Beijing to the banks of the Yangtze River. This China was nominally presided over by the kings of the Zhou house (1045 – 256 BCE). The *shi* of this time was a titular rank in Zhou rites, and functionally the *shi* of this time were retainers to the houses of princes and aristocrats, and not the later class of scholars who staffed the bureaucracy of a state. *Shi* did not acquire its association with scholarly and bureaucratic pursuits until the Warring States period (5<sup>th</sup> century BCE – 221 BCE), when Zhou suzerainty over other princely states was greatly diminished and these states frequently engaged in warfare. In the ensuing political instability, princes actively sought military and administrative advisors. Thus a market for sophists and itinerant thinkers flourished, and those whose advice were well received by princes became retainers and given titles and income. These retainers thus acquired a reputation for statecraft. The rise in social status of *shi* was further consolidated when, beginning in the Han Dynasty (202 BCE – 220 CE), landownership improved the economic position of the

*shi*. Civil service examinations, however, were a product of much later times. The recruitment process for the bureaucracy of early China was through a set of nominations of persons from prominent local families; as such, early China did not possess a system of regular civil service examinations to select bureaucratic talent. The consequence of this system of appointment by nomination was that the *shi* of this time was a class of prominent and often landowning families, but their members did not necessarily win appointment in the imperial bureaucracy on the basis of merit. Regular triennial civil service examinations did not begin until the Song period, in 1065, and was interrupted in the early decades of the Mongol Yuan period, in the late thirteenth-century. Crucially, this new system of regular civil service examinations changed the composition of *shi*, because theoretically the examinations were open to all and appointment was based on scholarly aptitude as assessed in candidates' performance in the examinations. In practice, candidates from wealthier and better connected backgrounds very likely had a greater chance of success, but gone were the days when the *shi* was a self-replicating clique of prominent families who had a stranglehold on government appointments simply by nominating their own – they must now pass the examinations. The composition of the *shi* thus changed to include more and more of the scholars who won their position through the triennial examinations of the new system. Confusingly, scholar-officials also referred to themselves as *shi*, despite these changes in the composition of the *shi*.

Merchants, in contrast, were once influential in early China. Some merchants exercised great influence in Chinese politics in the princely courts of late Warring States China. One merchant, Lu Buwei (吕不韦, d.235 BCE), rose to become the regent of the State of Qin. The seeds of the denigration of commerce and merchants, however, were also sown in this period. When students of Confucius considered merchants to be “mean peoples” and Mencius called

merchants “unscrupulous men” (賤大夫) who “competed for profits with the people” (與民爭利), they provided intellectual foundations for seeing merchants as a parasitic element in Chinese society. This antipathy towards merchants is compounded by a growing opinion of the importance of agriculture, which gained strong credence through Shang Yang’s (商鞅, d.338 BCE) reforms in the social structure and agriculture of the State of Qin and the Qin’s subsequent military supremacy over other princely states.<sup>13</sup> As mentioned above princes sought advice from itinerant thinkers first and foremost for the purpose of enhancing their states’ capacity for war, and so when the Qin house successfully conquered all princely states to form the first Chinese empire, the short-lived Qin Dynasty (221-206 BCE), future generations of statesmen and scholars recognized that it was Shang Yang’s emphasis on social order and agriculture that provided the material basis for the Qin conquest of all other princely states. The successor to the Qin Dynasty, the Han Dynasty, further institutionalized the preference for agriculture and the denigration of commerce. The reign of Emperor Wudi (141 - 87 BCE) was instrumental. Confucianism, with its disdain for commerce as seen above, was accepted as the

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<sup>13</sup> Angela Ning-jy Hsi, “Social and the Economic Status of the Merchant Class in the Ming Dynasty, 1368-1644,” (Ph.D. diss.: University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1972), 1-3. Hsi does not mention the text *Guanzi*, which contains discussions of the relative importance of agriculture, crafts and commerce. Because some of the terminology of this text survived down to late imperial China, particularly the use of the terms “roots” to describe agriculture and “branches” to describe crafts and commerce, it is arguable that the intellectual origins of the denigration of commerce as early as the 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE. The problem with this suggestion is that it is not clear whether the oft-attributed author of *Guanzi*, the minister Guan Zhong (管仲, 725- 645 BCE) of the State of Qi, wrote any part of the surviving text of *Guanzi*. Almost all surviving chapters of *Guanzi* are believed to have spurious origins. On the origins and transmission of *Guanzi*, see W. Allyn Rickett’s, *Guanzi: Political, Economic, and Philosophical Essays from Early China*, Vol. I (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 8-45.

sole legitimate school of thought. Merchants' reduced social status could now be seen through sumptuary laws and the circulation of new terminology deliberately designed to denigrate merchants. Furthermore, Emperor Wudi took an active role in commerce when his government declared a state monopoly on particular industries, such that producers and distributors already engaged in those industries would henceforth be required to use government-issued equipment and be charged for the use of such equipment. Under Wudi the Han state further assumed responsibility for the commodities' distribution and retail. In one stroke the Han state had assumed full control of these industries and changed the relations between the state and the merchants trading these commodities. Because of the monopolies, workers and merchants in these industries ultimately served at the state's pleasure. The Han state and successive Chinese dynasties later retreated from the burdensome responsibilities of transporting and retailing the commodities produced by the monopolies; instead, merchants were licensed and charged fees or given transportation assignments as a form of payment. But starting in the Han period the Chinese state almost invariably had some control of commercial affairs, even as successive dynasties officially sanctioned the low social status of merchants. It was in this context that a fourfold and hierarchical division of society developed and over time acquired the stamp of convention.

Conventional political economy in imperial China had a precept which reduced the mass of workers into four classes: scholar-officials, farmers, artisans, and merchants. This list was also intended to reflect the relative value of the four classes of workers *to the state*. Thus, as far as many Chinese elites were concerned, a career as a scholar-official was the most prestigious of occupations and a merchant's work was the least prestigious. This fourfold division of society was not simply an intellectual construct that only existed in the minds of elites and had minimal impact on social reality. The institutions of successive Chinese states gradually made the

promotion of scholar-officials and the denigration of merchants a very real fact of life in much of imperial China. Notably, as early as the Warring States period, it appears that some states had already designated special spaces for workers of the four occupations to work, and special residential spaces for workers of the four occupations to inhabit.<sup>14</sup> Mongol rule in China under the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368) complicated the division of social classes by promoting the use of non-Chinese administrative, commercial, and religious personnel in China, but the literati of the succeeding Ming Dynasty, an indigenous Chinese ruling house, saw the Yuan as an aberration from Chinese convention and refocused their attention on the fourfold division.<sup>15</sup>

The convention that honored scholar-officials and denigrated merchants enjoyed a long lifespan and continued to be seen in officials' writings up to the Ming period. It would be a nineteenth century writer who stood the precept of the fourfold division – that is, to respect scholar-officials, farmers, artisans, and merchants, in descending order – on its head:

“Officials compete for profits against the weak people under their rule, but people who are not in power must first find sustenance through agriculture, and then pursue their specialties, thus stimulating matters of exchange, and strengthening commerce. If not for the labor and enterprise of one's father and elder brothers, the sons and younger siblings of one's family could not have the leisure to study for imperial examinations and enter into official positions of prominence. Thus in ancient times society was divided into four classes; in later times those distinctions were abandoned. In ancient times the sons of scholar-officials always became scholar-officials; in later times only the sons of merchants could become scholars and officials. This was more or less a social transformation of the Song-Yuan-Ming period.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Zhao Gang 赵岗 and Chen Zhongyi 陈鍾毅, 《中国经济制度史论》 (Taipei: Liangjing chubanshe, 1986), 457.

<sup>15</sup> The tendency to see the Mongols as an aberration from indigenous “Chinese” traditions can be seen, for instance, in the quotation from the *Pei County Gazetteer* at the beginning of this chapter, in which the Mongol Yuan was contrasted unfavorably against the Ming (虽遭胡元之变, 而国朝文教四被).

<sup>16</sup> Shen Yao 沈垚, 《落帆楼文集》, 24:12a-12b, as quoted in Fan Jinmin 范金民, 〈商业文化与明清地方文化〉 in 《明代政治与文化变迁》 (Hong Kong: City University of Hong Kong Press, 2006), 73. The original Chinese reads: 任者既与小民争利, 未任者又必先有农桑之业方得给朝夕, 以专事进取, 于



Not only did the author of this passage, Shen Yao (沈垚 1798-1840), claimed that the real culprits in the hardships suffered by the masses were officials, Shen also mentioned the fourfold division in order to point out that it had been negated. As Shen stated, in earlier times the expectation was that sons of wealthy scholar-officials would continue in their fathers' and grandfathers' footsteps. That in Shen's time a merchant family background was more advantageous for a candidate's success than a scholar-official family background, greatly undermined this earlier expectation.

Shen Yao claimed that this change occurred gradually, in the *longue durée* from Song China (960-1279) to Ming China (1368-1644). Yet, as we will see in Chapter 2, it was in the latter half of the Ming, starting approximately at the turn of the sixteenth century, that scholar-officials noted the emergence of challenges to the fourfold division and convention.

### **A First Look at Ming Perceptions of Merchants**

Ming people had a diversity of views on commerce, and because of this diversity it is easy to make sweeping generalizations. A *superficial* look at some contemporary sources would give the impression that Ming emperors, unlike the Mongol Yuan emperors before them, did not hold commerce and merchants in high regard.<sup>17</sup> The founder of the dynasty, the Hongwu Emperor (1368-1398), certainly gave the impression that his sympathies lay with agriculture.

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是货殖之事益急，商贾之势益重。非父兄先营事业于前，子弟既无由读书以致身通显。是故古者四民分，后世四民不分。古者士之子恒为士，后世商之子方能为士。此宋元明以来变迁之大较也。

<sup>17</sup> It would be a lengthy digression to discuss Yuan policies on merchants. A concise description of Yuan "social and economic policies" can be found in Morris Rossabi's contribution to the CHC. Morris Rossabi, "The Reign of Khubilai Khan" in *The Cambridge History of China* Vol.6 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), Ch 5.

During his reign he repeatedly emphasized the fact that he was born in a commoner's family and suffered through poverty before becoming first a rebel leader and later emperor. He openly professed his compassion for laborers in agriculture and sericulture. In a passage in the official evaluation of his reign, purported to report an incident that occurred in June 1369, the emperor reportedly dismounted and walked after seeing farmers toil in the fields on a journey outside of the capital. To his entourage, he declared:

"I have long not farmed the land. Having just observed the toils of farmers in the fields, I felt compassion for their labor and unwittingly walked here. Agriculture is the root of state; the satisfaction of all needs proceeds from it. Their hard work ought to be frequently remembered by those who govern! Moreover, the ancients often warned of the dangers of those who lived in affluence but not know the difficulties of the poor and ignoble. When wearing silks, one ought to remember the hard work of female weavers; when consuming food, one ought to remember the pains of farmers. Without much thinking I feel empathy for them."<sup>18</sup>

In contrast, no Ming emperor is known to have ever made a statement showing similar esteem for commerce. Reasons for the preference for agriculture can be seen in the Hanlin court academician Wang Shuying (王叔英 MS: d.1402), who wrote a long discussion of some principles of government. In a part about social order and economic production, Wang's memorial reads:

"In ancient times when farmers were made soldiers, these soldiers could farm and feed themselves. Now many soldiers consume rations but cannot farm, and surplus farm hands become either merchants or artisans and they also consume and do not produce food. It is for this reason that many pursue the branch occupations and few pursue the root occupation. This is the reason why the military must relieve excess soldiers whenever possible. In ancient times the four occupations were: scholar-officials, farmers, artisans, and merchants. It was later that Buddhist monks and Daoist priests were added to make the number of occupations six, and this incidentally reduced the number of farmers still further. The two religious vocations were originally intended for the religiously pure. But in later times they were filled with people who hoped to avoid their labor duties and rely on their positions to eat and clothe without producing food and clothes

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<sup>18</sup> MSL: Taizu, 42:2b-3a. The original Chinese reads: 朕久不历农畝，适见田者冒而耕甚苦，因悯其劳徒步，不觉至此。农为国本，百需皆其所出。彼辛勤若是，为之司牧者亦尝闵念乎！且均为人耳身处富贵而不知贫贱之艰难，古人常以为戒。夫衣帛当思织女之勤、食粟当念耕夫之苦。朕为此故不觉惻然于心也。

themselves [...] The ancients ruled by honoring agriculture as the root and relegating commerce to the branches; thus they often treated agriculture favorably and suppressed commerce. In our times, the will to suppress commerce remain, but the will to favor agriculture is often hampered by weighty expenses and the sheer number of people to feed. Agriculture is not performing well, because the number of merchants is too many. Nevertheless, merchants make weighty profits and have income to spare, while farmers often cannot produce enough to feed and clothe themselves and become indebted to merchants. Then there are families in the arts and crafts, in which men and women may have completely abandoned agriculture, channeling their skills towards illicit means to produce things for weighty profits, which are in fact a waste of labor and have no practical value. Farmers can get their entire families to farm with them and still not earn as much as a merchant or artisan; farmers can collect a full year's harvest and still earn less than what a merchant or artisan might profit from one sale. It is for this reason that there is always an excess of people pursuing the branches and never enough people pursuing the roots, and it is also for this reason that those who pursue the branches are always affluent and those who pursue the roots are always in poverty.”<sup>19</sup>

The passage from Wang Shuying also gives us some insight into the rationale behind conventional political economy. Wang's mention of the ancients turning farmers into soldiers was a reference to the Qin state. The sedentary nature of farmers turned soldiers was a contrast to the Mongols' use of troops from nomadic peoples in the Yuan Dynasty, immediately preceding the Ming. In taking the Qin example as the model for the Ming, Wang followed the Warring States

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<sup>19</sup> HMMCJL, 8:3a-4b. Retrieved from webpage of 东京大学东洋文化研究所所藏汉籍善本全文影像资料库: <http://shanben.ioc.u-tokyo.ac.jp/> (last accessed on July 25, 2009). Please note that there is no specific URL to this title; readers must input the title in Traditional Chinese characters in the search engine or scroll through archive holdings. The original Chinese reads: 古者兵出于农，则兵固自耕而食者也。今为兵者既不耕而食于农者多，而又多余丁不为商则为工，是亦不耕而食于农者。人之务末者众而务本者穷，实由于此。此军卒有多余可裁减之故也。古者为四民曰：士农工商而已；后世盖之以僧道而为民者六，故务农者益穷。况二事之教本以清静无为为宗，而后世为其徒者多由避徭役而托于此，又依其教使人专奉有不耕而食、不蚕而衣之利 [...] 古者制民之法以农为本，故尝厚之，以商贾为末，故尝抑之。后世抑末之法犹存，而厚本之法每病于费广食众，不行之故为商贾者益多。然商贾获利既厚而财费有余、农民往往衣食不给，反称货于商贾。况又有工艺之家男女尽弃耕织不务，而施奇技淫巧为服历物以渔利，徒多费工力而无益于实用。农人竭一家之力者或不足当其一天之获、积一岁之收者或不足以侔其一旦之售，由是务末者恒有余而务本者恒不足；诚为务末恒胜而务本者恒贫之故也。

view that statecraft was foremost a matter of providing food for the state, and particularly for the military.<sup>20</sup> The criterion for determining whether an activity was a “root” occupation or a “branch” occupation, as one can see from Wang’s repeated emphasis on food production, was whether that activity directly fed and clothed the population. Following this train of thought, many conventional thinkers assumed that the accumulation of wealth was the accumulation of basic necessities such as food and clothes needed to feed and clothe the military, and these thinkers considered agriculture as a root activity because of its ability to produce food and produce materials for clothes. In addition, conventional political economy was in perennial fear of commerce, because many scholar-officials assumed that the size of the population was fixed and also that the rate of production must be fixed; hence, they adopted a zero-sum logic with regard to workers opting to work in root and branch occupations. As one can see from the above passage, Wang assumed that the loss of one farmer to crafts and commerce automatically meant the loss of one food producer and a necessary decrease in the supply of food. Closely associated with the contempt for commerce was the fear of “extravagance” (奢靡、奢侈). Because every farmer lost to the crafts and commerce was assumed to mean the loss of one food producer and a definite decrease in the total amount of food produced, crafts and commerce were believed to produce extravagant goods and services, and the satisfaction of such extravagant desires were

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<sup>20</sup> Scholar-officials understood that adequate supplies of food were essential to military strength and political stability such that many Chinese dynasties developed state granary systems to introduce government food reserves into the market in times of need. In many instances this was to keep prices stable, but sometimes the granaries were also meant to purposefully inject a supply to relieve areas suffering from emergencies. On the uses of state granaries in the Qing period (1644-1911), see the work of R. Bin Wong, particularly Pierre Etienne Will and R. Bin Wong, *Nourish the People: the State Civilian Granary System in China, 1650-1850* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991). To my knowledge, there is no comparably comprehensive scholarly treatment of Ming state granaries.

deemed to be inversely proportional to the satisfaction of the basic material needs of food and clothing, and hence wrong and must be curtailed. In truth, the association between branch occupations and extravagance was axiomatic for some scholar-officials like Wang; they assumed that *all* goods and services produced by the branch occupations were a “waste of labor” and “had no practical value” so inevitably those who consumed such goods and services must be engaged in wasteful and ostentatious displays of wealth, in other words “extravagance.” As recent Chinese scholars have made clear, this broad definition of extravagance made it a very problematic and intellectually shallow term, for in essence it allows a person to label as extravagant any type of goods deemed not necessary for survival, any person who consumes these goods, and any level of consumption above subsistence level.<sup>21</sup>

The Ming founder shared these assumptions. To promote agriculture and curb crafts and commerce, he articulated some draconian measures, as can be seen in the following statement dated to October 1385:

“People say that agriculture is the essence of providing food and clothing. The damage from the abandonment of root activities for branch activities can rarely be fixed. In the reigns of ancient sage kings, in the countryside there was not a single person not engaged in farming, in homes not a single woman not engaged in sericulture. In the face of floods and droughts there were no worries, and hunger and cold did not reach them. The neglect of agriculture follows from the flowering of marvelous and skillful arts. If one farmer abandons agriculture, one hundred families shall go wanting for food. If one woman enters a service occupation, one hundred men shall go wanting for clothes. Is it attainable to desire no poverty for the population? I think the sufficiency of food lies in the prohibition of activities of lesser substance; the sufficiency of clothes lies in the prohibition of extravagance. You ministers are advised to proclaim to the population of all corners of the empire, to order them to keep to their present occupations, to prohibit vagrancy,

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<sup>21</sup> See Huang Jingbin 黄敬斌, 〈奢侈：经济学诠释与中国传统观念〉 in 《经济评论》 No. 5 (2008); Chao Xiaohong 钞晓鸿, 〈明清人的‘奢靡’观念及其演变〉 in 《历史研究》 No. 4 (2002).

and to prohibit the wearing of beautiful clothes by commoners' families. In this way can the damage from extravagance be gradually eliminated.”<sup>22</sup>

In full agreement with Wang's disinclination towards extravagance, the Ming founder also once opined that he was critical of extravagance because he wished to protect the root activity of agriculture and repress branch activities.<sup>23</sup> Tellingly, in the official evaluation of his reign, a special subsection is entitled “the circumscription of extravagance” (戒奢侈) and notes various instances in which the Ming founder behaved in ways that support his image as a frugal individual and a benevolent emperor.<sup>24</sup>

Preference for agriculture and fear of extravagant crafts and commerce were not limited to emperors and Hanlin academicians, who were in the upper echelons of the Ming state. Up to the sixteenth century, when reporting local mores (风俗), gazetteers in the provinces often privileged agriculture and hesitated to report that local populations were engaged in commerce. For instance, in the 1511 Yingzhou gazetteer, the subsection on local mores used strong language to claim that local customs felt contempt for commerce and preferred agriculture and simple customs: “The locals are forthright, denigrate commerce but work in agriculture, calm and simple-minded, do not engage in branch activities; men keep busy through agriculture, and

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<sup>22</sup> MSL: Taizu Baofen, 3: 37a-37b. The original Chinese reads: 人皆言农桑衣食之本，然弃本逐末，鲜有其救其弊者。先王之世，野无不耕之民、室无不蚕之女、水旱无虞、饥寒不至。自什一之涂开奇巧之技作，而后农桑之业废。一农执末，百家待食；一女事职，而百夫待衣。欲人无贫得乎？朕思足食在于禁末作、足衣在于禁华靡。尔宜申明天下四民各守其业、不许游食、庶民之家不许衣锦绣，庶几可以绝其弊也。

<sup>23</sup> MSL: Taizu Baofen, 3:37b.

<sup>24</sup> MSL: Taizu Baofen, 4:1a-3b.

women keep busy through weaving.”<sup>25</sup> Very likely, the reference to the possession of a forthright disposition which denigrated commerce but worked in agriculture was a favorite cliché, for exactly the same characters (性率直，贱商务农) appeared in the 1470 Fengyang gazetteer.<sup>26</sup> Low regard for commerce was also expressed in Huizhou (徽州) gazetteers, despite the fame of Huizhou merchant networks across the empire. The 1502 Huizhou gazetteer reports that “locals engaged in commerce in spare time between studying and farming” (读书力田间事商贾). Only in the fine print did the gazetteer address the fame of Huizhou’s She County (歙县) merchants, and it excused their engagement in commerce by claiming that the land in She was not well suited for agriculture.<sup>27</sup>

The above sources may lead one to conclude that the Ming state and population stayed true to the convention of giving pride of place to agriculture and denigrating crafts and commerce. While this may be true for the early Ming of the Ming founder and Wang Shuying, gradually Chinese society evolved. Starting in the late fifteenth-century, several decades of relative peace and political stability in the empire allowed for population growth and increased economic activity.<sup>28</sup> In the increasingly commercial environment of the times, family fortunes and higher social status could be achieved for merchants. In Chapter 2, we will see some of the ways in

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<sup>25</sup> *Gazetteer of Yingzhou* (1511), 1:3b. The original Chinese reads: 性率直，贱商务农，尚气安愚，不事末作，男勤耕桑，女勤织纴.

<sup>26</sup> *Gazetteer of the Middle Capital at Fengyang* (1569 [1470]), 1:32a.

<sup>27</sup> *Gazetteer of Huizhou Prefecture* (1502), 1:10b.

<sup>28</sup> I use “increased economic activity” because existing hard data do not warrant the conclusion that Ming China experienced *economic growth*. Incomplete data is a problem for much of the pre-modern world. In the Ming case, a variety of written sources contain a vast amount of quantitative data that were originally intended to assess the fiscal health of the state, but these datasets were never intended to provide a comprehensive view of the economy and thus cannot reflect the totality of economic activity.

which some of the more affluent Ming merchants were rising in comparison to the declining fortunes of scholar-officials. In particular, members of merchant families were allowed to participate in the civil service examinations which opened the way for a bureaucratic career, and emulation of the consumption patterns of scholar-officials was causing anxiety for the traditionally privileged class of scholar-officials.

The dichotomy of root agriculture against branch crafts and commerce, in addition to accusations of extravagance, did not disappear as a result of late Ming increases in the social status of merchants. The transformation of contemporaries' thought on matters of political economy and social order was never complete. As Timothy Brook has shown with the example of the She County magistrate Zhang Tao (张涛 fl. 1609), a fringe minority of scholar-officials steadfastly refused to abandon convention and found the changes in social relations and patterns of consumption in late Ming society intolerable. As Brook paraphrased the words of Zhang Tao:

“[Zhang] completed his narrative of the seasons of the Ming with the world of his own adulthood in the 1570s. The face of Ming society was ravaged in the fall. ‘One man in a hundred is rich, while nine out of ten are impoverished. The poor cannot stand up to the rich who, though few in number, are able to control the majority. The lord of silver rules heaven and the god of copper cash reigns over the earth,’ he declared. ‘Avarice is without limit, flesh injures the bone, everything is for personal pleasure, and nothing can be let slip. In dealings with others, everything is recompensed down to the last hair.’ His vision of descent into actuarial frenzy was apocalyptic. ‘The demons of treachery stalk,’ he warned. ‘Fights have turned to pitched battles; pounding waves wash over the hills; torrents flood the land.’ The sole remedy for this grim state of affairs was to ‘establish policies to close the gates and prevent the merchants from traveling about.’ But our author sensed that this remedy was impossible. All he could do was lapse into despair and offer the standard sigh of vexation in classical Chinese when everything is going wrong: ‘*Juefu!*’”<sup>29</sup>

The majority of thinkers did not view commerce and merchants as negatively as Zhang Tao, although they did point out the limitations of commerce. The well-known thinker of the Ming-Qing transition Huang Zongxi (黄宗羲 ECCP: 1610-1695), for instance, had a more nuanced

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<sup>29</sup>Brook, *The Confusions of Pleasure*, 4.



view of root and branch occupations. He did not believe in a binary opposition between roots and branches: *some* crafts and commerce were useful to the state and to society, and therefore not *all* crafts and commerce should be circumscribed.<sup>30</sup>

Yet the harsh words against merchants also did not mean that merchants had no place in society and received no generous consideration from the authorities. Despite the Ming founder's and some officials' antipathy to commerce, the Ming state nevertheless made use of merchants as logistical support for the military. The Ming founder intended merchants working for the imperial salt monopoly to carry out the hard work of transporting supplies to the remote northern border, and consequently he had to encourage merchants to work for the state with the promise of profit. Moreover, although the Ming founder favored agriculture over commerce, he did not wholly neglect the livelihood of merchants. On occasion he protected merchants' interests at the state's expense. When an official presented the throne with a memorial, a written appeal to the emperor,

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<sup>30</sup> Huang Zongxi 黄宗羲, 《明夷待访录》财计三 (1663). Retrieved from the webpage of 华东师范大学研究生院: [http://www.yjsy.ecnu.edu.cn/jszj/%E5%AD%90%E9%83%A8-%E9%AD%8F%E6%99%8B%E4%BB%A5%E4%B8%8B/%E6%98%8E%E5%A4%B7%E5%BE%85%E8%A8%AA%E9%8C%84/%E6%98%8E%E5%A4%B7%E5%BE%85%E8%A8%AA%E9%8C%84\(%E5%85%A8\).htm](http://www.yjsy.ecnu.edu.cn/jszj/%E5%AD%90%E9%83%A8-%E9%AD%8F%E6%99%8B%E4%BB%A5%E4%B8%8B/%E6%98%8E%E5%A4%B7%E5%BE%85%E8%A8%AA%E9%8C%84/%E6%98%8E%E5%A4%B7%E5%BE%85%E8%A8%AA%E9%8C%84(%E5%85%A8).htm) (last accessed on July 25, 2009). This part of Huang's work reads: 治天下者既輕其賦斂矣，而民間之習俗未去，蠱惑不除，奢侈不革，則民仍不可使富也 [...] 何謂奢侈？其甚者，倡優也，酒肆也，機坊也。倡優之費，一夕而中人之產；酒肆之費，一頓而終年之食；機坊之費，一衣而十夫之爰。故治之以本，使小民吉凶一循於禮，投巫驅佛，吾所謂學校之教明而後可也。治之以末，倡優有禁，酒食有禁，除布帛外皆有禁。今夫通都之市肆，十室而九，有為佛而貨者，有為巫而貨者，有為倡優而貨者，有為奇技淫巧而貨者，皆不切於民用，一概痛絕之，亦庶乎救弊之一端也。此古聖王崇本抑末之道。世儒不察，以工商為末，妄議抑之。夫工固聖王之所欲來，商又使其願出於途者，蓋皆本也。 My interpretation of this passage is based on Ye Shichang 叶世昌, 《中国经济史学论集》 (Beijing: Commercial Press, 2008), 237-239.

with a proposal to increase revenue by levying more taxes on merchants, the emperor reportedly responded disapprovingly, replying that he did not see the overzealous collection of taxes as a sign of talent in an official.<sup>31</sup> This act of generosity towards merchants by the Ming founder can be partially explained by his understanding that merchants provided tax revenue and also served as logistical support to the state. Yet there is reason to believe that the Ming founder also acted generously towards merchants because he thought it was his duty to do so. The official evaluation of his reign reports that the emperor once explicitly compared his relationship to his subjects as that between father and son, and that as the figurative “father” the emperor ought to find solutions to problems which would benefit both “father” and “son.”<sup>32</sup> This comparison suggests that the Ming founder had a vague notion of his and his government’s function as a fair arbitrator in economic affairs. Merchants may be considered the lowliest of the four occupations, but that did not mean that they were beyond the care of the state.

The record of the Ming founder’s and the early Ming state’s position towards merchants, then, is a chequered one. While the Ming founder and some of his officials said much about putting agriculture above commerce, they nonetheless did not wholly neglect merchants’ interests. Particularly when state revenues or social stability were at stake, high-ranking officials were quick to discuss the pertinent issues and reviewed merchants’ involvement in state policies, such as the salt and tea monopolies. Chapter 3 will explore the dimensions of state-merchant relations in some memorials written by imperial officials recorded in the HMJSWB, published in 1638.

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<sup>31</sup> MSL: Taizu, 104:658. The not very subtle message behind the Ming founder’s response was that the performance of officials who collect taxes overzealously would not be judged favorably for promotion, and may in fact be seen with disapproval from the throne.

<sup>32</sup> MSL: Taizu Baofen, 3:40.

The focus on state-merchant relations in Chapter 3 tells us about the officials' thoughts about merchants. But officials were not the epicenter of commercial activity. Whatever high-ranking imperial officials thought of merchants and commerce, the preponderance of commercial decisions was decided by the merchants who actually conducted the daily affairs of commerce. It is therefore desirable to learn about aspects of Ming merchants from sources close to merchants themselves. Merchants, however, were not a homogenous class. The Chinese character, *shang* (商), has a relatively broad meaning and refers to both the street-level shopkeepers and traders who conducted the daily affairs, as well as the wealthy elites who profited from their activities. This diverse composition of *shang* poses a problem. The collected statecraft writings in Chapter 3 were primarily by the hands of high-ranking officials. Yet policy issues which called for the attention of higher-ranking officials often meant that they were particularly pressing, persistent, and difficult to resolve. In fact the problems identified in Chapter 3 involved smuggling and defiance of established procedures, and moreover the officials who discussed these problems often identified elite local families (豪右势要) and even serving imperial officials as the power behind the smugglers and perpetrators of other illicit activities. Such activities were not always applicable to the lower-level merchants who had no powerful protector, or had commercial operations sizable enough to cause immediately pressing problems for the Ming state. Far more likely, the thoughts which preoccupied merchants of modest means were much more mundane, such as the need for accurate information and the need for suggestions on how to achieve commercial success. Chapter 4 explores the advice of merchant manuals of the Ming period. These manuals were intended for an audience of lower-level merchants, and their advice to merchants on how to deal with various situations and persons offer unique insights into how the mass of lower-level merchants perceived the world around them.

The information on the disparate themes mentioned in this thesis would be of little value to historical scholarship if I do not discuss their significance to our knowledge of late imperial China. As I mentioned at the very beginning of this Introduction, applications of the term “commercialization” on the Ming period is often used to refer to a series of economic developments; scholars sometimes assume that these economic developments generally destabilized entrenched practices and social values in sixteenth and seventeenth century Chinese society. This quick assumption leaves much to be desired. As Richard von Glahn has doubted:

“[...] portraits of a ‘restless, fragmented, and fiercely competitive’ market society, in which ‘a modernist response to questions of individual human existence seemed to be brewing’ have grown increasingly elaborate as studies of the social, intellectual, and cultural history of late Ming-early Qing China have proliferated. But the centerpiece of this tableau, the market itself, has virtually faded from view. This neglect is unfortunate, because the question of whether the market actually functioned in the ways in which this model supposes remain very much an unproven hypothesis.”<sup>33</sup>

While it is not the intention of this thesis to furnish a long train of quantitative evidence to confirm or cast doubt upon the validity of late Ming commercialization, I do hope that the commercial and merchant aspects studied in this dissertation can be of service in three ways. Firstly, this thesis is intended to illuminate some aspects neglected by scholarly references to the commercialization of Ming society. To my knowledge, very infrequently have scholars used statecraft writings and merchant manuals as sources on commerce and merchants. Indeed, the focus on issues such as the development of capitalism and literati culture in late imperial China have often pushed aside the study of merchants and their relationship with other segments of Ming society. Secondly, this thesis is intended to further clarify our understanding of state-merchant relations and merchants’ lives. For instance, although the state, particularly in the early Ming period, was disdainful of commerce, as we will see in Chapter 3, the government

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<sup>33</sup> Von Glahn, 2-3.

nonetheless needed merchants and some officials were more than sympathetic and accommodating to merchants' needs. Surprisingly, some of these sympathetic and accommodating officials were active *before* the sixteenth century, and thus their sympathies could not simply be attributed as a manifestation of a changing of mindsets brought about by commercialization. Thirdly, the commercialization of Ming society may best be viewed beyond the temporal delimitation of the Ming period. Ming scholar-officials' and mid-level merchants' views of commerce were built on earlier foundations. The state and literati rhetoric that minimized the Yuan contribution to China was a reaction to nearly a century of non-indigenous rule. If we accept that the early Ming sought to reduce the contributions of the Mongol period, then our narrative of China's commercialization and the cultural influences of commerce on Chinese society ought to cover a lengthier period than the Ming Dynasty. Chapter 5, the conclusion of this thesis, will articulate these points.

## Chapter 2

### Changes in Consumption, Examinations, and Social Mobility

The quotation from Shen Yao in the previous chapter implied that the fourfold division of scholar-officials, farmers, artisans, and merchants was negated by the rise of commercial wealth. While Shen probably overstated the extent of the change, to some extent recent scholarship is supportive of Shen's assertion that the fortunes of scholar-officials and merchants underwent some drastic changes, which were acutely felt by scholar-officials and merchants, in sixteenth and seventeenth century China. The remainder of this chapter attempts to give the reader a flavor of this change. Because many extant sources from the Ming period were written by scholar-officials, often they focused on the deterioration of the social status of their own scholar-official class, rather than record the rise of merchants' social status. But, as the Chinese intellectual historian Yu Ying-shih has noted, it was truly curious that many of the obituaries that celebrated the lives of members of merchant households, were also written by scholar-officials.<sup>34</sup> This requires explanation. As noted in the previous chapter, the composition of the *shi*, which by the Ming had come to refer to the class of scholar-officials, underwent changes in earlier periods – the *shi* were at first retainers and advisors to princes, then landowners and officials appointed by nomination, and finally scholar-officials rewarded on the basis of examinations. In the Ming, the *shi* underwent yet another change of composition. As commercial success brought wealth to some merchant and artisan families, their children were encouraged to study for the examinations.

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<sup>34</sup> Yu Ying-shih 余英时, 《余英时文集第三卷: 儒家伦理与商人精神》 (Guilin: Guangxi Normal University Press, 2008 [2004]), 157-158, 232.

Gradually, the scholar-official elite included people whose ancestors were engaged in the crafts and commerce.<sup>35</sup>

This did not mean that the scholar-officials who possessed a more positive attitude towards crafts and commerce were all from merchant backgrounds. For instance, two scholar-officials from a traditional scholar-official family in Songjiang in South Zhili, in present-day Shanghai, Lu Shen (陆深 DMB: 1477-1544) and his son Lu Ji (陆楫 DMB: 1515-1552), made some perceptive economic observations and concluded that conventional attitudes about the issuance of loans by the rich to the poor and the consumption of luxury were wrong.<sup>36</sup> What the introduction of more and more scholar-officials from merchant backgrounds did mean was that the strict distinction between the scholar-official class and the merchant class, as devised in the fourfold division, was increasingly untenable. Far from having one class of scholar-officials which had little to do with another class of merchants, they came into increasing contact. Two rather clear signs of the weakening of class distinctions were the problems faced by scholar-officials in distinguishing their patterns of consumption, and the increasing difficulty of attaining civil service examination success. The following two sections of this chapter are discussions of

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<sup>35</sup> One of the most oft-cited example of a high-ranking scholar-official whose ancestors were merchants is Zhang Han (张瀚 DMB: 1511-1593). In Ming social and economic history, Zhang is particularly well-known for a lengthy essay "On Merchants" that provides various details about the long-distance trade routes in various provinces in his time. This essay is translated in Brook, "The Merchant Network in 16<sup>th</sup> Century China: A Discussion and Translation of Zhang Han's 'On Merchants,'" in *The Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 24: 2 (1981), 185-208.

<sup>36</sup> Lu Shen defended the issuance of loans, probably at usurious rates, by landowners to tenants as necessary in times of dire need. This is quoted in Chen Jiang 陈江, 《明代中后期的江南社会与社会生活》(Shanghai: Shanghai shehui kexue chubanshe, 2006), 114-115. On Lu Ji, see Chapter 1, note 10.

these two manifestations of withering class distinctions. The final section will comment further on the upward social mobility of Ming merchants.

### **The Blurring of Distinctions through Consumption**

The quotation from the Pei county gazetteer complaining of extravagance and arrogance at the beginning of Chapter 1 was a tepid admission of the influence of commerce and hinted towards changes in social values and consumption patterns. What was particularly unusual about Pei was that it was situated in Jiangbei, a region that was usually considered not very developed,<sup>37</sup> and that the gazetteer explicitly remarked on how local behavior was changed by “outsiders from all directions” and undoubtedly the commerce, fashions, and ideas that accompanied them into Pei. Many local gazetteers of the sixteenth century preferred to hold to the conceit that local populations remained committed to the pursuit of “root” agricultural activities. Significantly, the Pei gazetteer reported the influx of new people and ideas, the local population’s growing reverence for power and wealth, and the local population’s increasing extravagance in one consecutive sentence. The circulation of goods, people, and wealth brought with them higher

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<sup>37</sup> One late fifteenth-century foreign visitor to China, Ch’oe Pu, compared North China very unfavorably to the South. Ch’oe was a Korean official who was shipwrecked and washed ashore in Fujian Province in southeastern China. Upon his rescue he was ordered repatriated to Korea as soon as possible. His route back to Korea took him through the canals of the Grand Canal system, which began in the prosperous Jiangnan and cut through North China. Ch’oe Pu’s diaries are translated in John Meskill, ed., *Ch’oe Pu’s Diary: A Record of Drifting Across the Sea* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1965). A shortened narrative of Ch’oe Pu’s journey is provided in Brook, *Confusions of Pleasure*, 39-51.



levels of consumption and more elaborate patterns of consumption.<sup>38</sup> But the production and consumption of more elaborate goods and services could also produce anxieties about status.

Anecdotal evidence from the late Ming claims that people were consuming goods and services requiring increasingly elaborate preparation. This demand for more elaborately prepared foods, clothes, furniture, and travel and festive activities spurred demand for more resources and labor, and therefore some contemporaries thought these items of consumption were extravagant. Some examples of more lavish dishes will give the impression of extravagance. The modern-day historian Chen Baoliang has reported that starting from the Chenghua reign (1464-1487) the imperial household began the practice of making tofu from the mashed brains of birds, rather than soybeans. This was a dish that would have required the raising and slaughtering of hundreds of birds per plate of tofu produced.<sup>39</sup> The demand for foods requiring elaborate preparations was not confined to the imperial household. Chen also described the desires of the scholar-official elite to

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<sup>38</sup> Interestingly, the expansion of commerce in Ming China roughly coincided with the impoverishment of the state. The standard reference for the Ming state's financial structure and fiscal problems is Ray Huang, *Taxation and Government Finance in Sixteenth-Century Ming China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974). Huang's work focuses on general problems of Ming state finance. It is scholarly consensus that the Ming state's largest expense, and perhaps the chief source of its financial problems, was the provision of large armies on the distant northern border. A recent monograph by a Taiwanese economist is more informative than Huang on the Ming state's military expenditures and systems for provisioning the border armies. See Lai Jiancheng 赖建诚, 《边镇粮饷：明代中后期的边防经费与国家财政危机，1531-1602》 (Taipei: Academia Sinica and Lianjing chubanshe, 2008).

<sup>39</sup> Chen Baoliang 陈宝良. 《明代社会生活史》 (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2004), 271. Chen's description of foods in Ming China is short and engaging but does not say much about the different types of ingredients available and more importantly the diet of the Chinese population. On these, see F.W. Mote's chapter "Yuan and Ming," in K.C. Chang, ed., *Food in Chinese Culture: Anthropological and Historical Perspectives* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 193-258. See also E. N. Anderson, *The Food of China* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 94-108.

taste exotic local delicacies (方物) of various regions of the empire; as an example Chen reproduces the long list of local delicacies compiled by the literatus Zhang Dai (张岱, 1597-1679).<sup>40</sup> The majority of Ming people, of course, could not afford to sacrifice hundreds of animals for one dish or enjoy local delicacies from different corners of China. But that did not preclude them from demanding less costly foods requiring many ingredients and intensive labour. Some dishes could be produced with relatively inexpensive ingredients, but in the cases of some beverages and steamed dishes considerable time and skills were required. Chen listed in detail various main courses, dim sum, wild game, fruits, vegetables, beverages, herbs, spices, and condiments available to the general populace of the Ming.<sup>41</sup> Evidently, some foods of the common people managed to escape their lowly origins and became dishes for people of high social standing. In a particularly striking case, Grand Secretary Qiu Jun (丘浚, DMB: 1420?-1495) reportedly sent some steamed cakes (a common method of cooking) made from glutinous rice (a common ingredient) as gifts to the emperor. The cakes must have found imperial favor, for they were referred to as “Grand Secretary cakes” (阁老饼) and the imperial kitchen (尚膳监) was asked to make more, a task in which the imperial kitchen failed.<sup>42</sup> In all likelihood, cakes that were deemed suitable as gifts to the emperor and baffled the staff at the imperial kitchen must have required special effort, despite the commonness of their ingredients.

Some modern-day scholars view the consumption of these extravagant items by non-elites as conspicuous consumption. As Chao Xiaohong (2002) has noted, in the language of conventional Chinese political economy, it was a vice to publically flaunt one’s wealth and

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<sup>40</sup> Chen Baoliang, 281-282. The use of the term “dim sum” here is not anachronistic.. See Chen, 291n154.

<sup>41</sup> Chen Baoliang, 288-305.

<sup>42</sup> Chen Baoling, 290.

duplicate the consumption patterns of the elite, although one suspects that the real reason for scholar-officials' scorn for extravagance was the blurring of social boundaries between scholar-officials and peoples of the other classes.<sup>43</sup> Craig Clunas (1991) has explored late Ming guides to the appreciation of objects of art; he concluded that in the sixteenth century objects of art were becoming commoditized and served as markers of prestige for their owners.<sup>44</sup> Thus artwork became a means for scholar-officials to show that they stood above people of other classes. The problem with this strategy of demarcating scholar-officials from the rest of society, of course, was that consumption patterns could be copied by members of other classes. This is the theme of a book by Wu Jen-chu (2007).<sup>45</sup> As scholar-officials felt challenged by the ability of people from conventionally non-elite classes to imitate their consumption choices, they responded by changing their views of these objects and their consumption patterns. Wu contended that elites felt their identities challenged through various forms of consumption. Clunas and Wu agree that scholar-official elite consumers altered their spending choices in an attempt to meet these challenges, and developed theories to justify their consumption choices. In contrast to Clunas, however, Wu advanced the propositions that China in the sixteenth and seventeenth century saw the emergence of a "consumer society" (消费社会) and that the China of this period may have

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<sup>43</sup> Chao Xiaohong 钞晓鸿, 〈明清人的‘奢靡’观念及其演变〉 in 《历史研究》 No. 4 (2002).

<sup>44</sup> Clunas, *Superfluous Things Material Culture and Social Status in Early Modern China*. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), Ch 6.

<sup>45</sup> Wu Jen-chu 巫仁恕, 《品味奢华：晚明的消费社会与士大夫》 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2008 [2007]).

experienced something similar to the “consumer revolution”（消费革命）of the eighteenth century British Isles.<sup>46</sup>

How did the consumption choices of people in other classes begin to threaten the social boundaries of the scholar-official elite? Modern-day scholars point to the flouting of sumptuary laws in late Ming society. Clothing was a prominent example of the flouting of sumptuary laws. The early Ming regime imposed sumptuary laws to regulate the size, material, color, and design of clothes and their wearers. Different allowances existed for the clothes of people belonging to different occupational and hereditary groups, from the imperial and princely households to officials and examination candidates.<sup>47</sup> Ming sumptuary laws were a form of social control. The differences in clothing prescribed by law were meant to demarcate and reinforce the distinctions between classes, rendering the differences of social status and the differences of occupations immediately visible. Chen Baoliang quoted one early Ming official who claimed that different clothing of scholar-officials, farmers, artisans, and merchants were prescribed, so that one who

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<sup>46</sup> On Wu’s claim of a “consumer society” see Wu, Ch 1. On Wu’s suggestion of a “consumer revolution” see Wu, 289-290. This comparison between Ming China and eighteenth-century Britain is somewhat problematic. Firstly, it is not very clear why Wu chose eighteenth century Britain in particular as an object of comparison. Secondly, the applicability of “consumer society” and “commercial revolution” to sixteenth century China is not well established, because much scholarly work focused on the application of these terms on eighteenth century Britain. Thirdly, Europeanists are not decided on quite a few aspects of the “consumer society” and “consumer revolution” of early modern Europe, and thus the meaning of these terms are unclear. Jan de Vries has dissented to various aspects in the concept of “consumer revolution” as usually applied. See de Vries, “Between purchasing power and the world of goods,” in John Brewer and Roy Porter, eds., *Consumption and the World of Goods* (London: Routledge, 1993), 85-132.

<sup>47</sup> Chen Baoliang, 191-194.

did not belong to any of the four occupations could not hide.<sup>48</sup> Ming sumptuary laws also carried the mark of conventional thought, particularly the attachment of greater social prestige to scholar-officials and farmers and the denigration of merchants. For instance, merchants were forbidden to wear silk. In contrast, members of agricultural households were permitted to wear silk, but they lost this privilege if one member of the household became a merchant.<sup>49</sup>

In the early Ming sumptuary laws were strictly enforced. But, by the sixteenth century, frequent complaints about clothing were indications that the enforcement of sumptuary laws had ceased to be effective. A market for fashions had emerged.<sup>50</sup> And with a market for fashion came the need to change fashions intermittently. As Wu Jen-chu has observed of Ming clothing fashions, Ming clothiers drew inspiration from a variety of sources for the designs of their clothing. Some imitated designs from the past. Some invented exotic and novel designs. And still others imitated the designs of clothing worn by princely households.<sup>51</sup> One can see plainly that popular consumption of clothes with designs reserved for princely households was in breach of sumptuary laws. Princely households and top officials still wielded considerable coercive powers, powers which in all likelihood deterred others from excessive imitation. The blurring of social boundaries was more acute for low-ranking officials and literati. Particularly for the

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<sup>48</sup> Chen Baoliang, 194. The logic of this official's argument is not entirely clear. He seems to assume that one could not change clothes, or that all members of society could not find clothes belonging to those of other classes. Nevertheless, this quotation suffices to show that some Ming officials believed that sumptuary laws were effective means of demarcating and reinforcing differences in occupation and position.

<sup>49</sup> Chen Baoliang, 194. Wu, 122. Brook, *The Confusions of Pleasure*, 70.

<sup>50</sup> A document from the 1570s mentioned the term "the look of the moment" (时样), which Timothy Brook has identified with fashion. See Brook, *Confusions of Pleasure*, 220. Craig Clunas has translated the same Chinese characters as "the pattern of the day" and identified this with fashion. See Clunas, 90.

<sup>51</sup> Wu, 125-133.

clothing of literati and women, anecdotal evidence suggests that the imitation of existing designs and the introduction of new designs occurred with increasing frequency.<sup>52</sup> Ming scholar-officials recognized that these acts of imitation blurred the distinctions which set them apart from the rest of society. The Xinchang (新昌) county gazetteer of the Wanli reign (1572-1619) reported:

“Before the Chenghua reign, the common people adhered to imperial regulations, regardless of their wealth. They wore their kerchiefs flat, their clothes were dark colored and straight, and their clothes and shoes were extremely simple. In time they became more extravagant. Scholar-officials wore lofty headwear and loose-fitting clothes, and any child who had read some books and pretended to be a scholar would also wear colorful clothes and carry brightly colored kerchiefs. The sons of rich families would sometimes transgress and wear them.”<sup>53</sup>

And the 1638 Wucheng (乌程) county gazetteer reported with frustration that “rich families neglect supervision of their servants and permitted them to transgress by wearing kerchiefs” in the streets, where “newer and craftier designs would be introduced frequently” and were visually appealing and flaunted before the masses.<sup>54</sup>

Scholar-officials had various responses to these acts of imitation. Some resorted to coercive means to put a stop to the imitation. In the view of one early sixteenth-century official Wang Hong (汪鋐 1466-1536), imperial circuit attendants and local officials at the metropolitan, prefectural, and county level should be empowered to arrest imitators and confiscate their clothing.<sup>55</sup> Willingness to use force was not the only reaction of those who hoped to put an end to the imitation. Some scholar-officials changed their consumption choices and wore clothes with increasingly sophisticated designs, hoping that new styles would continue to display their elite status. Scholar-officials may even have entered into a race against their

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<sup>52</sup> Wu, 136.

<sup>53</sup> Quoted in Wu, 145-146.

<sup>54</sup> Quoted in Wu, 147.

<sup>55</sup> Wu, 149-150.

imitators. In one sixteenth century novel, a Suzhou scholar designed and wore a gown with excessively large sleeves, believing that these sleeves distinguished him and marked his status as a successful examination candidate. When asked why the sleeves on his gown were so wide, this scholar replied that the sleeves would help him stand above the rest of the population. He was then told that those sleeves would only help him stand above one person – his interlocutor in the present conversation relating this information to him – because similar gowns could already be seen all across Suzhou.<sup>56</sup>

In all likelihood, demands for stricter enforcement of existing sumptuary laws and races against imitators did little to stop the imitation of scholars-officials' clothing by members of conventionally lower classes. After all, Wang Hong's suggestion to use force to enforce sumptuary laws dates to the early sixteenth century and, as can be seen in the gazetteers above, scholar-officials' frustration with imitators persisted into the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century. And the race for newer and newer fashions between scholar-officials and their imitators probably produced more frustrations than results, as parodied in the tale of the gown with the excessively large sleeves.

Perhaps out of frustration that they could not put a stop to such imitation, scholar-officials developed intellectual critiques of the new, fashionable clothes and their wearers. These criticisms often applied to the non-elite imitators of scholar-official clothing, as well as the scholar-officials who participated in the race for new fashions. The proponents of these critiques attacked the newly designed clothes as inappropriate “offenses against the rites” (犯礼). Wearers of the new fashion were denigrated with outright abuses, such as “sartorial devils” (服妖). And the new clothes and their wearers, in the opinion of these scholar-officials turned

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<sup>56</sup> Wu, 155.

fashion critics, displayed poor aesthetic judgment in that these clothes and their wearers did not heed the distinction between “elegant” (雅) and “vulgar” (俗).<sup>57</sup> For instance, the 1593 Hengzhou (衡州) prefectural gazetteer complained that because some scholar-officials participated in the race for new fashions against their imitators, these scholar-officials were also guilty of “no longer distinguishing between elegance and vulgarity” (雅俗不分).<sup>58</sup> With the application of the terms “elegant” and “vulgar,” one can see that some scholar-officials resorted to appealing to new sources of authority, independent of Ming sumptuary laws, to oppose the consumption of elaborately designed and high quality clothing by non-elites. The aesthetic terms “elegance” and “vulgarity” were not words normally used in the pronouncements of the early Ming emperors, nor did they appear in the bulky tomes listing sumptuary laws and regulations such as MHD. Moreover, as Craig Clunas has shown, terms such as “elegance” and “vulgarity” were words used in the Ming literature of connoisseurship of objects of art, a genre aimed at the scholar-official elite.<sup>59</sup> According to Wu Jen-chu, it is likely that the use of “elegant” and “vulgar” as terms critical of the new fashions and their wearers originated from this literature of connoisseurship.<sup>60</sup>

Foods and clothes are extremely visible items of consumption, and their consumption is a convenient marker of one’s financial means and social standing. Sumptuary laws were intended

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<sup>57</sup> Wu, 155-164.

<sup>58</sup> Quoted in Wu, 163.

<sup>59</sup> Clunas, 82-83.

<sup>60</sup> Wu, 164n1. Wu makes this point in stronger language. But I feel that Wu’s point, that terms from the Ming literature of connoisseurship of objects of art were imported as criticisms of fashion, is quite speculative. To my knowledge, there is no evidence to connect Ming literature on connoisseurship with clothing fashions. Much of the literature of connoisseurship, as seen in Clunas, was concerned with paintings and antiques, and clothes were not their focus.



to set the elite scholar-official class apart from the rest of society. Yet, as we have seen with clothes, scholar-officials' frustration with imitators, and the various strategies employed by scholar-officials to stop these imitations, also show that visible acts of consumption could easily undermine class distinctions, if people from lower classes could mimic the consumption patterns of the elites. It should be noted, however, that vestimentary imitation did not flow in one direction. In addition to the imitation of scholar-officials' clothing by peoples of other classes, there were instances where members of elite households imitated the clothing styles of the lower classes. According to some Qing sources reflecting on Ming times, well-known courtesans of the late Ming period were trendsetters and their choices of clothing were imitated by women in scholar-official households.<sup>61</sup> This imitation reversal makes it even more difficult to define the elite of sixteenth and seventeenth century Ming society, for one could be at a loss as to which class was imitating which. But this bilateral imitation was a symptom of a society where an old class of elite was coming under threat. As will be seen in the next section, the awarding of examination degrees and official positions were increasingly affected by wealth and social networking between the most affluent merchants and scholar-officials, and these combined to create a new "gentry-yet-merchant" elite.

### **The Difficulty of Succeeding through the Civil Service Examinations**

In the sixteenth century, the most affluent merchant families were coming into closer contact with scholar-official families, forming a new elite group composed of merchants and scholar-officials.<sup>62</sup> The close contact between merchants and scholar-officials was a topic of mild

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<sup>61</sup> Wu, 134.

<sup>62</sup> The merchant origins of some of the new elite families can best be seen through the biographies of individuals of prominent families; however, many families often alternated between commercial and

amusement for some Ming observers. In a conversation between two Ming scholar-officials, one scholar said that Xinan merchants and Suzhou literati visited each other as frequently and predictably as “flies gathering around the smell of meat” (如蠅聚一膾), to which his interlocutor replied merely by smiling.<sup>63</sup> As the analogy of “flies gathering around the smell of meat” and the silent response suggest, some contemporaries had ambivalent feelings about the close association between merchants and literati. Modern-day scholars have divergent interpretations of the reasons for this ambivalence. For Zheng Lihua, some of these associations were genuine and intimate friendships, as evidenced by some of merchant epitaphs written by Ming scholar-officials, although Zheng does not discount the desire for social prestige and wealth as motivations for their willingness to interact with each other.<sup>64</sup> Zheng’s claim that *some* of these close associations were genuine and intimate friendships is difficult to deny; nevertheless, this emphasis on real friendship conceals self-interested motivations for the close association between many other merchants and scholar-officials.

More cynical interpretations of the close association between merchants and scholar-officials would emphasize the self-interest of both groups. For Xu Lin the mutual material interests of scholar-officials and merchants provided the motivation for both parties to interact

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scholar-official pursuits. Thus “merchant” and “scholar-official gentry” were not mutually exclusive. Brook also sees the dual status of the growing group of “gentry-yet-merchant” (士商) elite as a challenge to the conventional understanding of social order based on the fourfold division. See Brook, *The Confusions of Pleasure*, 143-144. Throughout this thesis I continue to call some families “merchants” and others “scholar-officials,” but it should be kept in mind that very likely many elite families were engaged in both sorts of activities.

<sup>63</sup> Quotation from Zheng Lihua 郑利华, 〈士商关系嬗变：明代中期社会文化形态变更的一个侧面〉 in 《学术月刊》 No. 6 (1994), 64-65.

<sup>64</sup> Zheng, 65-66.

and develop their social networks. In particular, late Ming scholars often received payment for their literary compositions, such as epitaphs for recently deceased merchants.<sup>65</sup> Merchants, Xu asserts, were particularly interested in befriending the upper crust of the old scholar-official elite, particularly the very successful landowning scholar-gentry, whose land ownership meant influence in local level affairs and thus could provide merchants with political protection.<sup>66</sup> Xu further asserts that, despite the inclusion of merchants in the new merchant-yet-gentry elite, the fact that merchants proved willing to join this new elite and adapt to scholar-official mores is evidence that Ming merchants remained in a weak position in comparison to their scholar-official acquaintances.<sup>67</sup> Such scholar-official mores include, for instance, the encouragement of their children to pass imperial civil service examinations; for there were few incentives to encourage their children to pass the examinations and attempt to become officials, if in merchants' minds they did not believe that there were distinct advantages for their children who could become scholar-officials. In Xu's interpretation, merchants remained dependent on the approval of scholar-officials. The wealthiest of merchants had greater financial means than many scholar-officials, but they remained in an underprivileged position as long as they needed other scholar-

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<sup>65</sup> Xu Lin 徐林, 〈明中后期士商交往评述〉 in 《东北师范大学报（哲学社会科学版）》 No.1 (2005), 2. Yu Ying-shih presents the Ming scholar-official Li Weizhen (李维桢) as an example of a scholar who profited from his association with merchants. Yu believes that Li's positive assessment of merchants – that merchants were the equal of scholar-officials – was an implicit defense of this profitable association. Nevertheless, Yu also believes that Li genuinely believed in the equality of merchants and scholar-officials and that Li's views were representative of other scholar-officials who held a positive view of merchants. See Yu, 168-169. Yu also presents a short description of the evolution of the fees (润笔) Ming scholars received for literary compositions; see Yu, 171-174. Chow Kai-wing also discusses the sale of prefaces as a source of income for Ming literati; see Chow, 110-115.

<sup>66</sup> Xu Lin, 3

<sup>67</sup> See Xu Lin, 4-5.

officials to help their children become scholar-officials themselves and as long as some of the wealthiest scholar-officials had effective control of commerce. As the Chinese scholar Fu Yiling has observed, in Ming China some industries and businesses – such as salt and steel, pawnshops and hospitality services for merchants – were largely in the hands of officials and merchants approved by scholar-officials, and the commerce of some regions were dominated by local scholar-official families; Fu cites specifically the prefectures of Suzhou and Songjiang, and the families of Xu Jie (徐阶) and Dong Qichang (董其昌). Xu and Dong were examples of scholar-officials whose families also had large commercial investments.<sup>68</sup> According to Fu, those who were primarily merchants by occupation did not possess such distinct advantages, and quite a few scholar-officials were probably aware of the unequal partnership between themselves and merchants, allowing scholar-officials to dictate terms to merchants. For instance, in one rental agreement for space for a shop between a family of scholar-officials and some merchants cited by Fu, the landowners were very clear and demanding in the terms they set for the tenant.<sup>69</sup> Thus there were significant material bases for merchants to desire the friendship of the wealthiest of

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<sup>68</sup> Fu Yiling 傅衣凌, 《明清农村社会经济明代社会经济变迁》(Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2007 [1959, 1981]), 261. The phrase “merchants approved by scholar-officials” mentioned in this sentence requires clarification. One of the commodities cited here, salt, was an imperial monopoly in Ming China and technically all merchants engaged in its retail should be licensed by the salt administration, under the auspices of the Board of Revenue, and carry “salt tickets” (盐引) as proof of license and as a record of the amount of salt owed to them by the state for fees and services rendered. As we will see again in Chapter 3, gradually the Ming state lost control of this monopoly and illegal, privately traded salt proliferated in the market. Many of the merchants selling this privately traded salt, however, were backed by powerful local families and so by and large shielded from capture and punishment. These powerful local families were most likely the families of high government officials in these officials’ native county. By the late Ming, then, these salt merchants approved by scholar-officials at home were not always in legitimate commerce.

<sup>69</sup> Fu Yiling, 《明清农村社会经济明代社会经济变迁》, 262.

scholar-officials. To clarify, this friendship was beneficial to merchants in three ways: increased political protection at the local-level, the acquisition of increased prestige by public knowledge of their association with scholar-officials, and perhaps the opportunity to attain better commercial arrangements between themselves and friendly scholar-officials. Once merchant families entered the new elite, they encouraged their young to study for imperial examinations and enter into government work, to further secure their position in this new elite. Yet, by focusing their next generation's attention on scholarly pursuits and government work, these merchant families strengthened the high social status of scholar-officials and governmental work. Interestingly, in addition to participation in imperial examinations and government work, it was believed that merchants were also using some of their funds to purchase land, imitating the landowning scholar-gentry in order to become respectable.<sup>70</sup>

Xu's interpretation succeeds in highlighting the benefits accrued by merchants and scholar-officials from their interactions, but Xu's interpretation assumes that the composition of the scholar-official class and the scholar-official lifestyle were unchanging. As can be seen in the last section's discussion of the imitation of the fashion of the lower classes, scholar-officials did change their aesthetic tastes when their previous patterns of consumption had been imitated by others. Moreover, the reversed imitation of courtesans' clothing by women from scholar-official households discredits the simplistic assumption that scholar-officials' lifestyle choices stood at the apex of society, so that merchants who entered the new gentry-yet-merchant elite could do no more than to emulate scholar-officials at the first available opportunity. In fact, merchants and

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<sup>70</sup> Ye Shicheng, 248. Brook relates the story of a Ming commercial publisher who tried to earn respectability by any means other than landowning. It is noteworthy that all the means employed by this merchant were intended to make this commercial publisher "act like gentry." See Brook, *Confusions of Pleasure*, 213.

scholar-officials exchanged more than clothing patterns; they also began to exchange ideas. Through their closer association with merchants, some scholar-officials gradually became convinced that the pursuit of profit was legitimate, which in the past would have contravened conventional notions of political economy. The acceptance of the pursuit of profits, Yu Ying-Shih has observed, can be seen in the writings of various Ming writers and in representations of merchants in popular novels.<sup>71</sup>

The difficulty of separating some sixteenth and seventeenth century scholar-officials and merchants is further compounded by the merchants' participation in the imperial civil service examinations. According to Zhang Haiying, before the Ming period, imperial governments prohibited merchants and members of special-service groups, for instance salt producers, from participating in imperial civil service examinations. This policy was justified by the conventional low social status of merchants.<sup>72</sup> As Ho Ping-ti once observed, since the founding of the Ming Dynasty, the state had restricted the upward social mobility of those employed in particular occupations and their descendants – for example, soldiers, military colonists, salt producers, medical practitioners.<sup>73</sup> The government eventually broke with this tradition and accommodated merchants and other hereditary special-service groups, by granting their members the privilege of participating in imperial examinations outside of their registered home districts.<sup>74</sup> But perhaps

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<sup>71</sup> Yu Ying-shih, 159-160.

<sup>72</sup> Zhang Haiying 张海英, 〈明中叶以后‘士商渗透’的制度环境 – 以政府的政策变化为视角〉 in 《中国经济史研究》 No. 4 (2005), 37.

<sup>73</sup> Ho Ping-ti, *The Ladder of Success in Late Imperial China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970 [1962]), 55.

<sup>74</sup> Special status exceptions were also created for these groups at examinations. See Ho, 67-72.

the state was legalizing and sanctioning existing practice, because cases of fraudulent reporting of candidates' home district and credentials (冒籍) were common.<sup>75</sup>

Occurrences of examination fraud were symptoms of a deeper problem with the career path offered by the civil service examinations. As the Ming population grew in size, so too did the size of the pool of aspirant officials. Moreover, the opportunity for members of merchant households to participate in the examinations meant that new commercial wealth became one of the factors that affected examination candidates' chances of success. As we have seen with the statement by Shen Yao in Chapter 1, merchant families were increasingly entering officialdom and blurring the distinctions of the fourfold division, which sharply divided scholar-officials, farmers, artisans, and merchants. But was Shen Yao's assertion about the obsolescence of the fourfold division an accurate description of Ming social reality? The most rigorous method of answering this question is to tabulate the numbers of successful Ming civil service examinations candidates with merchant family backgrounds. This is a difficult task because of the large numbers of recorded successful examination candidates in late imperial China, and because the examination system in fact awarded several levels of degrees and administered different levels of examination corresponding to the levels of degrees awarded.<sup>76</sup> Furthermore, to my knowledge, no scholarly work has directly concerned itself with the rigorous quantification of Ming degree-holders from families which included merchants or were engaged in commercial activities.

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<sup>75</sup> For a list of some known cases of examination fraud, see Fig. 6-21 in Wu Xuande 吴宣德, 《明代进士的地理研究》 (Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 2009), 218-220. But this type of examination fraud was an option available mostly to the wealthy. See Wu Xuande, 222.

<sup>76</sup> On the intricacies of the examination system and its various levels, one of the larger and most recent study of the civil service examinations in late imperial China is Benjamin Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley: University of California, 2000).

Ho Ping-ti's classic work on social mobility in late imperial China, *The Ladder of Success in Imperial China*, collated quantitative data showing the composition of cohorts of successful examination degree-holders of late imperial China.<sup>77</sup> But these tables do not show whether there was a correlation between merchant backgrounds and successful examination candidates. Also, among the many "factors affecting social mobility" considered by Ho, the growing size of Ming merchant communities and merchant wealth were not considered.<sup>78</sup> This is unfortunate, but Ho was focused on the changes in social status for a broad spectrum of Ming society and not any particular social class. One of Ho's parameters for assessing social mobility is helpful. In exploring the "regional differences in socioacademic success and mobility,"<sup>79</sup> Ho observed that the distribution of successful examination candidates was unevenly distributed among different regions of China, but he did not explain why particular provinces and counties were more successful than others and whether some regions had particular advantages, such as better education, that aided their candidates' success in the examinations.

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<sup>77</sup> The sources for Ho's work were, in Ho's words, "the lists of *jinshi* (holders of the highest academic degree who almost automatically became middle-ranking officials). These lists provide accurate information regarding candidates' ancestry for three generations. The forty-eight such lists available yield a total of 12,226 cases and cover reasonably well the whole period from 1371, when the first *jinshi* examination was held under the Ming, to 1904, after which the time-honoured civil service examination system was abolished. These supply the present study with the main body of its statistics but are supplemented by twenty lists of *juren* and *gongsheng* (holders of intermediate academic degrees who had the right to minor government appointment) of lower Yangtze. Two of the *shengyuan* (holders of the elementary academic degree and had no right to minor government appointment) cover the period from 1644 to 1904 and one the entire Ming-Qing period from 1368 onward." See Ho, Preface, xi.

<sup>78</sup> Ho, Ch 5.

<sup>79</sup> Ho, Ch 6.



In recent years scholars in China have devoted attention to these questions and treated the number of successful examination candidates as a measure of the level of education of various regions in China. From this corpus of scholarship, a chapter in a monograph by Wu Xuande has some interesting quantitative data.<sup>80</sup> Wu tabulates the distribution of *jinshi*, holders of the uppermost degree, by county. The depth of Wu's study into the county, as well as the provincial, level allows us to quantitatively compare the number of successful candidates against the number of community schools in a county and also the commercial reputations of individual provinces and counties. With this data it is possible to conduct a *limited* appraisal of the accuracy of Shen Yao's remark – that in the Ming period success in imperial examinations and entry into officialdom were increasingly the preserve of sons of merchant families. Fig. 2-24 names the county names and provincial jurisdictions of counties which produced 20 or more *jinshi* throughout the two centuries of Ming rule. Interestingly, the two counties which produced the most degree-holders, Jinjiang (晋江) and Putian (莆田) were in Fujian Province, which was not among the most economically developed of provinces during this period. But in the middle range of this table are the names of some counties in the lower Yangtze, a region particularly known for its crafts and commerce – such as Wuxi, She (in Huizhou), Wu, Shanghai, Taicang, Changshu, along with the names of counties in significant commercial thoroughfares in South China such as Nanhai in Guangdong Province and Nanchang in Jiangxi Province. In Fig. 2-1 he also shows that at different times during the Ming period, no individual province had a permanent advantage in the production of successful examination candidate. But Wu's delineation by

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<sup>80</sup> For a literature review of relevant Chinese-language scholarship on the distribution of successful examination candidates, see the Foreword in Wu Xuande 吴宣德, 《明代进士的地理研究》 (Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 2009), 1-14.

individual provinces obscures larger regional differences. The table in Appendix 1 are calculated from the data in Wu's Fig. 2-1 and show the significant lead the lower Yangtze region had over the rest of the empire. Most noteworthy is the steady increase in the total number of *jinshi* produced by the lower Yangtze region compared to all other regions. It would be premature to conclude that *commercial* wealth influenced their successes, since without looking into the individual family backgrounds of successful candidates we cannot tell whether or not successful candidates originated in families that profited from commercial activities. Yet, as circumstantial evidence, these figures strongly suggest that there was a positive association between wealthy regions and successes in imperial examinations. It should also be stressed that Wu's main purpose in compiling his data is to demonstrate the uneven geographical distribution of successful candidates.<sup>81</sup> The remaining chapters of Wu's book explore demographic and institutional factors influencing the production of successful examination candidates, and these chapters do not readily contribute to an understanding of the relationship between commercial wealth and the production of successful examination candidates. In fact in his 'Afterword' Wu explicitly states that differences in regional economic development could affect rates of success in the examinations, but because of time constraints he had not explored this in depth.<sup>82</sup> To my knowledge, a thorough study of such a relationship remains incomplete.

From whatever family backgrounds, Ming aspirants to the scholar-official lifestyle needed to work diligently for an increasingly difficult to obtain examination success. As modern-day scholarship of imperial China has noted, China's population more than doubled during the

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<sup>81</sup> Examination success was not the only item that had an uneven regional distribution. Wu further shows that successful candidates were unevenly distributed in the Six Boards and the Imperial Academy in Figures 2-28 and 2-29, which are suggestive of political factions associated with regional loyalties.

<sup>82</sup> Wu Xuande, 353.

Ming period.<sup>83</sup> And yet, as Yu Ying-shih has claimed, increases in the number of degrees awarded by the examination system were negligible. Yu cites a contemporary claiming that “one out of ten succeeded by scholar-official means; nine out of ten succeeded by the means of merchants”（士而成功也十之一，贾而成功也十之九）.<sup>84</sup> Although this contemporary probably underestimated the difficult odds faced by sixteenth century Ming examination candidates,<sup>85</sup> this quotation does suffice to show that Ming contemporaries noticed one’s low chances of success through the imperial examinations. Moreover, some examination candidates might have concluded that they were studying in vain. The low chances of earning degrees and entering the imperial bureaucracy was further compromised by the progressive use of the sale of government offices to common “mean peoples”（贱民） as a means to raise revenue from private “donations”（捐纳） to the state.<sup>86</sup> In all likelihood, knowledge of this practice must

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<sup>83</sup> For estimates of the population of China in different periods, the standard reference is Ho Ping-ti, *Studies on the Population of China, 1368-1953* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959).

<sup>84</sup> Yu, 164.

<sup>85</sup> Benjamin Elman states that “[b]y 1500, there were some 30,000 licentiates out of an approximate population of 65 million, a ratio of almost 1 licentiate per 2,200 persons.” Elman also states that “[b]y 1700 [56 years after Ming rule ended], there were perhaps 500,000 licentiates in a total population of 150 million, or a ratio of 1 licentiate per 300 persons.” This contradicts Yu Ying-shih’s claim that in late imperial China the increase in the number of degrees awarded were negligible; nevertheless, Elman’s first figure does show Ming examination candidates’ slim chances of success. Figures cited from Elman, 140.

<sup>86</sup> Zhang, 39. Elman, 145-146. On the revenue collected from sale of offices in the sixteenth century, see Ray Huang, *Taxation and Government Finance in Sixteenth-Century Ming China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 244-246. From what I can gather, the practice of selling of government offices was preceded by two practices of early Ming local level government. One practice allowed people found guilty of minor offenses to mitigate the severity of punishments in exchange for payment. A second practice concerned the recruitment of aides to local magistrates: in the early Ming, criminals and underperforming examination candidates could substitute punishment for assignments to serve the local magistrate（罚充吏

have demoralized examination candidates, reduced the social prestige of the scholar-official lifestyle, and benefitted merchants, for whom the sale of government offices opened an additional route of obtaining official positions.<sup>87</sup> In sum, from whatever family backgrounds, Ming aspirants to government positions faced intense competition in the civil service examinations, and even if they succeeded in becoming officials they were entering an occupation that had suffered a decline in social prestige. Very likely, the acquisition of government office through the examinations was losing its attractiveness as a career choice for many Ming examination candidates.<sup>88</sup>

According to anecdotal evidence, many eligible examination candidates responded to this situation by dropping their studies in favor of a life in commerce.<sup>89</sup> It is unclear whether or not this influx of aspirant merchants into commercial occupations made commerce more respectable. Ming examination candidates perhaps turned to commerce simply to make ends meet, because the scholar-official path to success had become so congested. Yet that does not necessarily mean that

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员) . As the Ming state found itself in financial desperation, these practices may have given the impetus to sell low ranking official positions and subofficial positions to any persons willing and able to pay a fee ( 谋充吏员) . It is unclear whether the initiative for the sale of official and subofficial positions originated from the local level or from the national level of the Ming state. See He Chaohui 何朝晖, 《明代县政研究》 (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2006), 44-46, 159-164.

<sup>87</sup> Zhang, 39. While I am sympathetic to Zhang's claim that the sale of offices must have reduced the social prestige of scholar-officials, it should be noted that this decrease must be relative. There is no necessary connection between the sale of offices and an *absolute decrease* in the prestige of scholar-officials. Hence, any talk of increases or decreases in prestige must be relative and highly subjective.

<sup>88</sup> Zheng, 68-69.

<sup>89</sup> Yu, 164-167. Zhang, 40. A caveat should be stated. Although much anecdotal evidence from the period supports the assertion that many Ming examination candidates fled from their studies to commerce, I am unaware of any reliable quantitative data on the actual numbers of examination candidates who did make such a career change. It is not clear whether the flight of examination candidates towards commerce and merchant life has been exaggerated. To my knowledge, the extant sources are anecdotal impressions.

a scholar turned merchant believed a commercial occupation would bring greater prestige than a career as a literatus and government official.<sup>90</sup> For the purpose of this thesis this is not of great significance. In conventional Chinese political economy, merchants were considered to be the least respected occupation which was epitomized in the fourfold division; thus merchants' ability to associate with scholar-officials at the top of this hierarchy, in addition to merchants' ability to obtain government offices through examinations or through purchase, indicated their upward social mobility and a break with convention. If the sons of these gentry-yet-merchants decided that their chances of passing the examinations and obtaining a middle or upper level government position were too slim, they could opt for a life in commerce.

### **Assessing the Upward Social Mobility of Merchants**

The sections above have illustrated particularly pressing difficulties confronting sixteenth and seventeenth century scholar-officials wishing to retain their privileged position in Chinese society. The above sections have also stated that a change of composition of the elites was taking place; that is, the old elite composed solely of scholar-officials was being replaced by a new association between some scholar-officials and merchants. But we have yet to analyze what effect these two problems, together with the change in the composition of the elites, had on the social status of sixteenth and seventeenth century merchants.

Because there is no standard quantitative measurement of social status, we cannot answer this question with precision. At present, anecdotal evidence and some extant records of Ming

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<sup>90</sup> Xu, 95. This difference is sometimes neglected in modern-day scholarship of Ming social change. Even if examination candidates dropped their studies in favor of another occupation to make a living, it does not necessarily follow that the latter occupation was more prestigious. One may earn a living in an occupation for which one does not have great respect, while one's preferred pursuits could be followed at leisure.

writers' defenses of commercial activities – for instance, Lu Shen's and Lu Ji's respective defenses of loans and luxury – do tell us that at least *some* Ming people, scholar-officials included, were influenced by the commerce surrounding them. Particularly in Lu Ji's defense of the consumption of luxuries, wherein Lu explicitly stated that he based his defense on empirical observations, we have a clear indication that some Ming thinkers developed unconventional ideas in response to the sight of commerce and its multifarious effects on society. But the Lu family was probably unique in that it produced not one but two unconventional thinkers in two consecutive generations. What we do not have, to my knowledge, are sources by merchants or artisans who articulated unconventional ideas of political economy. For modern scholarship to base judgment regarding merchants' social status on the basis of anecdotes and essays penned by scholar-officials, leaves much to be desired.

Fortunately, there is a method of indirectly assessing the social status of merchants that does not depend exclusively on the views of scholar-officials. Let us return to the data on examination success collected by Ho Ping-ti. Ho attempted to locate social mobility in late imperial China by reading the genealogical records of prominent surname groups across many generations and by tabulating the number of degree-holders from different family backgrounds as recorded in degree-winners lists. Taking the long view, he saw upward and downward social mobility in terms of the quantity of advanced degrees won by individuals of different social backgrounds. This was tabulated in one long table.<sup>91</sup> From his sources Ho was able to conclude that, remarkably, the fierce competition for degrees in the examination system made it extremely difficult for the established elite to monopolize political power. In Ho's words:

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<sup>91</sup> This is tabulated in Table 9 of Ho's book, which will be reproduced in Appendix 2.

“[...] save for the years 1655, 1682, and 1703, the distinguished families failed to produce more than 10 percent of the *jinshi* at each examination. Taking the overall average for the entire Ming-Qing period, they accounted for only 5.7 percent of the total candidates. It is true that the distinguished families constituted only a small portion of official families, but their aggregate number during any given average three-generation period must have been considerably larger than the total *jinshi* quota of any specific examination. The fact that in spite of their incomparable advantages members of distinguished families failed to dominate *jinshi* examinations, in sharp contrast to the prolonged monopoly of political power by a few hundred aristocratic families in eighteenth-century England, goes far to testify to the general effectiveness of the competitive examination as a factor in the social-leveling process and to the inability of the wealthy and top-status families in the long run to maintain their position.”<sup>92</sup>

But the entrenched elite’s inability to dominate political office does not necessarily mean that merchants enjoyed upward social mobility; it merely tells us that established scholar-official families had an exceedingly difficult time maintaining their privileged position. At best this corroborates the view that, for descendants of privileged families in Ming China, the examinations probably did not provide the easiest avenue for personal success, and thus may corroborate the view that a life in commerce was a better option. Moreover, this does not mean that the commercial occupation experienced an increase in prestige, because opting for an easier path to success elsewhere does not necessarily mean that other members of Ming society saw this choice in a positive light.

This data is also unable to tell us whether a change in the composition of the *shi* took place. Because of the limitations of the sources and the need to show differences in the family origins of various examination candidates, in his analysis of successful *jinshi* degree-holders Ho artificially divided the successful examination candidates into four categories in order to tabulate and analyze them. These categories must be defined before I proceed to my reinterpretation of

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<sup>92</sup> Ho, 147. Ho’s figures are based on Table 9 in Ho, 112-113. See Appendix 2. More recent scholars studying the examination system are skeptical of Ho’s assertion that the examination system effectively broke up the monopoly on power. See for instance Wu Xuande, 229-234.

Ho's data.<sup>93</sup> Category A "consists of candidates whose families during the three preceding generations had failed to produce a single holder of the elementary degree, let alone any office or official title." This category represents strongly the families whose fortunes rose quickly "from rags to riches" because "even successful small tradesmen during the late Ming and Qing almost invariably adorned themselves with a title of student of the Imperial Academy purchased for between 100 and 200 taels, and that the vast majority of *shengyuan* had to eke out their meager living by teaching or doing clerical or sometimes even manual work." Category B "consists of candidates whose families during the three preceding generations had produced one or more *shengyuan* but no holder of a higher degree or office." These represent candidates that "should be regarded as emanating from families which were already in the process of partial upward mobility." Category C were

"candidates whose families during the three preceding generations had produced one or more holders of higher degrees or offices [...]. To these should be added families with subofficials or ancestors who had purchased titles and ranks. Altogether they constituted the class of officials and potential officials, or a bureaucracy in a very broad sense. It ought to be pointed out that, although their legal and social status differed from that of commoners, many families of the lower stratum of this broadly defined bureaucracy were actually of relatively limited prestige, privilege, and economic means."

And finally Category D

"which is a subdivision of Category C, consist of candidates whose families within the previous three generations had produced one or more high officials, that is, officials of the third rank and above. Since officials of the upper three ranks had, among other things, the *yin* privilege, their families may be regarded as nationally 'distinguished.' To these should be added those candidates who came from families which belonged to the upper ranks of the imperial and non-imperial hereditary nobility which, much like the high-ranking officials, enjoyed hereditary privileges.

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<sup>93</sup> The following descriptions of Ho's four categories are summaries of the descriptions in Ho, 107-109.



Lower noble ranks are excluded from this category but included in Category C because such ranks were merely in the nature of minor sinecures.”<sup>94</sup>

Merchants were most likely represented in Categories B and C, because Category D status was almost out-of-reach of merchants and the ancestors of Category A candidates were unable to purchase titles, which indicated that they were either less wealthy than merchants or were highly unsuccessful merchants. How well Categories B and C candidates performed in the examinations can be seen from Table 9 in Ho’s *Ladder of Success*. From the recorded results of the 1457 examination to the 1580 examination, in each of the examinations Category A candidates comprised of 44.4 to 61.8 percent of the successful candidates, thus showing that the opportunities for candidates who rose from “rags to riches” remained quite high and steady. Only in the 1586 examination did this percentage fall conspicuously to 29.5 percent. Likewise, Category C candidates performed steadily well from 1457 to 1610 and the percentage of Category C recipients of the *jinshi* degree also stood between 38.2 to 58.4 percent in each of the examinations. Data for Category B candidates was very scattered, so we cannot speak with any certainty. Finally, as mentioned above, Category D candidates were awarded 10 percent or less of the degrees at each examination and so these candidates can be treated as negligible.

From this data it would appear that in mid- and late Ming China, the majority of candidates who passed the *jinshi* examination were quite evenly distributed between Categories A and C. The successful candidates either came from very disadvantaged backgrounds or from more secure scholar-official and merchant backgrounds. And the fact that in the approximately 150 years between the 1457 examination and the 1610 examination the percentage of successful

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<sup>94</sup> The *yin* (荫) privilege was the hereditary privilege enjoyed by descendants of current officials. Recipients of the *yin* privilege were given favorable treatment in examinations and in appointment to office. On the development and limitations of the *yin* privilege in the Ming, see Ho, 149.

Category C candidates remained quite steady. This could be taken as an indication that families who had money to purchase titles or ancestors who served as officials were relatively able to preserve their social status in the examinations.

Ho rejected the suggestion that families of Category C backgrounds were able to preserve their social status in the examinations. He explained that the steady percentage of successful Category C candidates masked the Category's dynamic nature. As Ho noted, his definition for Category C was very broad, and this masked the extent to which old Category C families fell out of this Category and were replaced by others.<sup>95</sup> Hence, the data does not show the true extent of the change in the composition of the *shi*.

Ho's data can say more on consumption. Ho believed that the high percentage of Category A recipients of the *jinshi* degree between 1457 and 1580 indicates a significant degree of upward social mobility for those at the lowest strata of Ming society. If we treat the attainment of a *jinshi* degree not only as an indicator of entry into officialdom but also as an indicator of increased personal income brought about through the appointment to a mid-level position in the civil service that accompanied a *jinshi* degree, then the 44.4 to 61.8 range of Category A *jinshi* holders produced between 1457 and 1580 is an indicator of the percentage of candidates who had experienced a sudden and significant increase in income. And with this income we can project that the descendants of these candidates could afford more elaborate patterns of consumption. They could afford costlier goods, receive gifts, and live in material comfort far above their

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<sup>95</sup> Ho, 109. Ho did not include quantitative information on families falling in and out of Category C, much less information on the occupations of individual families in Category C, so this point cannot be pursued further. If this information was available, it would help quantify the flight of examination candidates to a life of commerce and help us better understand whether the sons of merchants were increasingly overtaking the sons of scholar-officials in securing the degrees and official appointment as Shen Yao stated.

previous Category A existence. With the increased income that accompanied a middle or higher position in the imperial bureaucracy, it may be assumed that their families could slowly rise up the social ladder in successive generations. Ho stated that he was particularly strict in fitting candidates into Category A backgrounds, such that any candidate with family members in any positions of authority or attained any degree in the previous three generations would be disqualified from being listed in Category A.<sup>96</sup> If that is accepted, then two propositions necessarily follow. Firstly, the families of each *jinshi* recipient almost certainly rose to Category C or D status not long after their receipt of the degree, for the *jinshi* degree was their ticket to a middle bureaucratic position. Secondly, the *jinshi* from Category A backgrounds produced at each examination must have been from families unrelated to *jinshi* produced at previous examinations for three generations. Thus the families of the 44.4 to 61.8 percent of the *jinshi* produced at examinations between 1457 to 1580 from Category A backgrounds, were directly lifted “from rags to riches” and unlikely to have received help from well-connected and powerful individuals.

Several hundred families make for a small number when compared to the population of China, but when it is remembered that the examinations were the focus of the well-established scholar-official families it may explain why traditional scholar-officials felt their social status threatened. Passing the examinations was the rite of initiation into scholar-officialdom. To have significant numbers of Category A *jinshi* produced at each examination would have appeared to reduce traditional scholar-officials’ own influence and their exclusive privilege of consuming more lavishly than most of the population. It seems likely that the effect this had on traditional scholar-officials’ *perceptions* of their own social position was far more severe than the *real* effect

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<sup>96</sup> Ho, 109.

the rise of several hundred “from rags to riches” family had on the traditional scholar-official class’s relatively superior position. Some scholar-officials’ complaints of their relative loss of social status were probably ill-founded. For them to worry and complain that a few hundred families were given the chance to dress well and consume more elaborately, in a population of roughly 100 million people, was at best inflating the effects of what was in reality a demographically insignificant avenue for upward social mobility. Seen in this light some scholar-officials’ worries of their relative loss of social status and the relative rise of the *nouveaux riches*, if we may apply this term to the families of successful Category A candidates, were exaggerated.

Yet, although traditional scholar-officials’ worries probably blew the upward social mobility of several hundred families out of proportion, they were probably right to think that more people could imitate their consumption choices. Receipt of the *jinshi* degree did not simply affect one generation of the successful candidate’s family; their descendants benefitted as well. And the number of descendants tended to multiply with each passing generation. Thus, assuming that the family’s fortunes had not been lost through mismanagement or disaster, many of the descendants would have been raised into relatively affluent conditions, at least conditions that were probably better than their Category A ancestors. Like all other scholar-official families, the descendants of *jinshi* holders from Category A backgrounds suffered from increasing competition in the civil service examinations in the latter years of the Ming period. By this point, however, again assuming that their family fortunes had not been lost, they could preserve their economic standing by opting for a life in commerce or other profitable occupations.

None of the above reinterpretation of Ho’s data can give us an exact or estimated number of merchants whose ancestors had made their fortunes through success at the imperial examinations. Nor could it give us an estimate of the number of people who descended from

these successful examination candidates, who then opted to continue down the scholar-official path, entered a life in commerce, or chose to engage in both the scholar-official and commercial occupations. This is not possible with Ho's data, given the fact that Ho applied very lenient criteria for including successful examination candidates in Category C in his tabulation. But it did tell us that traditional scholar-officials' fears of losing out to competition from the poor and the *nouveau riche* were probably exaggerated. Hence, the social status of the traditional scholar-official class probably did not suffer as much of a decline as they thought; conversely, the social status of merchants and other occupations probably did not increase as much as they thought because of the relative decline of the scholar-official class. This exaggeration is only apparent to us with hindsight, with the aid of Ho's work, and so we should not think less of the anxieties of traditional scholar-officials who witnessed the success of many underprivileged candidates in the *jinshi* examinations at firsthand. Those anxieties must have felt very real. Yet, contemporary observers from outside of traditional scholar-officials' circles might also have spotted this exaggeration on their own initiative and did not think that the success of many underprivileged examination candidates presented much of a problem. Indeed, contrary to the anxious reactions of traditional scholar-officials, they might have thought positively of non-scholar-officials' rise to scholar-officialdom. The decline of the social status of scholar-officials, then, was probably the greatest not in scholar-officials' minds but in the minds of non-scholar-official observers, such as merchants.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> This is speculation and I have no evidence to support this assertion. This is particularly why I regret that we do not have many descriptions of Ming society written by non-elites such as merchants and artisans. Upward social mobility into scholar-officialdom worked to non-elites' advantage; hence, they most likely welcomed it. But without descriptions by non-elites this cannot be ascertained. We do know that *some* late Ming officials had ancestors who were not distinguished and incidentally had a slightly more benign view

The frustration of scholar-officials who felt their social status diminished because of the ability of persons of other classes to imitate their consumption choices was probably less exaggerated. For although the *jinshi* examinations lifted only several hundred families out of poverty, these several hundred families made for many more people, perhaps in the tens of thousands, in later generations who were likely born into superior economic conditions than their original Category A *jinshi* ancestors. To be sure, not all the descendants of these successful candidates could afford high levels of consumption. Some of them must have lost their family fortunes to mismanagement, disasters, and large families; or their ancestors in the middle and upper levels of government might have been one of those incorruptible officials who took no bribes and did not abuse their power to supplement the family's income.<sup>98</sup> Nevertheless, it seems safe to assume that enough people had escaped extreme poverty because of their ancestors' rise

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of commerce. Zhang Han, who was mentioned at the very beginning of this Chapter, was one example. On Zhang Han and his ancestors, see Brook, "The Merchant Network" 173-175.

<sup>98</sup> My skepticism of officials' honesty requires a defense. I have two reasons to think that corruption and expedient measures were rampant in Ming China. Firstly, as will be seen in Chapter 3, even high ranking officials admitted to problems with corruption in their discussions of the problems faced by the salt and tea trades. It is possible that they had overstated the extent of corruption. But my second reason is that our general knowledge of late Ming court politics corroborates the impression that late Ming officials were generally lenient towards corruption and deviations from stated rules and procedures. The life of one sixteenth century official known for his incorruptibility, Hai Rui (海瑞 DMB: 1513-1587), is telling. Hai rose to national prominence for braving imperial displeasure by criticizing the Jiajing Emperor. This act established Hai's reputation for moral firmness and simultaneously led to his imprisonment. Hai survived imprisonment and returned to official duties in 1567, but he was given positions with no real power. Hai later reacquired real administrative power in 1569, but he was impeached within eight months of appointment because he immediately tried to reform land tenures and tax burdens against the interests of the rich. Hai remained out of office until 1585, but in 1586 he once again courted trouble and was impeached, before dying in 1587. For a vivid illustration of Hai's life see Ray Huang, *1587: A Year of No Significance: The Ming Dynasty in Decline* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), Ch 5.

out of Category A status, such that in later generations the descendants of originally poor examination candidates were able to spend lavishly. This would be particularly true of the descendants who opted for a life in commerce and became successful merchants. The previous sentence is speculation, and in no way can we verify it with numbers. Yet given the development of merchant networks and market towns, which are well documented in existing literature,<sup>99</sup> I would further hazard the assumption that commercial success was relatively attainable for those who opted to enter into commerce. The most difficult push upwards was the escape from the grinding poverty and lack of connections that afflicted the majority of the common people in late imperial times. The examination system gave successful Category A candidates the much needed lift to escape this, and from that point onwards their descendants had better foundations in life than the majority of the Ming population.

This chapter has illustrated that the change in scholar-officials' and merchants' social status in the sixteenth and seventeenth century was not as simple as some late imperial period commentators would have us believe. All scholar-officials faced increasing difficulties in reproducing their examination successes, and all had to contend with new challenges to the demarcation of their elite status such as the new fashions worn by non-scholar-officials. But *some* scholar-officials fared better than their peers, in that some managed to coalesce into the new gentry-yet-merchant elite, while others resisted the change. The descendants of some scholar-officials must have decided that the path to examination success had become too difficult and opted for a life in commerce, but then so must have the descendants of some merchants. The

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<sup>99</sup> On the development of merchant networks, see for instance Brook, "The Merchant Network"; Fu Yiling 傅衣陵, 《明清农村社会经济明清社会经济变迁》. On the development of market towns, see for instance Fan Shuzhi 樊树志, 《明清江南市镇探微》 (Shanghai: Fudan University Press, 1990).

narrowing of opportunities in the civil service examination system affected candidates of all backgrounds. Candidates from less well-established families, particularly those whose family fortunes were made recently, may have been in a worse position to absorb this shock than others and quicker to abandon their studies in favor of other paths to success. In fact, as we will see in Chapter 4 will show, parents of poorer merchants' households were advised not to force their children to study for the examinations if they did not show early promise of scholarly aptitude.<sup>100</sup> In addition, because thus far we can only suggest a positive correlation between economically developed regions and high numbers of successful examination candidates, it is by no means a given that the Ming bureaucracy was increasingly staffed with people who were sympathetic to commerce and accommodated merchants. And most importantly, logically, there is no necessary connection between the fluidity of social status and an increasingly sympathetic attitude to commerce and merchants. As a class, many merchant families may have had experienced upward social mobility, but that did not necessarily guarantee that the Ming state and other members of society would quickly abandon conventional political economy, or otherwise make gestures that made particular accommodations for commerce and merchants.

Our statements about late Ming social change, therefore, ought to be carefully phrased to take into account the nuances of sixteenth and seventeenth century social reality and the issues that we do not know with great precision. From what has been said in this chapter, it appears safe to assume that scholar-officials and merchants did face drastic changes in social status. Particularly with the blurring of social distinctions through consumption and the increasing difficulty of attaining examination success, *traditional* scholar-official families found that it was increasingly difficult for them to stand apart and above the rest of the common people. This tells

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<sup>100</sup> See Chapter 4, pages 115-116 of this thesis.



us that there was a relative decline in the social status of the old scholar-official class. But this did not doom all scholar-officials to declining social significance, because the *new* gentry-yet-merchant elite offered scholar-officials and affluent merchants the opportunity to band together to form a new elite group. Merchants and the pursuit of profit probably gained wider acceptance in the eyes of the late Ming contemporaries as a result of the flight of examination candidates to a life of commerce, but this should not be confused with higher social status for merchants. We simply do not have a quantitative measurement of *social status* in Ming China. We do have Ho's quantitative data on successful examination candidates that can throw some light on *social mobility* in late imperial China, and from this we could speculate that the examination system probably gave several hundred families of the most disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds a much needed lift up the social ladder. But in reality this was a demographically insignificant avenue of upward social mobility and we could only guess how much of an effect this had on the ability of candidates from merchant families. None of this, it would seem, could overwhelmingly validate or strongly deny Shen Yao's claim that the fourfold division had been turned upside down in the Ming period. The frustration of traditional scholar-officials in seeing their consumption patterns imitated and their opportunities in the examinations diminished would seem to confirm that their fortunes were weakened, and the gentry-yet-merchant elite would seem to confirm that people with merchant family backgrounds were increasingly penetrating scholar-officialdom. Yet, when we put this into demographic perspective, the number of people who could have achieved success must be so small that it was a gross exaggeration to say that the fortunes of all scholar-officials and all merchants were reversed.

## Chapter 3

### Commerce and Merchants in Memorials by High-Ranking Officials

Chapter 2 has argued that late Ming social changes were complicated and there is much that we do not know with great precision but can only conjecture about. Thus it would be ill-advised to rely on sweeping generalizations, such as Shen Yao's claim that the fourfold division had been reversed. It is also ill-advised to rely on sweeping statements about officials' attitudes. The bureaucracy was not a homogenous set of institutions with an unchanging set of attitudes towards commerce. Officials had varied sets of assumptions about commerce and different interpretations of what good government meant, and these should be clearly identified and recognized, and not brushed aside by sweeping generalizations about the Chinese elite's conventional disdain for commerce. It is the objective of the present chapter to show that on economic matters high-level Ming officials were quite divided in their views, and consequently our understanding of state-merchant relations in the Ming period needs further nuances. Prominent officials, of course, would not pay particular attention to individual commercial practices and leave us a record of their thoughts pertaining to such matters, unless these practices were somehow deemed relevant to the state. An area of particular relevance was state finance. Among modern-day historians there is a broad consensus that the collapse of the Ming Dynasty owed in no small part to spiraling defense expenditure and wastage.<sup>101</sup> Some Ming period writers understood the state's pressing need to pay its expenses too, as evinced by the preoccupation with issues of state finance and issues of defense by the Chongzhen Emperor (1628-1644) and his

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<sup>101</sup> See Lai Jiancheng 赖建诚, 《边镇粮饷: 明代中后期的边防经费与国家财政危机, 1531-1602》(Taipei: Academia Sinica and Lianjing chubanshe, 2008), i.

court. The areas of economic activity in which the Ming state took on an active interest included the imperial monopolies, the collection of transit taxes, and the collection of fees for merchant storage spaces and retail outlets. We begin with the salt and tea monopolies, discussed in the section below.

### **Aspects of the Early Ming Salt and Tea Monopolies**

Throughout the Ming period, the state claimed a monopoly on the distribution and sale of salt and tea. In the salt industry, the state exercised control of production and was responsible for the payment of salt workers; in turn producers would turn over their produce to the state, which in turn distributed the salt to merchants. A merchant would be charged a fee or given an assignment to perform before receiving a certificate licensing him to pick up a specific quantity of salt for sale. Merchants were not allowed to sell salt anywhere as they pleased. Ming China was divided into multiple salt jurisdictions; it was illegal to sell salt across the borders of these jurisdictions, and as a result several largely autonomous markets for salt existed in Ming China. For accounting purposes, the government divided all of its salt into various types. Of the several types of salt distributed by the Ming, one particularly important type, *kaizhong* (开中), was designed to bring provisions to border regions. Merchant transportation of provisions to the border would act as partial payment for *kaizhong* salt. A merchant would be given a piece of paper licensing him to transport provisions from the interior of the empire, deliver supplies to a specified border location, and return to the interior to pick up salt as remuneration for this task. After a specified amount of time the merchant must sell all the salt in his care and return his salt license to salt administration officials. If a merchant wished to conduct this trade a second time, he must obtain a new license and a new transportation assignment to the border, and the process would begin anew. Thus this

system of *kaizhong* salt passed the state's responsibility for supplying distant border regions to individual merchants.<sup>102</sup> As the Qing-era MS remarked: "the Ming salt system was in fact a border [defense] policy" (明盐制实边策也),<sup>103</sup> in that the responsibility for supplying border regions was partially turned over to the salt administration and merchants. Ming officials confirmed the use of *kaizhong* salt as a logistical device for border regions. The various proposals to rectify the problems of the salt monopoly will attest that Ming officials understood the sale of salt to be part of the state's logistical arrangement. One such proposal from the late Ming remarked that, since the "time of the ancestors" at the beginning of the dynasty, it had always been preferable to have merchants carry the supplies over long distances and difficult terrain, rather than have the Board of Revenue arrange shipments.<sup>104</sup> *Kaizhong* salt was sold throughout the Ming period, but payments for *kaizhong* salt were commuted to silver in 1489.<sup>105</sup>

The tea monopoly also served border defense purposes. A tea and horse trade provided Ming China with access to high quality horses, a strategic resource for which China had an insufficient and not very high quality supply. Like salt, tea growers also turned their produce to the state, which was then responsible for the distribution of tea. The earliest system for the tea and horse trade was the gold-tablet system. Leaders of non-Chinese groups were given gold tablets. The tablets licensed leaders and their representatives to travel to Ming China's border to conduct a tributary trade that exchanged Ming tea for non-Chinese horses. The issuance of gold

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<sup>102</sup> For a more thorough treatment of the *kaizhong* salt traded in this scheme, see Li Qianlong 李潜龙, 《明清经济探微初编》 (Taipei: Daoxiang chubanshe, 1993), 175-224.

<sup>103</sup> MS, 101:639.

<sup>104</sup> HMJSWB, 155:1a-3b. The author of this memorial was Lu Shen, who along with his son Lu Ji we have encountered in Chapter 2.

<sup>105</sup> Ray Huang, *Taxation and Government Finance in Sixteenth-Century Ming China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 204.

tablets was discontinued in 1416 and the gold-tablet system itself was discontinued in 1449.<sup>106</sup> Starting in 1435, the gold-tablet system was paralleled by the licensing of merchants to sell tea in a manner similar to *kaizhong* salt, although the *kaizhong* tea system did not match the scale and success of the salt.<sup>107</sup> Political upheavals in Inner Asia in the middle of the fifteenth century scattered the gold tablets and disrupted trade; as a result, this method of acquiring horses directly from non-Chinese groups gradually gave way to the private exchange of tea and horses by merchants. The government introduced measures for merchants to take over the responsibility for the transportation of tea in 1490.<sup>108</sup> Thus the Ming state's ability to control the exportation of tea and the importation of horses weakened; however, it remained the case that merchants authorized to transport and sell tea were expected to channel horses into China's markets, where the state could then purchase them to raise them for military use.

#### **Facing the salt and tea administration's problems, from the fifteenth to seventeenth century**

The complexities of the salt and tea monopolies made their administration difficult and vulnerable to disruptions. The state's declared monopoly inserted the state in the salt and tea industries, so that the state could pass logistical responsibilities onto private commerce. But because the Ming founder and early Ming officials assumed that their policies would work smoothly and did not devise alternative arrangements to transport provisions and provide horses to the border, the state was often caught unprepared when these policy schemes did not function

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<sup>106</sup> On the discontinuation of further issuance of gold tablets, see MHD, 37:267. On the discontinuation of the gold-tablet system itself, see Tani Mitsutaka, "A Study on Horse Administration in the Ming Period," in *Acta Asiatica*. No. 21 (1971), 75.

<sup>107</sup> Huang, *Taxation and Government Finance*, 257-258. On *kaizhong* tea, see MHD, 37:266.

<sup>108</sup> Tani, 76.

as intended. When Ming officials awoke to the many short-term and long-term problems confronting the salt and tea administrations, they began to write memorials that detected, assessed, and offered solutions to the problems. Their writings demonstrated a range of views on the existing administrative arrangements and on the contributions of merchants in creating these problems. The following is a brief sampling of officials' observations on and suggestions for solving problems in the salt and tea monopolies. The following examples are by no means an exhaustive account of the corpus of official memorials detailing problems and suggestions for reform of the monopolies. My objective is to show the range of different opinions that existed and stimulate further research in indentifying these different opinions and exploring their impact on the financial health of the Ming state.

In the first place, it should be noted that high-ranking Ming officials were often interested and well-informed on matters pertaining to salt and tea administration, despite the conventional disdain for commerce and regardless of whether or not their official profiles gave them oversight of the salt and tea administrations. As Ray Huang once noted, over the course of time the Ming regime deliberately made piecemeal adjustments to its fiscal administration, to offer temporary fixes to its problems rather than to offer thoroughgoing reform.<sup>109</sup> The salt and tea monopolies were no exception. Occasionally, piecemeal administrative changes led to problems in areas affected by the changes, and such problems were spotted soon after the changes were implemented. In the early sixteenth century, for instance, Wang Yangming (王阳明 DMB: 1472-1529), then an official in Jiangxi Province sent a memorial to the emperor noting that a recent transfer of two prefectures from one salt jurisdiction to another imperiled the public order of the

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<sup>109</sup> Huang, *Taxation and Government Finance*, 3.

two prefectures. The orders sent to the prefectures prescribed that henceforth only salt from the Huai River jurisdiction would be allowed to circulate there. But as Wang pointed out, residents of these prefectures were accustomed to buying salt from a closer and cheaper source in Guangdong Province. The government's order to change jurisdictions stimulated the smuggling of salt from Guangdong, added to the local population's list of grievances, and therefore endangered public order. Wang further requested that the prefectures be permitted to trade Guangdong salt again, so as to pacify the local population.<sup>110</sup> Wang's memorial stands out because at no time in Wang's life was he an official responsible for the salt administration or posted to the Board of Revenue, which supervised the salt administration. That Wang chose to observe and report on the salt monopoly system, evidently for reasons of public security, shows that some Ming officials actively sought information on commercial matters, notwithstanding the conventional contempt for commerce.

Wang Yangming noticed a new and misguided administrative change recently ordered by the Ming state, and this measure was quickly addressed thanks to Wang. Other problems in the salt monopoly lasted much longer and were brought about by a much deeper failure in existing rules and procedures. In the fifteenth century, quite a few officials noticed that the salt trade was increasingly carried out by fewer but more powerful and well-connected families. The causes of this problem were manifold,<sup>111</sup> but out of the many causes one proximate cause was readily

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<sup>110</sup> HMJSWB, 130:40a-43a. This memorial, like many collected in HMJSWB, was not dated. But from our knowledge of Wang Yangming's biography, this incident should date to the late 1510s.

<sup>111</sup> Because this is not a thesis that specializes in the salt administration, I will not digress into discussions of the various manifestations of the problems faced by the salt administration in the two centuries of Ming rule. If the reader is interested, a concise description of the salt administration and a thought-provoking discussion of its problems can be found in Li Mingming 李明明 and Wu Hui 吴慧 《中国盐法史》

apparent to Ming observers: members of powerful families (势豪之家) increasingly dominated the salt market and took a disproportionate share of the salt licenses issued. One official, Han Wen (韩文 DMB: 1441-1526), observed that the early Ming emperors originally intended for the salt trade to benefit small merchants, but small merchants were now increasingly pushed out of the market by the merchants working for powerful families.<sup>112</sup> Han alleged that in the market for *kaizhong* salt, agents of powerful families received more salt than they should at the salt factories, because they further traded in salt produced clandestinely and without authorization. No action was taken since local officials refrained from taking action against them for fear of their powerful connections. Consequently, the problems faced by the salt monopoly can be traced to powerful licensees' domination of the market. Han made various recommendations to rectify the existing problems.<sup>113</sup> Particularly striking was Han's focus on

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(Taipei: Wenjin chubanshe, 1988), Ch 6. Huang offered a critical assessment of the Ming salt administration. See Huang, *Taxation and Government Finance*, Ch 5. The relationship between the salt administration and defense expenditure can be found in Lai 《边镇粮饷》, Ch 7.

<sup>112</sup> The concentration of salt licenses in the hands of the few and powerful is described in greater detail in Li, 194-195. Mirroring the powerful salt merchants were the powerful salt producers, whose increase in control of salt production put pressure on smaller salt producers. It is most likely that the greater market share enjoyed by powerful salt producers also better positioned them to trade with salt merchants in the illicit market for salt. On powerful salt producers, see Huang, *Taxation and Government Finance*, 207-208.

<sup>113</sup> HMJSWB, 85:8b-15a. At the heart of the problems faced by the salt administration was the fact that the officials who issued licenses to merchants were operating on projected figures. They could not have a full idea of the real quantities produced at the salt yards, and even less could they account for the loss of salt output as a result of salt producers channeling their produce into the illicit market for salt. This meant that the issuance of promises to remunerate merchants with salt almost invariably outstripped actual output. Memorials in HMJSWB by officials who flourished in the Zhengtong reign (1435-1449) discussed measures to "clear up the salt administration" (清理盐法). The flow of memorials on the salt administration could also be seen for much of the sixteenth century. All these memorials strongly suggest



corruption as the proximate cause of the failure of existing rules. For this official, powerful families' entry into the salt trade was perceived to be a form of corruption. He assumed that the system put in place in the early Ming to benefit small traders was adequate, and that it began to encounter problems because of this corruption. This assumption was particularly apparent in his use of the term "abuse" (弊) to refer to each of the problems faced by the salt monopoly.

But those who attributed the failure of the salt monopoly to corruption often did not recognize that corruption thrived and the market structure changed because the complexity of existing rules and practices allowed corrupt practices to go unchecked. In a memorial by Yu Qian (于谦 DMB: 1398-1457), the use of *kaizhong* salt to supply border garrisons solved one problem and caused another. Yu noticed that in times of crisis, when the government needed more supplies to be sent to border regions and sent quickly, the dependence on *kaizhong* to supply border regions caused more confusion and shortages than it solved. In such cases, salt merchants would rush to acquire supplies wherever they could, thereby driving up the prices of goods in regions which were not initially affected by the scarcity in border regions. The border regions might receive the much needed supplies, but this came at a high cost. As Yu noted, "wealth would have been spent, profits would belong to merchants, and damages would be borne by the population, but problems of scarcity remain unsolved" (财费于内帑, 利归于商人, 害及于百姓, 未有能济者也).<sup>114</sup> Yu's proposed solution was for the state to organize its own

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that this root cause of the salt administration's problems, that salt administration officials were in reality working in the dark, was not addressed throughout this time.

<sup>114</sup> Yu might also be implying that salt merchants had control over the grain market. This would have allowed them to withhold supply of grain to the market and drive up prices artificially, thus generating profits from two sources: firstly from the increase in prices due to many salt merchants purchasing the same goods at the same time, and secondly from an additional artificial increase in price of these goods as a

transportation of supplies in the short-term, and in the long-term have the provinces send supplies to the capitals where they could be stored and centrally distributed.<sup>115</sup> Through Yu one can see that at least some Ming officials appreciated that the problems faced by the salt monopoly were systemic. Yu did not deny that problems in the salt monopoly resulted from dishonest individuals exploiting the system for profit, but he also saw that problems arose because existing rules and procedures had systemic weaknesses that could be corrected.

Because systemic weaknesses in the original designs of the salt administration were partly responsible for the salt administration's failures to provide for border regions in later centuries, the Ming state did hear proposals for reform. The most prominent example was Yuan Shizhen (袁世振), who submitted a very lengthy proposal and participated in the reform of the salt administration in 1614-1617.<sup>116</sup> The examples of Yu and Yuan suggest that Ming officials

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result of the constriction of supply. How might salt merchants constrict the supply of grain? There is reason to believe that salt merchants were also grain merchants. In the early Ming some merchants organized peasant emigration to the northern border to establish merchant colonies (商屯) that produced food and other materials, in order to reduce the cost of the transporting supplies from the interior needed for *kaizhong* assignments. Merchant colonies were less influential in later centuries, but they indicated merchants' willingness to integrate the salt trade and the grain trade.

<sup>115</sup> HMJSWB, 33: 31a-33b. Something quite similar to this proposal was in fact carried out in the sixteenth century. Steadily, the Ming state commuted payments in-kind into payments in silver. For *kaizhong* salt, this commutation of payment returned the responsibility of supplying border regions to the central government. The silver collected was then allocated to the border commanderies so that the commanderies could purchase supplies on their own. But due to the spiraling costs of defense in the sixteenth- and seventeenth century, the commutation to silver incidentally left the Ming state with a continually strong demand for silver.

<sup>116</sup> HMJSWB, *juan* 474-477. On Yuan Shizhen's participation in the reform of the salt administration, see Huang, *Taxation and Government Finance*, 312-314. For some details of the reforms Yuan Shizhen pushed through, see Li and Wu, 《中国盐法史》 245-252.

usually took an active interest in the troubleshooting of problems they spotted in salt administration.

Yet there were significant differences in *how* officials perceived the proximate causes of the monopolies' problems and their proposed solutions differed as a result of their differences of perception. As seen above, Han Wen was of the opinion that the problems encountered by the salt monopoly were the product of corruption of a once workable system. In contrast, Yu Qian saw that weaknesses in the original designs of the salt monopoly contributed to the failure of the monopoly to function adequately. The disagreement about the failure of monopoly administration is more observable in the discourse on problems faced by the tea administration. Some officials focused their attention on lax enforcement of existing rules and the corruption of officials in charge. This was the opinion of Jiang Bao (姜宝, d.1568), whose discussion of the tea administration suggested that "miscreant merchants" (奸商) were able to smuggle tea because "of the greed of local officials who did not fear the law and actively participated in and tolerated" this private commerce (其原皆由地方武职官等贪利而不畏法, 相与勾引而纵容之). Jiang associated the private commerce with border raids, which he alleged were rooted in lax security precautions and the unwillingness of security personnel to intercept tea smuggling. This was a direct charge of collusion between the merchants of illicit commerce and the local officials who were responsible for smuggling prevention. Following the logic of this corruption argument, Jiang proposed stricter enforcement of the existing regulations, stricter prohibitions against the issuance of more tea license certificates to reduce supply and hopefully curtail the amount of tea falling into unlicensed merchants, and the tightening of supervision over local personnel.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> HMJSWB, 383:2b-4a.

Other officials saw the proximate cause of the tea monopoly's problems in impersonal market forces, as opposed to corrupt personnel and lax enforcement of rules. Writing on the problems of the tea for horse trade, one sixteenth century official, Liang Cai (梁材 DMB: 1470-1540), observed that the scarcity of tea in the legal market had forced non-Chinese tea consumers to obtain tea from sources outside of legitimate commerce. At the time, the Ming state had already begun to allow salt producers to sell some surplus salt (余盐) directly to merchants in the hopes of increasing the supply of salt. Liang hoped to increase the supply of tea in the legal market through a similar measure, and he made the case that it was unreasonable for the sale of surplus produce to be permitted in the salt industry but not the tea industry.<sup>118</sup> His proposed solutions, therefore, included a focus on legitimating the commerce lost to the smuggling of tea, in the hopes that this would bring much of the illicit trade into legitimate channels once again. This would be in addition to stricter enforcement of punishments for disobedience to the law.<sup>119</sup>

Liang Cai's and Yu Qian's views of the proximate causes of difficulties faced by the salt and tea monopolies were sometimes more nuanced than those of other officials who emphasized corruption, such as Jiang Bao and Han Wen. Jiang and Han appeared to have believed that the monopolies were in trouble primarily as a result of corruption. This was language similar to that of the Ming founder and Wang Shuying, who equated commerce with extravagance but nevertheless incorporated the salt and tea industries into the state's logistical apparatus. Their tendency towards thinking in terms of abuses and corruption resonated with the rules and

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<sup>118</sup> Liang's point was based on an analogy. This analogy assumed that the salt and tea monopolies were similar enough that they could be managed with similar measures. This analogy was not Liang's invention and was quite widely accepted by Ming officials; it can be seen, for instance, in the sections on tea administration in MHD.

<sup>119</sup> HMJSWB, 106:1a-12b.

regulations laid down by the Ming founder with regards to the salt and tea monopolies. In these rules and regulations, the Ming founder emphasized physical punishments as correctives to any aberration in the usual rules and procedures of the salt and tea administrations. This approach assumed that any problems that arose must be the result of individual cases of human error and therefore correctable by coercion alone. For instance, MHD listed a number of salt administration-related laws from the early Ming.<sup>120</sup> Most remarkable was that almost every one of these laws prescribed physical punishments, which indicated a legal culture that emphasized coercion and individual responsibility. Liang and Yu, on the other hand, seemed able to detect deeper structural weaknesses of the salt and tea administrations. For instance, Liang was able to see that merchants were calculative and motivated by incentives, since in his recommendations he proscribed severe punishments for disobedience, but complementing the threat of severe punishments was the opportunity for smugglers to turn to legitimate commerce.

Thus it seems safe to state that some Ming officials factored in the incentive calculations of merchants to propose rather creative solutions. The willingness to imagine creative solutions and the awareness of merchants' calculations can best be seen in the case of Qiu Jun.<sup>121</sup> Qiu thought of some interesting, if not entirely realistic, ideas. He proposed that to make up for the shortfall of salt owed to merchants, sea salt should be introduced into the supply of salt. Because of high prices for salt in the south and lower prices in the north, he also suggested that vacant government transport ships on the Grand Canal system (漕船) be allowed to transport salt from

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<sup>120</sup> MHD, 34: 239-240 and 164: 844-845. The regulations frequently permit the use of banishment into forcible military service (充军) and capital punishment either by strangulation or beheading.

<sup>121</sup> This was the same Grand Secretary Qiu Jun (丘浚) of the "Grand Secretary cakes" mentioned in Chapter 2.

north to south.<sup>122</sup> The latter suggestion contravened the basic premise that no salt was allowed to pass from one salt jurisdiction to another. But precisely because this undermined the autonomy of individual salt jurisdictions, this proposal could effectively introduce competition and readjust the price of salt in all areas affected. Qiu devised yet another imaginative solution: he proposed that the government abandon its claims to the salt monopoly altogether and levy something akin to “an excise duty on all salt production.”<sup>123</sup> While Qiu’s suggestions were unrealistic because they would have caused disruption in many parts of the state bureaucracy, his suggestions would also have sanctioned much of the illegitimate commerce that was already occurring. Much of that commerce was rendered illegitimate because the Ming state intentionally imposed its will on the salt industry. Particularly in the *kaizhong* scheme, the state deliberately transferred to salt merchants some of the responsibility to provide for border regions. And in dividing the empire into many salt jurisdictions, the Ming state permitted the populations of different geographical areas to be charged a range of prices for very much the same commodity. Very likely, had Qiu’s proposals been enacted, they would have reshaped the salt industry and the market for salt. And because of this they would have reset many aspects in the calculations of legitimate and illegitimate salt merchants, such as the sourcing and pricing of salt. In a manner of speaking, ‘the rules of the game’ would have changed beyond recognition. This ability to propose schemes that could influence the calculations of merchants was not always present in other officials’ writings, particularly the officials focusing on protecting the existing system through stricter enforcement and coercion.

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<sup>122</sup> HMJSWB, 72: 16b-19a. Li Qianlong reports that Qiu proposed to use vacant government transport ships to carry all sorts of commodities in general, and not limited to salt. See Li, 582-583.

<sup>123</sup> Huang, *Taxation and Government Finance*, 223.

It would be rash to divide Ming officials into two opposing camps, one more knowledgeable of merchants' calculations and making accommodations for them, while the other threatened more violence and exhorted the preservation of the existing system irrespective of the calculations of merchants and market forces. Such a division may have existed, although the above examples are not sufficient to support such an assertion.<sup>124</sup> But while the officials discussed above showed divergent views on the salt and tea administration, at the most fundamental level they were united in the pursuit of solutions to ensure that the salt and tea administration would adequately serve the state's financial and logistical needs while preserving social stability. In this sense, they all shared a wish to see government functions continue smoothly. They may be said to have shared a broad concern for good government.

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<sup>124</sup> To my knowledge, the full study of the different mindsets of Ming officials with regards to commerce remains incomplete. Such a study would have required great familiarity with the institutions and the real practices of the different commercial operations in which the state had an active interest, for instance the salt and tea monopolies, and it would furthermore require a scholar with extensive knowledge of the full corpus of relevant statecraft writings by officials. The value of such a project is twofold. Firstly and with deliberate anachronism, it may be of interest to academic and non-academic audiences to further research the means of official accommodation and the extent of officials' tolerance of merchants' desire for profit; or in purely anachronistic terms: "how business-friendly was Ming China?" Though anachronistic, this question holds the potential to illuminate indigenous approaches to commerce before China was heavily influenced by Western trade and ideas. I must qualify the previous sentence by adding that we may speak of indigenous approaches to commerce, without making exclusivist and triumphalist claims of 'Asian values.' Secondly and without anachronism, if Ming officials were divided into factions who held different assumptions about how best to deal with merchants flouting existing regulations, then it must be asked whether their difference of beliefs pushed Ming policy in particular directions that affected the trajectory of China's *commercial* development. Some of the recent literature that discusses China's trajectory of development, for instance Bin Wong's *China Transformed*, focused on the introduction of agricultural produce into the market. But much more could be known about the effects of commercial policies on China's trajectory of development.

The shared general concern for good government divided officials again when they could not agree on exactly what purposes the salt and tea monopolies were meant to serve. Throughout the Ming period, neither emperors nor officials seemed to have made authoritative statements of the exact purposes served by the salt and tea monopolies, and the exact procedures according to which the salt and tea administrations should operate.<sup>125</sup> It was up to the discretion of individual officials to interpret the original intentions of the monopolies and how best to serve them. From the above discussion of officials' divergent views on the salt and tea administrations, it appears that many Ming officials could agree that the salt monopoly was *somehow* supposed to raise funds for government coffers, in addition to *somehow* provisioning border regions. And it also appears that many Ming officials could agree that the tea industry was *somehow* supposed to raise funds for government coffers, in addition to *somehow* procuring horses from the non-Chinese peoples living outside of Ming China. The decisions of each generation of emperors and officials provided precedents and established procedures, many of which were written into the MHD, for later generations' reference; however, these never achieved definitive and unalterable status. By the time it was necessary to call on precedents, moreover, the men who established them might have died, been removed from power, or had a change of heart. Thus the authority of precedents

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<sup>125</sup> The sections on salt and tea administration in MHD are extensive records of the many decisions pertaining to the monopolies, but nowhere do they state the exact purposes the monopolies were meant to serve, nor do they state clearly the procedures through which they were meant to serve their purposes. In particular, the introductory paragraph of the salt monopoly is very frank about deviations "from the best possible model established by the ancestors" and the gradual total loss of the monopoly's "initial purposes" (祖宗立法最善，历朝累更，尽失初意). Yet precisely what these "initial purposes" were was not stated. See MHD, 32: 226. This stands in contrast to the introductory paragraph of the transit taxes section in MHD, which explicitly stated that paper currency collected by transit stations were to pay for rewards to officials by the emperor, and the silver collected by transit stations were to pay for border provisions (所權本色钱钞，则归内库，以备赏赐；折色银两，则归太仓，以备边储). See MHD, 35: 245.



and established procedures was weak, and individual officials arrived at individual interpretations of past decisions and the exact purposes of the salt and tea monopolies.

It was with this discretion that officials such as Qiu Jun could propose measures which would have thoroughly undermined existing rules and practices in the salt monopoly. Provided that the proposed new measures could offer temporary respite to existing problems, they could be discussed and possibly adopted. Although Qiu's proposals for the salt administration were not adopted, other milder changes to established rules and practices were adopted. For instance, over the course of the Ming period, as the direct exchange of tea for horses fell into disuse, a great variety of replacement programs and several horse-rearing schemes were used in different times, all striving to procure greater quantities of good horses for the state.<sup>126</sup>

The salt and tea administrations were the most significant examples of heavy state supervision and intervention in industry and commerce during Ming times. They differed from other industries in that the state co-opted them so that they could serve its logistical and financial needs. When the salt and tea administrations became unable to fulfill these needs, high-ranking officials' discussions of relevant problems and their suggested solutions illuminate their differences of opinion. Yet underlying their differences of opinion was the shared concern that these problems needed to be repaired, and the salt and tea industries should return to serving government functions. The frequency and length of their considerations of matters pertaining to

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<sup>126</sup> A summary of their developments by a horse administration official, Gui Youguang (归有光), is in HMJSWB, 294: 1a-3b. For a much more comprehensive record of the administrative apparatus responsible for the acquisition of horses and the raising of horses, see MHD, *juan* 150-153. Morris Rossabi's 1970 article is a standard reference for information on the tea-horse trade. See Morris Rossabi, "The Tea and Horse Trade with Inner Asia during the Ming," in *The Journal of Asian History* 4:2 (1970).

the salt and tea industries could not be explained without recourse to some notion of good government. For, if officials did not consider the salt and tea administrations important and the supervision and repair of the salt and tea administrations as part of their duties, it would be difficult to explain why they wrote so many memorials and imagined all these different ideas. But this notion of good government, as shown in the above discussion of their memorials on the salt and tea industries, was based upon the interests of state.

All these points suggest that Ming state-merchant relations were dictated by the needs of the state. The sense of good government as discussed above was always predicated on the assumption that if administrative systems were not performing as expected, then they should be repaired or reorganized *so as to benefit the state*. That is, if merchants, salt and tea producers, and corrupt officials were colluding to the detriment of state revenue, then they should be punished, or the administrative system should be changed so as to close the loopholes. Either way, these merchants would lose the opportunities and livelihood made from illicit trade. It is true that, compared to those who advocated stricter enforcement of existing rules and greater use of punishments, proponents of milder means to accommodate or legitimize illicit commerce were advocating measures that were probably financially, and certainly physically, less damaging for the merchants of illicit commerce. But merchants' well-being was not the prime concern of high-ranking officials in this case. Considerations of good government and state-merchant relations here focused on the good of the state.

In other instances, however, considerations of good government and state-merchant relations showed a gentler and less self-interested side of the Ming state and high-ranking officials. This is not as easy to see in the salt and tea administration. Instead we must turn to early seventeenth century officials' discussions of the corruption of the system of transit taxation (钞

关) by additional tax collectors (税使) and the unauthorized conversion of public storage spaces and retail outlets (官店塌房) into private enterprises, which contemporaries referred to as “imperial stores” (皇店) .

### **Aspects of Transit Taxes and Public Store Spaces for Merchants**

Unlike the salt and tea monopolies which had been administered by the Ming founder and since the beginning of the dynasty, transit taxes developed over the course of the dynasty. A transit tax was a form of commercial taxation, unrelated to the salt and tea monopolies, administered by the Ming.<sup>127</sup> Up to the early Xuande reign (1426-1435), tax collectors had a practice of appropriating a share of passing merchants' commodities (抽分) as a means of commercial taxation. No paper currency or precious metals were collected from passing merchants in these years.<sup>128</sup> In 1429, however, transit stations were ordered to collect paper

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<sup>127</sup> For a fuller list of non-monopoly related commercial taxes and a discussion of their development, see Li Qianlong, 470-564. On the administration of transit taxes and for some data the amount of revenue generated by transit stations, see Huang, *Taxation and Government Finance*, 226-231.

<sup>128</sup> This sentence applies only to *commercial taxation* extracted from *merchants*. Although many sources of state revenue were commuted to silver only in the sixteenth century, the Ming state had been collecting some taxes in precious metals from as early as the fourteenth century. Hence, we should be cautious of generalizations about the commutation of taxes into silver, the so-called “Single Whip Reform,” occurring only in the late Ming. Silver did circulate in far greater quantities in the late Ming, but we should beware of generalizations of a “silver economy” in the late Ming which might give the impression that precious metals were not used in the early Ming. From what I can find, the earliest Ming example of a tax commuted from in-kind payments into payment in some form of currency was the fisheries tax (鱼课) collected from fishermen at waterside stations (河泊所) . This commutation occurred in 1385 and commuted in-kind payments for gold, silver, and paper currency. Most likely this tax was commuted to precious metals and paper currency because the collection of in-kind payments would not be very effective with highly

currency (钱钞) for the emperor's personal treasury, which in turn paid for the emperor's rewards to his officials. In addition some of this currency, it was ordered, would be exchanged for silver, for which it would then be used to maintain border garrisons. The 1429 order to collect paper currency was out of the ordinary, because it also ordered a fivefold increase in the nominal value of the commercial tax to be charged (课加五倍).<sup>129</sup> This sudden order to collect taxes in paper currency and the sudden increase the value of the tax was part of a desperate effort to revive the use of paper currency. Ming officials and modern-day historians alike have noticed that the Ming founder issued an excess of paper currency. By 1429 paper currency had lost significant value and could not be relied on as a valid currency. The MHD recorded repeated decrees by the Ming founder that paper currency should be used as the means of exchange in place of precious metals, and that lower officials and commoners must not excuse their refusal to use paper currency because individual notes were dirtied or damaged.<sup>130</sup> The collection of taxes payable in paper currency was meant to draw paper currency out of private hands and back into circulation, and perhaps it offered an opportunity for the state to dispose of excess notes or issue a new set of paper currency. Nominally, this fivefold increase in the value of commercial tax would have also

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perishable goods like fish and whatever other items fishermen might have traded on their fishing journeys. The fisheries tax was an insignificant source of state revenue. Indeed, in 1397, some waterside stations were closed down and the fishermen formerly under their jurisdiction were given additional labor duties in place of the fisheries tax. See MHD, 37:265. Citing some Ming writers, Ray Huang suggested an alternative explanation of the decline of the fisheries tax; the writers attributed the decline of the fisheries tax to the fishermen's lack of fixed places of residence that would have made fixed tax stations, like the waterside stations, effective. See Huang, *Taxation and Government Finance*, 234-244.

<sup>129</sup> MHD, 31:224 and 35:245.

<sup>130</sup> MHD, 31: 224. Von Glahn, 70-72.

increased the value of revenue collected by the Ming state.<sup>131</sup> Because the sharp increase in the nominal value of commercial taxation at transit stations posed serious difficulties for merchants, particularly the sudden need to bring back paper currency that was previously largely out of circulation in the market, the insistence on using paper currency was scaled down in the coming years.<sup>132</sup> But the credibility of paper currency remained weak, and finally the imperial government chose to ignore its own paper currency.<sup>133</sup> This was relevant for transit stations because by the late fifteenth and the early sixteenth century commercial taxes were increasingly collected in the form of dried foodstuffs (杂粮), copper coins, and silver. Moreover, by the Longqing (1567-1572) and Wanli (1573-1620) reigns all transit stations were ordered to collect silver.<sup>134</sup>

Another way to impose taxation, in addition to stopping merchants en route, was to pressure them into lodging and warehousing their goods in spaces allocated by the state. After all, the state could only assess taxes on merchants if merchants came to the state or if the state knew where to find merchants. The placement of transit stations on important commercial

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<sup>131</sup> MHD, 31: 224-225. Von Glahn, 74-76. Huang, *Taxation and Government Finance*, 69-74. Li Qianlong, 482- 483. I use the word “nominally” in the above sentences because the ability to restore the credibility and market value of paper currency was seriously in question; hence, even if the Ming state recollected these notes, it was by no means certain that their real value in the market was anywhere close to their stated value.

<sup>132</sup> MHD, 35: 245-246. Von Glahn, 74-75. Huang, *Taxation and Government Finance*, 72-73.

<sup>133</sup> The last item recorded in the section on administrative decisions pertaining to paper currency in MHD dated to the Hongzhi reign (1587-1595), which strongly suggests that the Ming state of sixteenth and seventeenth century acquiesced to the worthlessness of paper currency in the market. MHD, 31: 225. In fact, according to Huang, paper currency was reduced to little more than gifts from the emperor to his officials. These gifts of paper currency were more important for the conveyance of imperial favor than for the actual value of the currency. See Huang, *Taxation and Government Finance*, 73-74.

<sup>134</sup> MHD, 35:246.

thoroughfares cleverly channeled merchants towards the tax collector, and public storage spaces allocated by the state would let it know where to find and tax merchants and their goods. Starting in the 1380s in Nanjing, the Ming state gradually expanded a program of public storage spaces for merchants' goods (塌房), some of which were then channeled into retail outlets that were nominally under official control (官店). In September 1391, the Ming founder had decreed that merchants stopping in Nanjing were required to register and lodge their belongings at a particular location outside of the capital designated by the emperor. His pretext for this decree was that he pitied the merchants entering Nanjing, because the former private location used by merchants was inconvenient.<sup>135</sup> But the introduction of a designated location also conveniently gave the state an additional means of supervision over merchants' whereabouts and their commodities. When the Yongle Emperor (1402-1424) transferred the imperial court from Nanjing to Beijing, a similar designated storage space for merchants was allocated for Beijing in 1409.<sup>136</sup> To my knowledge, the Ming did not have a particular administration devoted to public storage spaces and retail outlets, and sources such as MHD did not have a special section devoted to them. So it may be assumed that this was not a very important form of commercial taxation.

### **Redress of Grievances with Transit Taxes and Public Store Space**

Neither transit taxes nor public storage spaces appear to have caused significant fiscal or social problems until the sixteenth century. This may be attributed to their relative unimportance as sources of Ming state revenue. Land tax, and not commercial taxation, was the largest source of the Ming state's revenue, and among all the commercial sources of revenue the salt

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<sup>135</sup> MS, 211:4a-b.

<sup>136</sup> MHD, 35:255.

administration was by far the most significant. The insignificance of transit taxes and public storage spaces as sources of revenue, however, did not mean that Ming officials were unaware of their effects on society. As much as financial and social stability were the focus of officials in the above section on salt and tea administration, Ming officials did not feel that these were the only criteria for good government. Social justice, if I may use the term loosely, was also a concern. The objective of this subsection is to discuss in greater depth brief passages from memorials written by two late sixteenth and early seventeenth century officials, Zhao Shiqing (赵世卿 d.1618) and Lu Kun (吕坤 DMB: 1536-1618). As in the section on the salt and tea administration above, I do not intend to discuss exhaustively all the various problems associated with transit taxes and public storage spaces. Nor is this section intended to discuss in detail Zhao's and Lu's writings and their intellectual inclinations.<sup>137</sup> Rather, in this section I intend to support the assertion that *compassion* was a significant element in statecraft writings, in addition to catering to the financial interest of the state as seen in the salt and tea administration.

In an early seventeenth century memorial, Zhao Shiqing decried the effects of high taxation.<sup>138</sup> This memorial is worth quoting from and commenting at some length, in order to distinguish what was new and different about Zhao's concerns and the concerns of the officials in the salt and tea administration section. Before we begin it should be noted that the high level of taxation that bothered Zhao in the early 1600s was not brought about by any sudden increase in transit tax, like that of 1429. Instead it was brought about by additional tax collectors (税使)

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<sup>137</sup> Unusually for officials of the Ming period, Lu Kun was given careful consideration by an intellectual historian and was the subject of a monograph. See Joanna Handlin, *Action in Late Ming Thought: The Reorientation of Lu K'un and Other Scholar-Official* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).

<sup>138</sup> The below discussion of Zhao is based on his memorial in HMJSWB, 411: 4b-6b.

sent out by the Wanli Emperor (1572-1619) in 1597 to seize and tax merchants to finance Ming China's military campaigns in the Korean Peninsula. This aggressive taxation continued in years thence, and because these tax collectors worked independently of the tax collectors of the transit stations their aggressive taxation of merchants was beginning to reduce the amount collected by transit stations. After all, merchants had only so much that could be extracted, and the tax collectors the emperor sent out had the advantage of being able to roam the realm while transit stations were stationary. The parallel existence of the itinerant tax collectors and the transit stations meant that merchants were charged more than once.<sup>139</sup> Zhao was writing to ask the emperor to withdraw the additional tax collectors.

In his memorial, Zhao began his case by reiterating the view that transit taxes were intended to benefit the state but not overburden merchants (国家立钞关仿古讥市征商之法，下不病商，上籍裕国). Zhao's point that merchants ought not to be overburdened by taxes was not new; as we have mentioned in the Ming founder's refusal to overtax merchants in Chapter 1, the desire not to overexploit and overtax the people, merchants included, had long been a part of the notion of good government. What was rather striking about Zhao's memorial was Zhao's presentation. He carefully cited some figures to emphasize the weakening of the tax base, but more than that, the figures were also meant to show the burden that was placed on merchants.

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<sup>139</sup> To be precise, merchants were often charged more than once even before the introduction of these roaming collectors. As Huang had pointed out, a characteristic feature of the various forms of Ming commercial taxation, including transit taxation, was that merchants had to pay *repeatedly* for many minor items, but that each payment would be of *low value*. See Huang, *Taxation and Government Finance*, 231-232. So before the introduction of the roaming collectors, merchants were already paying at each of the transit stations they passed. But what was particularly rapacious of the roaming collectors was that these collectors collected taxes outside of the preexisting commercial taxes, which in effect meant the taxes they collected were new levies, and their mobility allowed them to actively seek out merchants repeatedly.



According to Zhao, the heavy tax burden damaged the tax base. He claimed to have checked the account books (会计录) submitted by some transit stations and found that the annual yield of a group of transit stations was estimated at approximately 335,500 taels of silver. In 1597 increased taxation yielded 82,000 taels above this figure. In 1599, the yield was 340,500 taels and 49 short coins. In 1600, the yield was 306,132 taels. In 1601, the yield was 262,800 taels and 3 short coins. Zhao then opined that this annual decline in transit tax revenue was the result of the severe taxation brought about by the itinerant collectors. He illustrated this vividly by appealing to observations that fewer and fewer merchants were setting up shop. He noted that, at one transit station, in previous years there were approximately 160 cotton cloth peddlers; at the time of his writing only around 30 remained on record. At another transit station, only two merchants remained on record after 38 merchants had their wares confiscated by tax collectors in recent years. Furthermore, at this station there used to be 32 silk fabric peddlers, 73 cotton cloth peddlers, and 65 grocers on record; at the time of writing 21 of the silk fabric peddlers, 45 cotton cloth peddlers, and 41 grocers had disappeared. We cannot ascertain whether the figures cited by Zhao was a fair representation of the social and economic realities faced by merchants in the early 1600s; nevertheless, we can see that these figures made a persuasive case for the withdrawal of the additional tax collectors targeting merchants.

Pleading for what was in effect a reduction of taxes, because heavy taxation was allegedly destroying the tax base, could be construed as an appeal to the long-term fiscal interest of the state. Yet Zhao did more than appeal to the state's well-being. Zhao concluded his memorial by appealing to the hardships merchants faced in order to carry out their trades, and contrasting this hardship with the overzealous collection of taxes by tax officials. Zhao mentioned outright that this high taxation was "worse than the storms and hardships faced by merchants in

their travels” and was an “oppressive policy more terrifying than tigers”（无乃税使之害，尤甚于跋涉风涛者，则苛政猛于虎之说也）。This language was meant to elicit pity for merchants, for if Zhao was solely concerned with the health of the tax base, he needed only to focus on the aforementioned figures showing the decline in revenue collected; the mention of storms and tigers would have been superfluous. That he chose to append the hardships of merchants on their journeys and the allusion to terrifying tigers to his argument indicated that more than the fiscal health of the state was on his mind. But this does not mean that the state’s fiscal interest was not Zhao’s concern. Immediately following this talk of merchants’ hardships and the oppressiveness of taxation, Zhao returned to appealing to the fiscal interest and stated that the use of roaming tax collectors was short-sighted:

“Heaven and Earth created only so much wealth. For too much to fall into one place, it must mean that other places are injured. Can Your Majesty receive surplus after surplus of tax revenue from itinerant tax collectors year after year? This neglects that, what these tax collectors are truly abusing are the revenue from other forms of taxation, which are now falling. From the decrease in transit taxes, we can well imagine these itinerant collectors also diminishing the revenue in gold, silver, and foodstuffs that other forms of taxation are meant to procure. We have not seen the long-term benefits of continuing this policy, but we can already see its damage, and this is not only a sickness visiting upon the people but also a sickness to the empire.”<sup>140</sup>

Finally, Zhao ended his memorial by exhorting the emperor to take action and withdraw the additional collectors. From this ending, it would appear that the long-term health of the empire’s tax base was still Zhao’s top concern; nevertheless, Zhao did not abandon his ancillary concern for merchants, as the last analogy of a sickness that hurt both the empire and the people suggested that he believed the interests of the Ming state and its people, but particularly the merchants who by far bore the brunt of this taxation, were linked. Good government in this case, then, was not

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<sup>140</sup> The original Chinese reads: 天地生财，止有此数；多之于此，必损之于彼。皇上得无以连年税使之供进有余乎？不知其所朘削者，即此各关不足之数也。即此一项，则各项钱、银、粮种种道欠皆可例推是。若辈未见其利，先见其害，不惟病民，抑且病国。

simply a matter of focusing on the state's fiscal interest but also a matter of taking care of the interests of the common people, including merchants.

If Zhao's appeal to the Wanli Emperor to protect the interests of merchants in the above memorial still sounded somewhat halfhearted, he was more insistent in another memorial asking the emperor to stop the corruption of public storage spaces for merchants. Since their founding in the 1380s, these public storage spaces had been somewhat crudely administered. Not all the spaces were state owned stores (官店); some were simply the houses of private and wealthy individuals whose property had been requisitioned and who were personally charged with the responsibility of looking after the goods stored on their property (塌房). These spaces presented an opportunity for unscrupulous merchants and officials. Officials had supervision of these spaces, but state control of these spaces could be manipulated by those in charge. This was a problem when those in charge had their own stakes in private commerce and could therefore abuse their control of the storage space to hinder the commerce of other merchants.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> At the heart of this problem was the fact that the Ming did not have very clearly defined distinctions between public and private property. This was particularly true for the uppermost level of the Ming state, the emperor and the various state treasuries. Both the state's and the imperial household's expenditures were drawn from these treasuries. There were also very weak distinctions between one's personal and official interests, and consequently there was not much protection against conflicts of interests. Again, we can see this most clearly at the uppermost level of the state, with the emperor. As Ray Huang has noted, when the Wanli Emperor ordered the Board of Revenue to advance 24 million taels of silver for the wedding ceremonies of three of his sons including the heir apparent in 1599, the Emperor was in reality acting out his vendetta against his bureaucracy. The emperor had hoped to replace the heir apparent with another prince, but felt unable to proceed because of vocal opposition from his officials. The 24 million taels of silver were meant to delay the heir apparent's wedding and to block him from further consolidating his claim to the throne through marriage and children. See Huang, *Taxation and Government Finance*, 304.

Zhao was not complaining about the corruption of officials, however. The term “imperial stores” referred to the manipulation of these spaces by members of the Ming imperial household, in this case one of the emperor’s own princes, the Prince of Fu (福王).<sup>142</sup> Zhao began this memorial by insidiously questioning the Prince of Fu’s practice of pressuring private merchants into choosing government storage spaces and retail outlets under his care, outlets in which the revenue would go towards the prince’s personal use. Zhao related that, according to the Prince of Fu, the prince’s actions were intended to reduce friction between the private and public retail outlets and to give private merchants a chance to use the public outlets so as to avoid the high rental taxes (店税) that the state charged private retail outlets. Zhao disingenuously applauded the Prince of Fu for such thoughtfulness, but then Zhao quickly pointed out ten “inconveniences” in the prince’s proposal.<sup>143</sup> Many of the “inconveniences” Zhao listed were the results of the coercion needed to pressure merchants to lodge their belongings into the nominally state-controlled outlets. In reality, Zhao deliberately neglected to point out that the prince and his agents probably clandestinely directed these coercive pressures. He further added that the Ming regime already paid the prince a stipend and thus the prince could not be said to be suffering from poverty and in desperate need for this revenue to be turned over to the prince. Zhao proceeded to claim that not much profit could be made from this manipulation. He called the revenue generated from the stores a “feather-light sum” and contrasted it to the “weightiness of the irresponsibility of letting this continue, not to mention that it would be inappropriate for an imperial prince to

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<sup>142</sup> The following discussion is based on Zhao’s memorial in HMJSWB, 411: 19a-22a.

<sup>143</sup> The original Chinese introduction of this memorial is quite cleverly worded and skirts all direct criticisms of the prince: 看得锦衣卫带俸指挥谢文铨所奏，崇文门外店税即福王亦稔知其苛，请除五款，独将各项客商杂货俱入官店发卖，不许附近私店擅行停宿以启争端。此其意甚美，而其词甚可味也。臣愚奉旨查行，敢不将顺顾，反复思维，有必不可行者十。

compete against his subjects for miniscule profits”（得之不过毛羽之轻，而酿之则系泰山之重，无论堂堂王国，不宜与小民争刀锥之利）。Zhao then reminded the Wanli Emperor that the emperor should lecture the prince on frugality and benevolence, and Zhao asked rhetorically whether it would not be particularly regrettable for the Prince of Fu to acquire a bad reputation among the people simply because the prince had been momentarily misled by greedy and small-minded advisors（奈何以群小之利媒，而令福王为怨府乎？）。Zhao ended the memorial by pleading to the emperor to restrain the Prince of Fu's clandestine control of these retail outlets and storage spaces, and furthermore to stop inconveniencing private merchants. In this way, Zhao alleged in the very last sentence, the emperor would not only display his imperial benevolence towards merchants and the people but also show great love for the prince（伏乞皇上深思远览，细察臣言，收回成命，此非独爱商爱民，也甚所以爱福王也）。

Here Zhao saw the well-being of private merchants as something that should be placed above the personal profit of a member of the Ming imperial house. Although the disingenuous style of the memorial, particularly in the very last sentence, would make it appear that stopping the Prince of Fu was Zhao's primary concern, this was more an indication of the subtlety Zhao had to employ to thwart the profit-making designs of a prince than an indication of Zhao's true intentions. Perhaps the good repute of the Prince of Fu was a concern for Zhao, but it would not seem to be his most important concern. The interests of merchants were his primary concern in this memorial, as one can see in the deliberate inclusion of “merchants” in the very last sentence. In fact, it would be difficult to explain why Zhao bothered to write this memorial, and the above memorial protesting the itinerant tax collectors, if he was not particularly focused on the interests of merchants. In both memorials Zhao went into particular details about the plight that confronted merchants. His solicitude for merchants' plight, in particular, shared some resemblance to the

emotive qualities of the Ming founder's show of favor towards farmers in Chapter 1. The people, farmers for the Ming founder and merchants for Zhao, were portrayed in a particularly wretched and helpless light, implying that only action by the highest level of state could rectify their problems. Had Zhao not wished to focus on the plight of the merchants and speak on behalf of their interests, all this would not have been necessary and would probably have been a distraction. This is not to suggest that Zhao was a spokesman for small merchants' interests, for these two memorials are not enough to substantiate that claim, and moreover they cannot suggest what personal motives Zhao might have had in speaking for the interests of merchants. In the absence of documentation showing that Zhao had personal motives to speak on merchants' behalf, it would be safer to assume that Zhao was motivated by a singular concern for good government and that, incidentally, because the long-term fiscal health of the state depended on merchants' profitability it was unwise, and perhaps unjust, for the state and members of the imperial family to extract so much from merchants in the present.

In the memorials above Zhao did not explicitly state that the roaming tax collectors and the manipulation of public spaces were cases of social injustice. He emphasized quite strongly that they were simultaneously injurious to merchants and the state, but he stopped short of claiming that the corrupt practices perpetrated by officials and imperial kinsmen were *injustices* and pushing the discussion towards a more and more moralistic tone. In contrast, Lu Kun did frame the corruption of these public spaces for merchants as a social injustice. On the corruption of the public stores used by merchants, Lu was not particularly focused on the case of the Prince of Fu and thus he spoke in more general terms. The families of the powerful, Lu alleged, were sending servants into commerce on their behalf, and ordinary merchants had no hope of

competing with them.<sup>144</sup> In Lu's perspective, these ordinary people were biting back their frustration, swallowing their anger and withholding their complaints, all because of the strength of the patronage behind these servants of powerful families. The plight of ordinary families, Lu alleged, was so great that one need not search very far to see it. Following this Lu made an explicit and emotional appeal to the injustices (冤) merchants were suffering through the abuses perpetrated by those backed by powerful patrons, and furthermore rumors of more palace eunuchs seeking to leave the palace for assignments outside of the capital were causing the people much fright.<sup>145</sup>

Lu brought an overtly moral element into policy discussions that we had not seen in Zhao Shiqing or in the discussions pertaining to the salt and tea administration above. While the discussion of the salt and tea administration were focused on making ailing policies work to the state's advantage once again, and Zhao was ultimately divided between appealing towards the

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<sup>144</sup> Lu used the phrase "families of the powerful" (势豪之家) and thus I am obliged to translate it as such here, although in the case of these "imperial stores" it would be more appropriate to say that these were the servants of imperial princes and servants of influential palace eunuchs, rather than the servants of families of powerful provincial local elites.

<sup>145</sup> I should add that eunuchs were particularly feared because, as personal servants of the emperor outside of the civil service bureaucracy, influential palace eunuchs had comparatively easy access to the emperor and often flaunted this relationship to extort money and resources for personal gain when they were out of the palace and beyond effective supervision. The in-text discussion of Lu Kun's thoughts pertaining to corruption is based on an excerpt of Lu's writing in Xie Guozhen 谢国桢, 《明代社会经济史料选编》 (Fuzhou: Fujian remin chubanshe, 1981), 261. The original Chinese reads: 今势豪之家, 用仆开店, 居民尚且忍气吞声, 莫敢与较, 而况朝廷遣使, 赐之敕书, 以泰山压卵之威, 行密网竭鱼之法, 民间之苦不问可知。纵使内臣廉静, 不扰市民, 而长随之下各有长随, 挂搭之中又有挂搭, 强吞横噬, 独占群侵, 内臣何由知? 冤民何处诉? 夫杨村张湾, 南通省直, 北接都城, 天下咽喉之地, 陛下销此咽喉, 不及一年, 商贾不至, 缓急有用, 将安取给; 不独此也, 都下近日讹传, 有太监营求镇守之说, 极知此言无据, 亦足扰人心。

long-term fiscal health of the state and appealing to the plight of the merchants, Lu swung this balance in favor of making a more emotionally charged appeal to the injustices that confronted the common people and merchants. Again, this resembled the solicitude that, as we have said above, shared some resemblances with the Ming founder's sense of compassion, but compassion directed at farmers rather than merchants.<sup>146</sup> For Lu, it appears, the redress of social injustice was an intrinsic function of good government, and this put much stronger emphasis on compassion than all the memorials discussed previously. A sense of compassion was not completely absent in the above memorials, but Lu's memorial here made by far the greatest use of compassion. Zhao Shiqing, one might suspect, was appealing to the plight of merchants as a rhetorical device, a way to seize the moral high ground to win an argument so to speak. This is much harder to say of Lu Kun, whose emotionally charged statement of a people already suffering from injustices and a bureaucracy that was unaware of these injustices (内臣何由知? 冤民何处诉?) left less room for argumentation. He already took for granted that people were suffering injustices and was pleading for redress; he was not looking to debate whether these were injustices. Indeed, in Joanna Handlin's assessment, Lu probably preferred quick action to relieve problems and did not hold argumentation in high esteem. According to Handlin, Lu probably learned from Hai Rui's

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<sup>146</sup> I hesitate to say more on the parallels between the Ming founder and Zhao and Lu at this point, because I do not have the necessary support to claim that Zhao and Lu were very much mindful of the Ming founder, who after all lived 200 years before their time, when they were approaching these problems facing merchants in the early 1600s. With more time for research, or in the hands of a specialist of late Ming officials' thought in relation to the Ming founder, perhaps questions about what late Ming writers thought of the early Ming could be answered more satisfactorily. This question may be particularly contributive to our understanding of whether the commercial economy had affected sixteenth and seventeenth century thinkers to put a stronger emphasis on commerce and reject the frugal and agricultural emphasis of early Ming government and officials as seen in Chapter 1 of this thesis.



unsuccessful attempts at reform and learned to eschew angry and self-righteous denunciations in favor of framing his thoughts on social injustices in strong, compassionate, *but measured* language.<sup>147</sup> In Handlin's words:

"In contrast to the brashness of Hai Rui, Lu worked cautiously within the conventional boundaries and was sensitive and talented enough to find the acceptable means of responding to the extremes of his time. Hai Rui fiercely opposed expedient measures; Lu condoned those who bent the rules of conduct to cope with emergencies. [...] Lu had learned from the experience of Hai's generation that disputes were unproductive, and was perhaps even aware that the strongly opinionated Hai had alienated many. [...] Lu repeatedly warned against 'considering the self right and others wrong.' He scorned those scholars who 'from the Qin and Han [dynasties] on have fought to the death in disputing 'right and wrong.' He observed that the debaters had never resolved their conflicts but only grew more obstinate as they waged their battles. [...] Where Hai Rui was arrogant and outspoken, Lu humbly knew when to retreat into silence. He had witnessed how 'considering the self right and others wrong' had created social discord and how Hai Rui's assertiveness had generated only rancor. In addition, Lu warned against speaking precipitously. 'Nine out of every ten times,' he observed, 'words are responsible for disastrous deaths.' Both Hai and Lu were loners by nature, but where Hai demonstrated his independence by singlehandedly promoting his cause, Lu expressed his by spurning all claims to knowledge. He criticized joining groups specifically because they fostered 'egotistical prejudices' and 'idle words.'"<sup>148</sup>

In this view Lu shared Hai Rui's strong desire for reform and most likely identified himself with the interests of the common people, including small merchants. He was a more tactful individual than Hai, however, and showed a stronger capacity for empathy and genuine concern for the common people than Zhao Shiqing or the officials who discussed the salt and tea administrations.

The above discussion of some officials' writings on the salt and tea administration, in addition to the corruption of the state's policies in transit taxation and public stores, suggests that Ming officials were quite capable of engaging in technical detail as well as sound a moralistic

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<sup>147</sup> Hai Rui (海瑞) was the morally firm and imprudent official mentioned in Chapter 2, note 98.

<sup>148</sup> All sentences in this block quotation are quoted from Handlin, 118-121. I have abridged Handlin's narrative for the sake of brevity. The reader may wish to consult these pages to see if my appropriation of Handlin's work to point out the strength of Lu's compassion and Lu's restraint is fair.

note in their discussions. Whether there were two or more camps of officials who favored either moralist overtones or imaginative but technical solutions to problems cannot be ascertained at this time. What we can state more confidently is that some Ming officials framed their memorials with more compassionate appeals than others. The memorials for the salt and tea administration remained relatively technical and focused on the restoration of the salt and tea industries' functions for the state; although it appeared that no official could state definitively what exactly those functions were and how the Ming founder and early Ming government intended these functions to be carried out. In contrast, in the few passages from memorials by Zhao Shiqing and Lu Kun explored in the latter part of this chapter, Zhao and Lu abandoned the relative technicality and state-centered focus of the memorials written on the salt and tea administration. Zhao and Lu, to different degrees, put forth the impression that the maintenance of the people's welfare, including the welfare of small merchants, was more deeply embedded in the notion of good government than the impression given by other officials.

All of this is relevant for Ming state-merchant relations because it tells us that Ming officials were by no means a homogenous bloc which held a singular, unchanging set of attitudes towards merchants. This finding calls into question older scholarly generalizations that held that imperial Chinese officials generally had a dismissive attitude towards commerce. This is not to say that the dismissal was not present, for a minority of scholar-officials, such as Zhang Tao, was greatly antagonized by the sight of commerce, as seen in Chapter 1. But it would be an overstatement to say that imperial Chinese officials had an attitude of *blanket antipathy* towards merchants and commerce and that officials refused to sully their hands with commercial

transactions.<sup>149</sup> Certainly, as we have seen in Zhao Shiqing's memorials above, if and when the interests of merchants and of the long-term fiscal health of the state converged, there were officials who spoke for the mutual interests of merchants and state. But this should not be understood as an unequivocal endorsement of the view that Ming officials quickly came around to the defense of merchants' interests, particularly with the commercialization of the economy. When the interests of merchants and state diverged, as we have seen in the many memorials pertaining to the salt and tea administration, chances were that officials would choose to focus on catering to the state's interests and sacrifice merchants' interests. After all, all the memorials on the salt and tea administrations cited above agreed that the profitable but illegal activities of illicit salt and tea merchants must be stopped; they differed mainly in that some officials were willing to find ways of bringing illegitimate commerce back to legitimate commerce, while other officials were more inclined towards stricter enforcement of existing rules and procedures regardless of the interests of the smugglers. It would also be incorrect to point out that this was due to any change of officials' mindsets as a result of the growing commercialization of the Ming economy. Officials such as Yu Qian (1398-1457), Qiu Jun (1420?-1495), and Liang Cai (1470-1540) either lived in the fifteenth century or lived up to the middle of the sixteenth century, roughly corresponding to the time *before* or at the earlier parts of the commercialization of the Ming

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<sup>149</sup> See for example Rossabi, 145: "Why the Chinese Emperors chose low ranking and underpaid officials to work for the [Tea and Horse Agency] is difficult to understand. It was perhaps the same attitude that motivated them to appoint eunuchs as directors of the Maritime Trade Superintendencies in southeastern China, an attitude springing from an antipathy towards commerce and a belief that high officials should not demean themselves in the marketplace. As I have already stated, though the Chinese recognized the need for trade they were continually scornful of it." I agree with Rossabi's assessment that the early Ming state was scornful of commerce. Nevertheless, it would be extremely misleading to see from this an ingrained and unchanging antipathy towards commerce and merchants that was shared by all officials.

economy. Rather than see the bureaucracy and officials as a homogenous bloc with fixed attitudes towards commerce and merchants, it is more fruitful to acknowledge that differences of opinion pertaining to commerce and merchants existed throughout the Ming period.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Merchants in Merchant Manual Advice**

Chapter 3 focused on a small sample of high-ranking officials' views on matters related to commerce and merchants. In particular, it tried to point out different shades of opinion among officials. Some officials who wrote about the salt and tea administrations framed their opinions on a state-centered perspective and either ignored the interests of merchants, or tried to reform the salt and tea administrations in order to pressure illicit merchants to return to the legal market. In other issues, some officials focused less on the interests of state and showed a stronger desire to take care of the interests of the common people, including small merchants. From these differences we can see that the Ming state, at least in the higher levels of the bureaucracy, did not have a singular and unchanging set of attitudes towards commerce and merchants. But the imperial government and high-ranking officials were not the centerpieces of commerce. Daily commercial transactions were carried out by merchants, particularly clerks, apprentices, long-distance traders, and smaller scale brokers, innkeepers, and retailers. Hence, it would be desirable to find out about these people's views of merchants and commerce; in the best instance, this would allow us to find out how they viewed their own identities and the work they engaged in everyday. But compared to writings of elite scholar-officials, fewer sources were written by merchants and even fewer were preserved.

Among the sources preserved, one type of source tailored to merchants' needs was the merchant manual. The objective of the present chapter is to illuminate what the few merchant manuals from the Ming period tell us about the daily realities faced by merchants; in particular, it

will focus on the content and quality of merchant manual advice. In addition, we will discuss briefly the manuals' borrowing of a veneer of the Confucian orthodoxy of the elite that seems to suggest a particular merchant identity. To complement the findings of Chapter 3, we will explore what merchant manual advice had to say about state-merchant relations and how their advice presented a different picture of Ming state-merchant relations than what we saw in Chapter 3.

### **Introduction to Merchant Manuals**

Merchant manuals blossomed in the late sixteenth and seventeenth century. Originating from Song period family instructions, merchant manuals were at their most sophisticated in the Qing period.<sup>150</sup> The contents of merchant manuals were often very diverse, and some of the manuals attributed to the Ming period were in fact essays collected within encyclopedic compendia, rather than independent monographs focusing on commerce.<sup>151</sup> Merchant manuals targeted a specific audience of merchants. The merchants in this audience were not the affluent and well-connected merchants of Chapters 2 and 3 who could frustrate scholar-officials with their

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<sup>150</sup> Richard John Lufrano, *Honorable Merchants: Commerce and Self-Cultivation in Late Imperial China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997), 8.

<sup>151</sup> As one early compendium, *The Santai Master Guide of Ten Thousand Applications* of 1599, boasted to readers: "Of the many books and prints in stores today, many of them copy from older works. They discard ten times more information than they reproduce, so that they copy the chaff and spit the essence, thereby confusing readers from all corners of the empire. Our publisher recently compiled this work, which we named the Master Guide of Ten Thousand Applications, with clear subdivisions and subheadings, and it is filled with diverse and complete information, so that all information is present when you open this work and read it, and you will not have need for further consultation." This is quoted in Chen Xuewen 陈学文, 《明清时期商业书及商人书之研究》 (Taipei: Hongye chubanshe, 1997), 32. The original Chinese reads: 坊间诸书杂刻, 然多沿旧套, 採其一, 去其十, 弃其精, 得其粗, 四方士子惑之。本堂延侵此书, 名为万用正宗者, 分门别类, 俱载全备, 展开阅之, 诸用了然, 更不待他求矣。

imitation of consumption patterns and with intrusion and domination of the salt industry. Instead, the readers of these manuals were merchants engaged in some distance trade and much closer to the street level clerks and shopkeepers of much more modest means, who also fell under the meaning of the Chinese term for merchants, *shang*, and whom Richard Lufrano aptly if inelegantly labeled as “mid-level merchants.”<sup>152</sup> The goals and aspirations of these mid-level merchants were not the same as those of their wealthier *shang* brethren. As Timothy Brook stated with literary flourish, mid-level merchants “looked up at gentry status as something almost impossibly remote. What dominated their thinking was how to succeed in business, not how to get out of it.”<sup>153</sup>

Merchant manuals offered a way to provide mid-level merchants an advantage in their pursuit of commercial success. Because of the family instruction and encyclopedic origins of these manuals, their contents were sometimes overwhelmingly diverse. Broadly speaking, merchant manuals served two major functions. As *route books*, they provided rhymes, songs, and other mnemonic cues for merchants to remember routes, names and locations of political jurisdictions, distances, and sometimes even information pertaining to the numbers and ranks of various officials at each locality. As *advice columns*, the contents of which we shall focus on in this chapter, they provided short essays and pithy maxims to advise merchants on diverse matters related to their commercial and personal well-being, on issues such as their health, business associates, personal finances, personal safety, and family and kin. This diversity necessarily meant that some contents in merchant manuals were more immediately applicable to merchants in their everyday experiences than other contents. The contents of these sections ranged from the

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<sup>152</sup> Lufrano, 3-4.

<sup>153</sup> Brook, *Confusions of Pleasure*, 215.

practical to the curious, for instance health tips and the names of past Chinese dynasties. Sections were compiled from a variety of sources. Often, the names of the authors of individual sections were not given, and manuals were known to partially or fully reproduce sections of other manuals without citing their origins.<sup>154</sup> When a merchant manual was organized without subdividing the contents into many subsections, the diverse contents were organized in one long and loosely organized narrative, thus increasing the difficulty for a critical appreciation of the manual.<sup>155</sup>

Also important to note was the variegated quality of merchant manual advice on how merchants should conduct themselves. Some pieces of advice could be quite nuanced. The manuals' advice on how to interact with boatmen and porters can serve as an example. The manuals call some merchants *keshang* (客商), meaning itinerant merchants or guest merchants. To conduct trade across counties and provinces, mid-level itinerant merchants engaged in long-distance trade usually needed to hire extra pairs of hands and boats to transport their goods. The boatmen and porters hired were often strangers to their employers. Merchant manuals were particularly concerned about the risks of boatmen and porters turning on their temporary employers in the middle of their journeys. One manual, *The Compendium for Gentry and Merchants* (henceforth abbreviated as SSLY), devoted a short essay on the hiring boatmen and porters. This essay recommended that boatmen and porters should be hired through a trusted intermediary, that merchants should take time to observe the trustworthiness of the boatmen and porters hired, and furthermore merchants should resist the temptation to save small sums through

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<sup>154</sup> Lufrano observed that nearly identical passages have been found in different manuals. See Lufrano, 12.

<sup>155</sup> This is the case of *Brining Merchants to Their Senses*, which is one of the manuals explored in this essay. This manual is divided into two sections (上、下篇). The first section, which is approximately 90 pages in length, contains all of the manual's advice for merchants. The second section, which is an assortment of merchant themed short poems (歌), is six pages in length.



hiring without an intermediary.<sup>156</sup> Another manual, *Bringing Merchants to Their Senses* (henceforth KSYLXM), did not devote a special essay on boatmen and porters, but like SSLY it recommended hiring through an intermediary. It further added that without an intermediary there may be not be another person aware of the itinerant merchant's whereabouts if problems arose.<sup>157</sup> Yet another manual, *Strange Things in the World of Commerce and the New Book on Treacheries*, concurred with the need for trusted intermediaries, and it raised a very interesting suggestion on how to manipulate boatmen into not robbing their employers. It suggested that if a merchant carried small quantities of precious metals, he should conceal them; however, if he carried less expensive and bulkier metals, a merchant should reveal the relative worthlessness of his possessions in order to discourage robbery.<sup>158</sup> This last piece of advice showed a more complex understanding of people's motives. In particular, it recognized that boatmen and porters did not commit robberies indiscriminately, and that merchants in possession of high value commodities and isolated merchants presented much more attractive targets. Merchant manuals, however, did not systematically develop this understanding of the motivations for crime. Often, manuals did not keep consistent the focus of each piece of advice. For instance, one piece of advice says:

“Do not show your valuables to others you encounter. When traveling on boats, residing at inns or passing through the countryside, take care to hide well your valuables, and stay outside for as little as possible. If you are not careful and your wealth is revealed to other people, you will provoke malicious intentions in others; the loss of one's life and the depletion of one's wealth

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<sup>156</sup> SSLY, 358-359. This section also lists some ways in which boatmen could steal various types of commodities entrusted to their care.

<sup>157</sup> KSYLXM, 371. This piece of advice might have been an exaggeration. Ming merchants also used contracts to document their relationships with boatmen and porters.

<sup>158</sup> This is quoted in Chen Xuewen, 232. The Chinese title for this manual is 《江湖奇闻杜骗新书》. SSLY, 361 makes a very similar point.

arise out of this. If family and friends should see that your home is laden with wealth, they may come asking for assistance. It would be difficult to refuse them, and if refused it would certainly induce ill-will.”<sup>159</sup>

In advising merchants not to put forth the appearance of extravagance, the focus of this passage is split between the prevention of robberies and the preemption of requests for help from family and friends. Even more problematic are the tensions and contradictions between different pieces of advice. An example is the advice regarding how itinerant merchants ought to collaborate with local brokers (牙人), who must have an intimate knowledge of merchants' inventory as merchants arriving from distant regions required the services of brokers to trade in unfamiliar locales.<sup>160</sup> Though the manuals suggest ways to interpret the intentions of these brokers and spot deceit, their suggestions sometimes appear arbitrary. One essay in SSLY claimed that if one saw a broker whose household items were very old, one should not think that this particular broker was poor but instead should appreciate that this broker was a frugal and honest person who was hiding the full extent of his wealth. Conversely, if a broker lived in a splendid residence, one should assume that the broker was very wasteful. If a broker wore very old clothes or clothes with patches, however, the manuals claimed that this broker's apparent poverty must be real.<sup>161</sup> It is not very clear why old household items should convince one that the broker's poverty was not real, while old clothes should convince one that the broker's poverty must be real. Nor is it clear

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<sup>159</sup> KSYLXM, 349. Nearly identical characters can be found in SSLY, 361. The original Chinese reads: 逢人不令露帛。乘船登岸，宿店野行，所佩财帛，切宜谨密收藏，少留在外。若不仔细，露帛被人瞧见，致起歹心，丧命倾财，殆由于此。居家有财，亲友见之，或来求借，不惟无以推辞，若拒之必开其怨隙也。

<sup>160</sup> For a description of the role of local brokers, see Brook, *Confusions of Pleasure*, 67.

<sup>161</sup> This series of advice are listed consecutively in SSLY, 360. Nearly identical pieces of advice using nearly identical characters are in KSYLXM, 331-333.

why clothes, which were worn for all to see, should be seen as a reliable marker of the agent's poverty while the exterior of a house, which stood for all to see, should be seen as an unreliable marker of the broker's wealth. The manuals might have a deeper rationale for these pieces of advice, but if so they did not explain it fully.

Furthermore, it should be noted that different pieces of merchant manual advice oscillated between an optimistic and pessimistic view of human nature. In general, they oscillated between exhortation to readers to follow ethical ideals and a universal assumption that most people were motivated by personal gain. Thus, on one hand, merchant manuals consistently assumed that conditions faced by mid-level merchants were less than ideal. They assumed that, aside from their readers, most of the people with whom merchants must interact in their commercial dealings were dishonest and would lie, cheat, steal, even murder, if presented with the opportunity and if such actions were profitable. This pessimism regarding other people's motives is consistent with observations that fraud was a general malaise in late Ming society.<sup>162</sup> A belief in love of wealth and lack of trust is readily apparent on the first page in of KSYLXM:

“Wealth is commonly loved by all, though few earn it righteously; profits are contested by crowds, and greedy and obsessed people are many. Wealth has value wherever one goes, such that even babies and toddlers would know to love it. Thus many people struggle and force their way in pursuit of wealth, risking their bodies and virtues, forgetting shame and accepting disgrace, willing to bear hardships without regret. People who know justice, are content, and are not willing to give rein to their greed, are very rare in the world.”<sup>163</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> One Ming writer was aggrieved to find that craftsmen had “counterfeited” gold by diluting it with silver. He thought this was symptomatic of the declining value of goods and people's common decency. This is quoted in Chen Baoliang, 112. The Chinese quotation reads: 最不可伪者，金也。二十年来，金丝有银心者，金箔有银里者。工人日巧一日，物价日贱一日，人情日薄一日，可慨也夫！

<sup>163</sup> KSYLXM, 329. The original Chinese reads: 财溺于人共爱，义取者希；利起于众所争，贪嗜者伙。财者，通行蛮貉，虽婴孩亦所知爱，是以人多竞求强取，致有丧身失德，忘耻受辱，甘当无悔，其知义安份，不事妄贪者，世之罕有。 The Ming scholar-official Zhang Han's essay on commerce began

On the other hand, one essay in SSLY tells readers that they should not to feel sorry if they have been cheated. Wealth earned through dubious means, the essay claims, necessarily leads to recklessness and must not endure. Readers are advised not to stray down this path:

“Wealth cannot be exhausted by cheating but can be exhausted by not paying attention to inconspicuous expenses. If another person cheats you, you still have wealth to spare. As the common saying goes: ‘Rather be cheated by someone else than for me to cheat another person.’ The meaning of this is that you benefit and the cheater does not benefit. Cheaters squander wealth inconspicuously because they no longer calculate expenses. What they spend on will be inappropriate. What actions they take will be mistakenly directed. Their actions will not be compatible with the opportunities present. They will spend recklessly. And all of this shall lead to an imbalance in their income and expenditure, decline in their commercial ventures, and daily dissolution of their funds.”<sup>164</sup>

The tension between the pessimistic view that people are motivated only by greed, and the optimism that success is dependent on righteous conduct, does not seem fully resolved in any Ming merchant manual. But it is apparent that the writers of merchant manuals believed that morality was essential in commercial dealings, and that those who failed to act morally in their commercial dealings will face retribution. As the quotation alleged, the deviousness of a merchant who cheats must lead that merchant to recklessness and ultimately will destroy him.

It is not fully accurate to equate this latter tendency to exhort for moral conduct with Confucianism. For although Confucius emphasized the Three Bonds and Five Relationships (三纲五常) in political and family contexts, these bonds do not readily apply to all the commercial situations and characters appearing in the merchant manuals, characters such as boatmen and

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with a similar observation of how wealth can lure one to ignore dangers and neglect reputation. A full translation of this essay can be found in Brook, “The Merchant Newtwork,” 185-208.

<sup>164</sup> SSLY, 361. The original Chinese reads: 财不竭于阳骗，不切忌乎阴消。人来骗我，利我有余。俗云：‘宁人骗我，莫使我骗人’；意谓我富而他不富也。其阴耗财本者，因无算计，所用失宜，所为失策，不合时机，妄施无当，以至出纳乖方，经营错落，本钱日见消铄矣。 Nearly identical characters appear in KSYLXM, 387.

porters. Nor did Confucius look deeply into commercial interactions. Merchant manuals seem to adhere to relatively loose interpretations of Confucian thought in some areas, while in other areas the relationship to Confucian thought is not immediately recognizable. Merchant manuals rarely acknowledged canonical texts and authors, although the modern reader might find faint traces of Confucian thought in them. In *SSLY*, for instance, there is a brief section exhorting merchants to comply with the notion of filiality, and this section is conscious of the fact that filiality is a moral virtue discussed in Confucian texts (事亲之道，经书备载，当讲究而力行之，求为孝子可也)；however, this is raised without citation of the names of any particular scholars and texts, and without quotation or paraphrase of specific texts. The manual immediately proceeds to recommend actions that one can perform to show filiality.<sup>165</sup> This leaves one with the impression that, though the author of this passage has a broad awareness of the Confucian canon, the author may not have known these works in great detail, and hence the noticeable lack of particular names and quotations from texts.<sup>166</sup> Yet merchant manuals did not completely give up on introducing to their readers some elements of the elite culture of scholar-officials and the more well-to-do merchants. *KSYLXM* contained a reference to some famous historical figures of earlier Chinese dynasties and *SSLY* included a section listing the names of the most successful candidates in previous imperial examinations of the Ming Dynasty.<sup>167</sup> Manuals would not contain such information if manual authors, editors, publishers, and readers had not the least modicum of

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<sup>165</sup> *SSLY*, 424. This mention of filiality in a merchant manual is in contradiction to Lufrano's assertion that merchant manuals make no explicit mention of filiality. See Lufrano, 55.

<sup>166</sup> Lufrano makes a similar point that the authors and editors of Ming-Qing merchant manuals were probably functionally literate, some of whom may have been imperial examination drop-outs. But even then "their level of education should not be exaggerated." See Lufrano, 16.

<sup>167</sup> *KSYLXM*, 383; *SSLY*, 431-438.

interest in this information. This would suggest that a relatively superficial understanding of some vaguely recognizable Confucian principles and some historical content were sought by mid-level merchants, perhaps for their own education or for practical reasons that are not known, although it is unclear to what extent this material interested merchant readers.<sup>168</sup>

In contrast to the ethical virtues of Confucian thought, the qualities prized by merchant manuals were rooted in practical considerations for the attainment of success in personal and commercial life. From the manuals we can see that the intellectual outlook of mid-level merchants stood some distance apart from that of the scholar-official and wealthy merchant elite. A few examples will show the focus on practicality in merchant manual advice. Merchant manuals prize discipline because, the manuals allege, discipline prevents one from entering into unnecessary trouble.<sup>169</sup> Hard work is encouraged, because the manuals believe that wealth is accrued through hard work and conversely poverty is the result of laziness.<sup>170</sup> One's family must be well managed, because one who cannot manage one's family or draws one's family into unnecessary trouble will ultimately lead to despair for himself and the family.<sup>171</sup> Forethought and sound financial planning are wise, because they can prevent one from feeling overwhelmed and panicked when confronted with problems in the future.<sup>172</sup> Distancing oneself from prostitutes is

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<sup>168</sup> I am aware that more powerful merchants, in possession of greater wealth and closer connections to the state and scholar-officials, are demonstrably much more aware of and exercises influence in elite culture. On the intellectual affinity between merchants, scholars, and officials, see Yu Ying-Shih, 188-202.

<sup>169</sup> KSYLXM, 378.

<sup>170</sup> SSLY, 364. Nearly identical characters are in KSYLXM, 410.

<sup>171</sup> SSLY, 363. Nearly identical characters are used in KSYLXM, 378-379.

<sup>172</sup> Numerous passages point to the view that prostitutes were a source of trouble, though this view is most succinctly expressed in a short poem in KSYLXM, 420.

recommended, because prostitutes distract one's attention and drains one's finances.<sup>173</sup> And, most remarkable of all, KSYLXM claims that the most accurate test of a person's character rests with how a person treats your wealth when you entrust them with it.<sup>174</sup> Clear and direct links to Confucian principles are not recognizable in these suggestions. Yet, despite many pieces of merchant manual advice showing faint traces of Confucian thought, the manuals nonetheless expressed a latent desire to argue that mid-level merchants could become Confucian gentlemen.

### **Mid-level Merchants as Confucian Gentlemen**

The first sign of merchant manuals' desire to claim the status of Confucian gentlemen for mid-level merchants can be found in the Chinese title for SSLY (*The Compendium for Gentry and Merchants*). This title assumed that the mid-level merchant readers of this manual could rise to the status of the scholar-official gentry and continue conducting commerce because it deliberately put the character for merchants, *shang* immediately following the character for scholar-officials, *shi*.<sup>175</sup> But we can find richer evidence of merchant manuals' desire to proclaim

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<sup>173</sup> SSLY has two sections dedicated to prostitution. The first section is a tirade against the potential ills from frequenting prostitutes. The second section comments on the author's view on a recommended level of a merchant's attachment to prostitutes. Both are in SSLY, 366-7.

<sup>174</sup> KSYLXM, 329.

<sup>175</sup> The Chinese characters *shishang* (士商) in the title is ambiguous; it can mean gentry and merchants, or *gentrified* merchants. But this "gentry" in manual titles did not refer to scholar-officials and their wealthy merchant acquaintances, because these wealthy individuals would rarely be personally running the day-to-day business of interregional commerce, and therefore had little need for the practical information contained in these manuals. This is not the only merchant manual title to utilize the term *shishang*. Another manual is entitled *Shishang yaolan* (士商要覽), which literally means *Must See for Gentry and Merchants*. I have not altered the catchy, sensationalist tone of the manual titles. The use of catchy titles by some of these manuals probably reflected the competitive nature of late Ming commercial publishing.

mid-level merchants as good Confucians can be found in the texts of the manuals. Manuals occasionally use an elite term for gentlemen, *junzi* (君子), to describe mid-level merchants. SSLY says: “Whenever people are gaming and gambling, it is desirable to stay away and not stay nearby. If people are in the company of courtesans, do not interrupt them at will. Achieving this makes for a tactful gentleman, and this is the tenth principle.”<sup>176</sup> KSYLXM says that complaining or reneging on prior commercial agreement is not the way for gentlemen to make friends.<sup>177</sup> The choice to use *shishang* and *junzi* in the above cases appear deliberate, because the appendage of the character *shi*, for scholar-officials, to the character *shang* was not necessary. As far as I am aware, early Chinese writers had no trouble referring to merchants without appending to them the character for scholar-officials. That people began calling merchants *shishang* appeared to be a practice that was new to the Ming period. In conventional thought, to append *junzi* and *shi* to the character *shang* would appear to be a contradiction in terms. Thus merchant manuals’ references to mid-level merchants as *shishang* and *junzi* undermined the conventionally dismal social status of merchants as seen in the fourfold division, much like wealthy merchants’ imitation of scholar-officials’ clothing as seen in Chapter 2. Mid-level merchants might not possess the resources needed to successfully compete in the imperial examinations and imitate the consumption patterns of the elite, but that did not stop manuals from claiming gentlemanly status for them.

It certainly did not prevent merchant manuals from suggesting that mid-level merchants could practice some vaguely Confucian values in their commercial activities. Above we have

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<sup>176</sup> SSLY, 360. The original Chinese reads: 凡见人博弈赌戏，宜远而不宜近。有人带妓作乐，不得随时打闹。此为老成君子，十也。

<sup>177</sup> KSYLXM, 344. The original Chinese in this passage is very long and will not be reproduced here, but the important point is that this passage ends by stating specifically that “this is no way for the gentleman to make friends.” In the original Chinese: 此非君子交谊。



seen that the manuals taught their readers to follow some generally recognizable Confucian virtues, for instance filiality. But in fact some pieces of manual advice also used attempted to give a veneer of respectability to merchants by using some vaguely Confucian motifs in the manuals' advice to readers to act morally in commercial life. Ultimately, these suggestions amounted to little more than exhortations to merchant readers to act virtuously and establish basic trust between different commercial parties, but the use of terms that can be found in the Confucian canon generated the impression that merchants shared a belief in the fundamental tenets of the Confucian orthodoxy of the conventional scholar-official elite. Two examples will show this. Firstly, in *The Analects*, Confucius was extremely skeptical of the wily, flippant and unreliable nature of base people, *xiaoren* (小人), and contrasted them against his ideals of the gentleman, *junzi*. A *Xiaoren* was thought to have a polished demeanor and to be a skilled but impetuous verbal manipulator, while the *junzi* strove to be dispassionate and patient.<sup>178</sup> The following merchant manual advice mirrored Confucius's dim view of verbal sophistication:

“Being wily is inferior to being clumsy. Among articulate and clever people, those who have noble intentions and are knowledgeable of worldly affairs can cultivate their character and exploit their talents for good. Those who have corrupt intentions would exploit their talents for devious causes, speak lies and plan frauds, and be a menace to others, until they are exposed, at which point they would become victims of their own deviousness. If you look inside jails, they are filled with clever and wicked people; it would have been better to be a clumsy person, who is content with what he has and fears the law, and thus be able to live a calm and stable life.”<sup>179</sup>

Secondly, as scholars of merchant manuals have noted, merchant manuals express the need for providing some breathing space for competitors and consumers through the use the characters *ren*

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<sup>178</sup> On Confucius's characterization of the gentleman as dispassionate, see for instance *The Analects*, 13:27.

<sup>179</sup> KSYLXM, 391. The original Chinese reads: 守巧不如守拙。伶俐聪明之人，志向高者，逆知世务，修德省身，潜养己长。志向污者，持才造意，骗人弄诡，侮奸害人，及事暴白，反伤自己。观彼了圉圉中，尽皆乖巧刁徒，不如痴拙之人，守己畏法，得以安稳过平生矣。

(仁) and *yi* (义) which denoted the Confucian virtues of benevolence and righteousness, respectively. With particular resonance of Mencius's optimistic view that benevolence and righteousness sufficed to produce good results,<sup>180</sup> some manuals claimed that profits depended upon righteous action and furthermore that mid-level merchants should have pity for others and refrain from overexploitation through the relentless pursuit of profit.<sup>181</sup>

It would be naïve to think that the mid-level merchant readers of these manuals would feel compelled to act dispassionately, righteously, and benevolently simply because these were the qualities of a Confucian gentleman. As mentioned earlier, many pieces of advice in merchant manuals were rooted in practical considerations relevant to merchants' own financial and personal well-being. This remained the case in merchant manuals' attempts to persuade their readers that they could become Confucian gentlemen in their day-to-day commercial activities. Rather than have merchants sacrifice their personal and financial interests in order to bend towards the ideals of the gentleman, the manuals eased their readers' difficulty by applying these virtues in commercial situations and suiting them to merchants' needs.<sup>182</sup> It is likely that manuals made the virtues of righteousness and benevolence attractive to their merchant readers because

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<sup>180</sup> The first book of *Mencius* opened with a dialogue between Mencius and a king. The king began the dialogue by asking Mencius if Mencius had any profitable teachings to offer to him, to which Mencius replied that he did not need to speak of profits because righteousness and benevolence will result in political stability and bring good rule to the kingdom. See *Mencius* 1a:1. The focus of this passage in *Mencius* was politics. It would appear that merchant manuals took this emphasis on righteousness and benevolence out of its original political context and applied them to a commercial context, although merchant manuals certainly did not share Mencius's quick dismissal of profits.

<sup>181</sup> Chen Xuewen, 71-74.

<sup>182</sup> A late Qing manual would go so far as to openly admit that adaptations had to be made in order to allow for the occasional acts of accommodation, compromise, and dishonesty needed by merchant readers to survive in a greedy world. See Lufrano, 56.

these virtues encouraged readers to willingly aid each other in times of desperation, building the foundations for trust in the market. In this way, manuals made the establishment of trust sound like good business practice, and conversely the manuals make the unrelenting pursuit of profit appear ill-advised. The manuals' pessimistic streak, after all, consistently assumed that other people would do anything for the sake of profit; it is likely that the manuals were exhorting for these actions in order to lessen the viciousness of the marketplace. The application of terms usually reserved for the elite, such as *junzi* and *shishang*, on merchants might have been a consequence for the manuals' desire to establish trust.

As mentioned earlier, some merchant manual suggestions were not recognizably Confucian. In fact, it is doubtful that the 'merchant gentleman' that merchant manuals so wanted their readers to become was Confucian in any strict sense. Although manuals used characters such as *ren* and *yi* borrowed from canonical Confucian texts, very often manuals also showed some influences from beliefs in cosmic merit and retribution. We may recall the advice against cheating and the insistence that profiting through acts of cheating *necessarily* leads to recklessness and eventual business failure. A belief in retribution is inconsistent with the scarcity of statements showing that Confucius believed in retribution.<sup>183</sup> To some extent, the emphasis on retribution can be attributed to the incorporation of Buddhist cosmology in the Neo-Confucianism of Zhu Xi (朱熹, 1130-1202), whose brand of Confucianism had superseded the Confucianism of

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<sup>183</sup> For Confucius, one of the passages that comes closest to avowing a belief in the supernatural is *The Analects* 5:13, where Zigong mentions that Confucius once spoke of the Way of Heaven (天道). But this passage is likely of spurious origins and a late addition to *The Analects*. On the original *Analects* and later interpolations, see E. Bruce Brooks and A. Taeko Brooks, *The Original Analects: Sayings of Confucius and His Successors* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998). *Analects* 5:13 is listed as an interpolation in Brooks and Brooks, 167, 329.

Confucius and Mencius. But Neo-Confucianism alone cannot fully account for the shallowness of merchant manuals' borrowing from diverse intellectual traditions. In the manuals, the acts of cosmic retribution are believed to occur in this world as opposed to the next, and retribution is believed to result from human agents and human errors. Nowhere in these manuals were supernatural forces accredited as factors that could influence one's family or commercial success. It may be disputed that if supernatural forces were not involved, then these were not beliefs in cosmic retribution at all. But the manner in which merchant manuals insisted on *causal* relations between say, cheating and commercial failure, showed that merchant manual authors had a cosmology of causal relations in mind, and this was inconsistent with the early Confucianism of Confucius and Mencius whose teachings did not give much thought to cosmology.<sup>184</sup>

The superficial borrowing of Confucian motifs in merchant manual advice might be better explained by reference to popular culture. In addition to teaching merchants to establish trust, manuals claimed that their mid-level merchant readers could achieve the status of a gentleman, on par with the gentry-yet-merchant elite. But the intellectual origins of the advice to merchant readers on how to become a gentleman cannot be easily identified. In fact, they appear to have derived from a mishmash of relatively superficial borrowings from a variety of beliefs available in late imperial China, and thus the manuals' image of a merchant gentleman did not fully duplicate Confucius's or the imperial Chinese elite's ideals of the *junzi*. Merchant manuals probably borrowed motifs from a variety of sources to form new and meaningful beliefs for mid-level merchants, such as the claim that mid-level merchants could become respectable gentlemen.

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<sup>184</sup> The case for Qing merchant manuals is much more clear-cut than for the smaller corpus of Ming manuals. A borrowing of notions of cosmic retribution is immediately apparent in a song included in one Qing merchant manual, since it says that overexploitation of others is "to leave one's children and grandchildren with cosmic debt." Chen Xuewen, 72.

As Carlo Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms* demonstrated to great effect, the common people "possessed a culture of their own" which shared some of the contents of, and was subordinate to, the culture of the dominant elites.<sup>185</sup> In the case of late imperial China, the dominant culture would be that of the imperial court, scholar-officials, and the wealthiest of merchants, based on orthodox interpretations of the Four Books and the range of Neo-Confucian schools of thought that circulated in the sixteenth and seventeenth century. Mid-level merchants can be said to form a subordinate class, insofar as they were in a socially inferior position *vis-à-vis* the wealthier *shang* and scholar-officials, and insofar as mid-level merchants must have had a more difficult time rising up the social ladder because of limited connections to high officials and wealthy merchants. But because of the spread of literacy we can quite confidently assert that mid-level merchants were in a position to borrow from the Neo-Confucian culture of the elite. As Evelyn Rawski has argued, the use of the characters in the *Thousand Character Classic*, a primer for foundational Confucian thought and other miscellany, in pawnshop receipts as well as seating arrangements in imperial examinations showed the popular reach of foundational level Confucian education in late imperial Chinese society.<sup>186</sup> Certainly, the issuance of pawnshop receipts using the characters in the *Thousand Character Classic* as a code indicated that some mid-level merchants were relatively literate; at the very least they had been exposed to a primer that contained foundational knowledge of Confucianism. The other miscellany in the *Thousand Character Classic* and other primers, in addition to popular literature such as novels and morality

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<sup>185</sup> Carol Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, John and Anne Tadeschi, trans., (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992 [1976]), xiv.

<sup>186</sup> Evelyn Rawski, "Economic and Social Foundations of Late Imperial Culture," in David Johnson, Andrew J. Sullivan, and Evelyn Rawski, eds., *Popular Culture in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 30-31.

books that were readily available through Ming commercial publishing, also enabled mid-level merchants to borrow from a diversity of beliefs. For instance, beliefs such as cosmic merit and retribution were readily apparent in many morality books. One type of morality book, the ledgers of merit and demerit (公过格), had received particular attention by scholars. Ledgers of merit and demerit grew more sophisticated in sixteenth century China, and they reached their peak popularity in the seventeenth and eighteenth century.<sup>187</sup> The ledgers were particularly striking in their way of economizing moral faults and achievements. The ledgers treat merit and demerit as calculable and fungible units. The rationale for this calculation of merit and demerit derived from a diversity of beliefs. As Cynthia Brokaw has illustrated, the ledgers' particular configurations of beliefs in supernatural retribution and merit accumulation provoked a small but lively debate that involved ledger writers, Neo-Confucians of the Taizhou School, and the Donglin partisans in the seventeenth century.<sup>188</sup> Each of these parties in the dispute had slightly different cosmologies and drew their inspirations and based interpretations on the authority of different sources, and perhaps their works might have come into contact with merchant manuals and some merchant readers. The vibrancy of the late Ming publishing industry and Ming book market made that a possibility.<sup>189</sup> It is not known whether these ledgers were widely circulated among mid-level

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<sup>187</sup> Cynthia Brokaw, *The Ledgers of Merit and Demerit: Social Change and Moral Order in Late Imperial China* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 61.

<sup>188</sup> Brokaw, Ch 3.

<sup>189</sup> I make this statement with some hesitation. Some research has suggested that publishing and print culture grew extensively in the late Ming, though to my knowledge this has not been quantitatively demonstrated. But assuming that they did grow, we still do not know with great precision the titles which were published and which sorts of books sold well and which sorts of books reached across class lines. We cannot, therefore, speak with great confidence that merchant manual authors and readers learned of elite cosmologies through the printed word. To my knowledge, it is only very recently that the China field

merchants. The debate involving Taizhou thinkers and Donglin partisans certainly suggests that the ledgers circulated among the dominant class of scholar-officials and their wealthy merchant acquaintances. In fact, to entice wealthy merchants, some Qing ledgers tried to persuade wealthy merchants to perform meritorious deeds with promises of success in imperial examinations and subsequent elevation to scholar-officialdom.<sup>190</sup> But regardless of the circulation of the ledgers among mid-level merchants, it may be seen that whether in the reading material of the scholar-official elite, for instance ledgers of merit and demerit, and the reading material of mid-level merchants, for instance merchant manuals, Ming elites and Ming common people appropriated and amalgamated other motifs into their own beliefs, and that the exchange of these motifs was obscuring what it meant to be a gentleman for peoples of different classes in sixteenth and seventeenth century Chinese society.

Lacking the greater wealth and personal connections used by affluent merchants to get ahead in society, merchant manuals' claim that 'gentlemanly status' was not beyond mid-level merchants' reach must have comforted many. There were general differences between the channels which mid-level merchants and wealthier merchants hoped to use in order to rise to gentry status. As seen in Chapter 2, consumption was one of the ways in which the new

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expended much energy to tackle Ming and Qing publishing and print culture. The work of Joseph McDermott (2006) and Chow Kai-wing (2004) immediately comes to mind. Tobie Meyer-Fong wrote a learned review of Chinese, Japanese, and Western scholarship in late imperial publishing and print culture in her "The Printed World: Books, Publishing Culture, and Society in Late Imperial China," in *The Journal of Asian Studies* 66:3 (2007). Carlo Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms* also took into account the transmission of knowledge through oral culture. See particularly Ginzburg, 58-59. But, to my knowledge, oral transmission of ideas in late imperial China is *very* difficult to demonstrate as I am unaware of any works that focus on oral culture in Ming and early Qing China.

<sup>190</sup> Brokaw, 212-214.

commercial elite was chipping away the exclusivity of elite membership, at a time when a few Ming thinkers such as Lu Ji were rethinking the concept of extravagance. Expending vast amounts on consumption, however, directly contradicted merchant manuals' repeated emphasis on frugality and conservation of one's wealth. And while scholar-officials often praised wealthy merchants' erudition and knowledge of Confucian commentaries, erudition and mastery of canonical Confucian texts was not as strongly emphasized by merchant manuals. A small section in SSLY advised merchants to educate their sons and to read literature and history, but the section advised reading on a variety of matters in addition to canonical texts. The entire section reads as follows:

“Before educating your sons, observe their characteristics. If they are quick and intelligent, then do not let them go to waste. They should read widely the classics and histories, study the principles behind heaven and earth and men, learn to give praise and applaud at appropriate moments, discover the reasons for order and chaos in ancient and present times, strive to know the causes of the rise and fall of past dynasties, and they should understand all of this and not simply know them through rote memorization. But study relies on industriousness and brilliance. Industriousness can daily accumulate one's knowledge, and brilliance allows materials to be appreciated with astonishing interpretations, and alas these are not qualities that one can acquire of one's own accord. One should also know books on martial arts in case of strife, to be well-rounded in civil and martial matters, and be able to serve as a stabilizing force for one's country and family. For even sages such as the Duke of Zhou and Confucius lived in times that could not avoid war and diplomacy, how can one be trained only in civil matters to the neglect martial affairs! One should also have learned the *xiaoxue* so that the rites are internalized, and furthermore one should have farmed and experienced manual labor. But do not force any of this, for one should pursue these only according to one's abilities.”<sup>191</sup>

Although this passage did not say so explicitly, merchant manual authors undoubtedly understood that the study of Confucian classics, which would have prepared one for an administrative career

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<sup>191</sup> SSLY, 425. The original Chinese reads: 教子读书，先观其质。质如颖敏，勿令自弃，须博览经书子史，究天地人物之理，试弥缝参赞之宜，考古今治乱之由，求历代兴亡之故，不徒记诵之而已。然读书之法，在勤与思，勤则有日新之功，思则有上逢之妙，庶己其能自得矣。又必旁通用武之书，以备不虞，养就文物全材，以为邦家之基也。盖周公、孔子之圣，也未免有东山之征，峡谷之会，岂专于文而无事于武哉。其次令读小学，使知礼节。又其次力田应役，毋强其进，因其材而笃。



in the bureaucracy or the military, was poor education for practical commercial matters such as how to travel safely and not be cheated. Manual authors furthermore understood that mid-level merchants wanted a broader education than the narrowly Confucian education sought by wealthier merchants and their examination-bound children; the above quotation lacked strong encouragement for mid-level merchants to prepare their children for imperial examinations. As can be seen in the first sentence, mid-level merchant parents were encouraged to prepare their sons down this path *only* if their children showed promises of success in early childhood. Thus, in the final analysis, if scholarly talent was absent in the family, mid-level merchant families were advised to stay out of the examinations and resort to other careers to succeed in life.

### **State-Merchant Relations in Merchant Manuals**

Like merchants in many other societies, merchants in Ming China were well aware of the dangers of crime and fraud. But particularly remarkable was the depth of distrust and the frankness with which Ming merchant manuals conveyed this sense of distrust; for instance, SSLY flatly stated, probably exaggeratedly, that nine out of every ten boatmen would steal from itinerant merchants.<sup>192</sup> As seen earlier, this pessimism about other people bore out some relatively lengthy pieces of advice on how to evaluate brokers' trustworthiness and how to manipulate porters and boatmen into not perpetrating robberies. Nevertheless, Ming mid-level merchants were offered little institutional protection against fraud and robberies. Litigation could be pursued, but the costs of litigations could be ruinous.<sup>193</sup> And litigations were only possible if a crime was reported; it was for this reason that manuals particularly feared robbery and murder of isolated

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<sup>192</sup> SSLY, 359.

<sup>193</sup> Brook, *Confusions of Pleasure*, 217.

merchants on roads and waterways in the middle of their journeys. Moreover, although the manuals advised merchants to have little trust for people like brokers and porters, merchants were told to have even less faith in magistrates. Local magistrates, though of low rank in the imperial bureaucracy, held considerable influence in local settings because their distance from central authority meant that their actions could go unchecked by higher-ranking but faraway officials. On a day-to-day basis magistrates wielded considerable coercive powers over the local people in their jurisdictions, people such as mid-level merchants, and this power could be abused.

According to Yang Lien-sheng, it was not uncommon for deaths to occur during floggings ordered by local magistrates, and the phrase “family-breaking district magistrate and household-extinguishing prefect” circulated in Ming times.<sup>194</sup> Fears of physical abuse and arbitrary detainment were quite vividly reflected in the manuals, for instance in the following advice:

“Go to the *yamen* [the seat of the local magistrate] as infrequently as possible, and do not watch crowds gathering around interrogations. Whenever you find yourself seeing public condemnations of adulterers or criminals before the local magistrate or around tax offices, you must not join the crowd and follow them into the *yamen* to watch the proceedings. You should fear that the magistrate might desire to trap any potential accomplices by sealing all exits without announcement; or under the pain of torture the criminals might whimsically point at anyone in the crowd and you may find yourself falsely accused. Though the magistrate may soon discover the truth, this will still give you much of a fright.”<sup>195</sup>

And even if a local magistrate did not abuse his power, merchants had to contend with the potential for reprisals if they brought charges against other officials. One Huizhou merchant from the Chinghua reign (1464-1487) brought his case to a magistrate after a military official “forcibly

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<sup>194</sup> Yang Lien-sheng, “Ming Local Administration,” in Charles O. Hucker, ed., *Chinese Government in Ming Times: Seven Studies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), 17.

<sup>195</sup> SSLY, 364. The original Chinese reads: 少入公门，毋观囚罪。凡到府县巡司衙前，及水陆途中口岸处所，或见奸妇、贼犯异常之争，切不可挤入人丛，进衙观看。恐问官疑人打点，关门扑门扑捉；或强盗受刑不过，妄指左近搪塞，苟遭其害。虽公断自明，亦受惊骇矣。

taxed a portion”（用强抽分, which likely indicated extortion） of his shipment of timber. In this case, the magistrate appeared to have found in favor of the merchant, although some years later this merchant's younger brother was tied and beaten when he was intercepted by the military official in this case.<sup>196</sup> It would be best of course to prevent problems with any officials from occurring in the first place. Readers of merchant manuals were advised to respect officials of all ranks and yield the road to them:

“All officials should be respected; all elders should be shown deference. Whatever an official's rank, he is entrusted by the imperial court, and this power can be used to restrain people; do not be insolent to them even if they are of low rank. Being thoughtless or offensive to them would not only dishonor them, but may also insult them; if you are flogged as a result, you cannot wash away your embarrassment. Whenever you encounter officials, you must stand and yield, for it is the responsibility of our people to be low and humble.”<sup>197</sup>

Particularly interesting was the statement that mid-level merchants were of a humbler social class than officials and that readers should accept this state of affairs. This resignation to a humbler social position stood in contrast to the ability to wealthier merchants' ability to frustrate the scholar-official class. In the above quotations there was no suggestion that the conventional fourfold division of society had been weakened at all. Perhaps mid-level merchants were more deferential to officials than wealthier merchants and more upwardly mobile families. But this quotation certainly contradicted Shen Yao's statement that the fourfold division broke down in the Ming period. Much more likely, wealthier merchants were by far the greatest beneficiaries of

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<sup>196</sup> Fan Jinmin et al 范金民 等,《明清商事纠纷与商业诉讼》(Nanjing: Nanjing University Press, 2007), 290-291.

<sup>197</sup> SSLY, 364. The original Chinese of this quotation reads: 是官当敬, 凡长当专。官无大小, 皆受朝廷一命, 权可制人, 不可因其秩卑, 放肆慢侮。苟或触犯, 虽不能荣人, 亦足以辱人, 倘受其叱挞, 又将何以洗耻哉。凡见官长, 须起立引避, 盖尝为卑为降, 实吾民之职分也。I have translated 吾民 as “our people” but its usage here in Chinese suggests that merchant manuals saw their mid-level merchant readers as constituents of a coherent social class.

this breakdown and mid-level merchants accrued much fewer benefits from the late Ming social changes described in Chapter 2.

We may wonder whether merchant manuals said anything about bribery and illegitimate commerce. Perhaps out of merchant manuals' desire to stake a claim to gentlemanly status for mid-level merchants, Ming merchant manuals generally avoided talking about smuggling. With the exception of a discussion of how porters and brokers might covertly siphon the merchant reader's goods, the manuals explicitly discouraged mid-level merchants from engaging in dishonest behavior. The manuals discouraged readers from courting favor from individual officials and then abusing this official connection for personal gain. As KSYLXM warned:

"If you rely on official connections, when the official leaves then your advantages disappear. When trading away from home, perhaps you have family and friends in officialdom and positions of prominence. If you abuse this relationship to do as you please, engage in extortion and taking criminals under your wing, then even if other merchants appear more than willing to hand over their goods to you, they do so out of fear and not respect for you. Whenever this official is relieved of his current position, then those whom you have previously hurt will return with suspicion and anger, and must create trouble, and thus your swaggering under false pretenses will stir up real trouble for you."<sup>198</sup>

Because fear of local magistrates was high and the abuse of relationships with officials might backfire, merchant manuals directed mid-level merchants to resolve commercial conflicts among themselves. Rather than rely on the state to regulate merchant behavior and arbitrate commercial disputes, the manuals believed that ideally disputes could be minimized and perhaps eliminated if

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<sup>198</sup> KSYLXM, 401-402. The 'loss' of an official connection mentioned in this quotation was quite common. It was the policy of the Ming state to reassign local magistrates to a new post every three years. We know that this policy to shuffle magistrates across the empire was quite well enforced in the late Ming, because early Jesuit missionaries to China quickly discovered that their efforts to establish trust with local magistrates would be interrupted every time magistrates were reassigned. This difficulty is mentioned in Liam Matthew Brockey, *Journey to the East: The Jesuit Mission to China, 1579-1724* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2007), 35-36.

large groups of merchants behaved according to a more or less uniform set of standards. As seen above, the manuals assumed that no one else could be trusted and therefore encouraged readers to adopt particular precautions to prevent losses. Itinerant merchants did not travel alone all the time or travelled mainly with strangers whose loyalties were suspect. The inhabitants of particular areas of China, for instance Huizhou, were particularly dependent on commerce. Itinerant merchants from regions such as Huizhou banded together through native-place ties and simple contracts to form geographically defined cliques, for instance Huizhou merchants, Shanxi merchants, Dongting merchants.<sup>199</sup> The mid-level merchants among these cliques were undoubtedly part of the target audience of these merchant manuals and some of this advice might have been intended for them.

But if merchant manual authors were probably aware that merchants sometimes banded together in groups, we might well ask what advice from manuals was meant for these bands of itinerant merchants working alongside one another. While advice such as taking extra precautions against porters and boatmen was sound whether a merchant was working alone or in a group, the more idealistic exhortations, for instance the suggestion that righteousness and benevolence should precede profits in the marketplace, would be much more practical in group setting. It would thus seem less silly of the manuals to suggest that righteousness and benevolence would spontaneously produce good results in the market. If an individual merchant unilaterally decided to act less competitively, he had few guarantees that his competitors would not take advantage of his generosity. In a group setting, however, a compromise could be negotiated. The manuals did

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<sup>199</sup> Chen Xuewen, 66. On page 61 Chen reproduces the text of a fairly primitive Ming contract between two commercial partners. This contract was probably meant to reaffirm their solidarity and not intended for use in court. In any case, without stating mutual obligations in detail, this contract would probably have been of very limited litigious use except as proof that a partnership did exist.

not, however, offer any practical advice on how to negotiate or how the virtues of righteousness and benevolence could be expressed in a commercial partnership. Additionally, merchant manuals' exhortation to practice righteousness and compassion in the marketplace should not be confused with any modern notion of a level playing field or fair competition. Our present views of fair competition require some large body, for instance the state or a guild, to act as arbitrator in case of dispute. Nowhere did the manuals say that the state or a guild should step in, and the manuals' belief that small bands of itinerant merchants travelling and working together could make compromises among themselves would make for less coercive power than a state or a guild could bring to bear.

It is not wholly unreasonable to think that a sixteenth century state like Ming China had the capacity to step in and increase its control of commerce, and it is not anachronistic to think that Ming merchants might want the state to step in. In the case of commercial brokers, for instance, in the early Ming local brokers were required to register with the authorities. Particularly in the Ming founder's reign, the founding emperor had attempted to bind merchants to the state by decreeing the abolition of brokerages. Had this decree been successfully implemented and endured, it would have drawn merchants closer to the state. Particularly in the early Ming, the state either made very assertive claims to control the production of certain commodities, for instance full monopoly power over the salt and tea industries, or it would sell surpluses of other commodities in its storehouses. The decree against brokerages was lifted in the Yongle reign and the registration of brokers was employed as a means of giving the state some level of control of commerce. This may suggest that the state began to retreat from direct intervention in commerce. But if so, the Ming regime did not retreat very far. Despite the increase in smuggling which flouted the monopoly power of the salt and tea administration, throughout the

Ming period the state did not abandon the *nominal* monopoly of these industries and continued to administer them haphazardly. Moreover, in the southern province of Guangdong, between the Yongle and Zhengde reigns (1402-1521), Ming emperors allowed provincial coastal tax offices (市舶司) to auction goods from the state-controlled tributary trade; in this arrangement the state eliminated the need for a broker and directly interacted with merchants.<sup>200</sup> By the late Ming reigns (1572-1644), when merchant manuals were written and circulated, acts of heavy state intervention in commerce were a distant memory. Nevertheless, these instances in the early Ming show that the imperial government in Beijing did stake claims for greater control of commerce in the past, and it could have a much closer relationship with merchants if it desired. Indeed, at the local level, magistrates appear never to have stopped administering local affairs, including affairs pertaining to commerce. A 1617 stele erected by the Changshu (常熟) county magistrate, in the metropolitan district of South Zhili, cited the protection of public order as a justification to impose a series of measures “to prohibit the robbery of merchants by wandering miscreants” (常熟县严禁流奸赤棍截商劫民碑).<sup>201</sup> Whether the stele and accompanying security measures had the desired results cannot be ascertained at this time. But this stele is indication that magistrates at the local level remain empowered to perform their duties, sometimes to the benefit of merchants. All this suggests that the state had the power to intervene in commercial affairs. This is not to suggest that the Ming state had the capacity to *continuously* monitor and intervene in commercial affairs, but the occasional intervention such as readjustments to the salt and tea administrations and manipulation of rates of exchange were probably not beyond the Ming state’s

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<sup>200</sup> Li Qianlong, 《明清经济探微初编》, 331-333. The MHD does not seem to contain information on the coastal tax offices; however, this coastal tax administration is briefly discussed in MS, 104: 663-664.

<sup>201</sup> 《明清苏州工商业碑刻集》 (Nanjing: Jiangsu remin chubanshe, 1981) , 372-374.

capacity. Perhaps merchants were aware of this capacity and wanted officials to exercise some control in particular cases, for instance small merchants probably wanted the state to take action against the domination of the salt trade by a few powerful salt merchants; however, to my knowledge any talk of a majority of small merchants hoping for state intervention must remain speculative because sources to support such assertions appear not to have survived.

Whatever the state's capacities, merchant manuals did not show great enthusiasm for non-merchants to step into mid-level merchants' lives. Manuals' advice to merchants to defer to officials of all ranks suggest that mid-level merchants looked upon officials as superiors to be feared and shown deference to, although this did not mean that there was a reciprocal relationship between mid-level merchants and officials. The manuals wanted mid-level merchants to show deference to officials of all ranks, but the manuals did not explicitly ask for protection from officials. Given the manuals' strong fear of official abuse of power, the manuals probably wanted merchants to have as little to do with officials as possible, and the suggestion to merchants to show deference to officials perhaps was a way to reduce mid-level merchants' risk of antagonizing officials.

This desire to stay away from officials in order to reduce merchants' chances of antagonizing officials as much as possible stood in contrast to the paternalism of the Ming founder and high-ranking officials. We may recall the Ming founder's tendency to make grand pronouncements in Chapter 1 and the notions of good government in Chapter 3. Where the Ming founder and officials thought that their actions would bring order to the empire to the benefit of the entire population, mid-level merchants probably had no such illusions. Merchant manuals did not show any particularly idealistic notions that private commerce and the state could impose a social order for the benefit of all. Indeed, mid-level merchants probably did not give particular



thought to how private commerce and the state could perfect the world either in a piecemeal fashion or through the implementation of a particular vision of government. Readers' very purpose for reading a merchant manual was to learn how they could make a better life for themselves *on their own*; as such, this was an individual rather than a collective enterprise. The fact that manuals continuously assumed dishonesty in almost all other people with whom itinerant merchants must interact suggest that manual authors and readers were inclined to think that one was alone in the world and that one had to take care of oneself. Such an assumption would be incongruent with the idea that one had responsibility to take care of strangers and that one could perfect the world to the benefit of strangers.

What this *might* tells us about state-merchant relations is that, beyond the ordinary conflicts of interests between the state and merchants, high-ranking officials and mid-level merchants looked at the world from different lenses informed by contrasting sets of assumptions. It may not come as surprise to learn that the elite and the non-elite had different worldviews. But the differences between elite and non-elite worldviews can be helpful in the reframing of our research questions for Ming Chinese popular culture. If, as we have seen briefly in the merchant manuals above, the subordinate class of mid-level merchants borrowed recognizably Confucian motifs from the intellectual orthodoxy of the scholar-official elite and yet interpreted these motifs differently, we might well ask what different meanings they drew from terms such as *ren* (benevolence) and *yi* (righteousness). We may further ask whether or not merchants and scholar-officials realized that they had different interpretations of these terms across *class* lines. We know that many different schools of thought competed for the attention of the scholar-official and wealthy merchant elite in the Ming, and it was probably no surprise to scholar-officials to meet other scholar-officials who held divergent interpretations of the Four Books. But it would be

more interesting to see what they thought when they realized, if they realized, that people of the subordinate classes such as mid-level merchants had their own interpretations of some of the elite's cherished Confucian terms. Using Inquisition trial records, Carlo Ginzburg had performed an assessment of the Inquisition's inability to make sense fully of the cosmology of a late sixteenth century miller in northern Italy.<sup>202</sup> An assessment of the differences between elite and non-elite interpretations of the canonical texts and terms used by the elite has not been performed for late Ming China.<sup>203</sup> Although China did not have a permanent institution such as the Inquisition that focused on extracting information on the beliefs of the population, the voluminous corpus of official documentation did contain references to heterodox sects, many of which appropriated terminology and concepts from a variety of philosophical and religious traditions. Our views pertaining to state-merchant relations and scholar-officials' views of merchants are reliant on scholar-officials' personal opinions and there is much room for the kinds of historical reconstruction that can greatly illuminate the differences and the relationship between the elite and non-elite individuals.

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<sup>202</sup> Ginzburg warned of making clear-cut distinctions between elite culture and the culture of the subordinate classes. See Ginzburg, xxii-xxiii. I am inclined to agree, although for Ming China this must be stressed more strongly because the close association of scholar-officials and wealthy merchants meant that class boundaries in Ming China were perhaps more porous than those of early modern Europe .

<sup>203</sup> To be precise, the late imperial China field does have works of literary reconstruction. Two works that come immediately to mind are Jonathan Spence's *Death of Woman Wang* (New York: Penguin, 1978) and Sarah Schneewind's *A Tale of Two Melons: Emperor and Subject in Ming China* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2006). Neither of these works, however, focused on the differences of interpretations in elite and non-elite people's thoughts pertaining to texts and terms from the Confucian canon.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Conclusion**

As stated in Chapter 1, the purpose of this thesis is to add nuance to our understanding of the general milieu in which commercialization took place in sixteenth and seventeenth century Ming China. Such nuances are meant to strengthen arguments which dispute Eurocentric theories of development and advocate that scholars refrain from privileging early modern Europe's and America's trajectories of development in their analyses of non-Western paths of development. While Andre Gunder Frank and R. Bin Wong, the two scholars mentioned in Chapter 1, differed in their approach to reassessing world economic development, with Frank advocating a singular global approach and Bin Wong advocating a more minute unit-by-unit comparison between early modern Europe and China, they both drew on particular features of late imperial China in order to build their arguments against Eurocentric appraisals of late imperial China's position in the world economy. In light of their reliance on identifying particular features of sixteenth to eighteenth century China's political economy, it is particularly important to find out more about features of Ming society and commerce that the scholarly community has not emphasized enough in the use of the term "commercialization." This is the enterprise towards which my thesis is intended to contribute.

By looking at a small sampling of high-ranking officials' memorials about commercial activities, this study disputes the older misconceptions that the Ming bureaucracy had a singular, unchanging set of attitudes towards commerce and merchants. As Chapter 3 has illustrated, officials argued from different sets of assumptions and different inclinations. In discussions on how to repair the salt administration, for instance, we see different sets of assumptions about

whether the use of coercion or the readjustment of incentives were more effective means to put an end to the activities of illicit salt merchants. All the sampled memorials on the salt and tea administrations, however, were directed towards catering to the interests of the state and not the interests of the common people. In contrast, Zhao Shiqing's and Lu Kun's memorials on the corruption of transit taxation and the public spaces for merchants showed that some officials had greater concern for the interests of the common people, including small merchants. Furthermore, the timing of this sampling of official memorials calls into question simplistic conjectures of a dramatic shift in scholar-official consciousness with regard to commerce occurring in the sixteenth century. For instance, Yu Ying-shih's work on merchants and Confucianism sometimes gives the impression that officials only changed their attitudes towards commerce as a result of a decisive shift in the intellectual orientations of the elite that coincided with the growth of commerce.<sup>204</sup> But as stated in Chapter 3 the careers of sympathetic officials such as Yu Qian (1398-1457), Qiu Jun (1420?-1495), and Liang Cai (1470-1540) either predate the sixteenth century or involve only the early half of the sixteenth century. While I do not deny that something dramatic had happened to scholar-officials and merchants in the sixteenth century, the findings of Chapter 3 suggest that the development of a more sympathetic attitude in scholar-officials' view of commerce might be a gradual historical process that occurred across a longer span of time.

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<sup>204</sup> See for instance Yu, 183-185. Here, Yu cites the essay by Lu Ji as evidence of a sixteenth century ethos that reassessed the convention view of luxury. I am not convinced that most sixteenth century thinkers changed their minds on the notion of extravagance; it appears to me that Lu Ji's view was not widely shared in his time. But what is particularly striking was the way Yu introduced Lu Ji's essay: "and yet not a moment too soon or too late, in the sixteenth century, there emerged a train of thought that praised luxury" (然而不迟不早, 到了 16 世纪, 竟出现了一种肯定奢侈的思想) .

Merely stating that dramatic changes happened to scholar-officials and merchants is neither clear nor satisfactory. Chapter 2 aimed to shed light on some of the changes faced by scholar-officials and merchants. In particular, the chapter narrated scholar-officials' frustration in matters of consumption. The chapter's narrative gave us a qualitative description of at least one aspect in the decline of the elite status of traditional scholar-officials. Qualitative descriptions of scholar-officials' declining social status, however, do not make for very strong evidence. Chapter 2 sought to quantify the decline in the social status of the traditional scholar-official elite by reinterpreting the data on the successful examination candidates of the Ming period, holders of the *jinshi* degree, provided by Ho Ping-ti and Wu Xuande. Although the data compiled by Ho and Wu still cannot tell us with the utmost precision whether or not scholar-officials suffered as great a decline in social status as some late imperial writers claimed, the data does lend greater precision to how we characterize the changes in scholar-officials' and wealthy merchants' social status. Ho showed that a significant portion of examination candidates from poorer backgrounds did receive the *jinshi* degree for much of the Ming period, which indicated that the examination system was an effective engine for upward social mobility for the underprivileged of Ming society. But in comparison to the population of China, the total number *jinshi* recipients throughout the Ming period was miniscule and we should not exaggerate the examination system's *immediate* impact on the lives of most contemporaries. The examination system might have had an *indirect* effect on a larger portion of the population because receipt of the *jinshi* degree likely brought about greater material wealth and better career opportunities for the descendants of successful candidates, although this statement assumes that these families did not easily dispersed their wealth due to mismanagement or sudden misfortunes. In light of these

findings we would be ill-advised to generalize from scattered pieces of anecdotal evidence that the social status of sixteenth century scholar-officials suffered a drastic decline.

As much as Chapters 2 and 3 added nuance to our understanding of Ming society and commerce that directly affected contemporaries' lives, they said little about the thought of the bulk of merchants who had neither the power nor the resources of elite scholar-officials and affluent merchants. In the past, study of merchant manuals tended to focus on route information. Timothy Brook's monograph on commerce and culture used one Ming manual to draw a sketch of "merchant values."<sup>205</sup> Chapter 4 was an exploration of the substance of merchant manual advice that simultaneously tried to discover what they had to say about mid-level merchants' identity and state-merchant relations. The manuals' advice suggests that the daily realities of mid-level merchants were less than ideal. To confront the problems mid-level merchants faced on a daily basis, the manuals advised merchant readers to adopt a series of sensible and accommodative measures, although the manuals also did not shy from advising manipulative and expedient courses of action. Merchant manuals advocated the building up of trust in the market; however, the manuals leapt towards putting a 'gentlemanly' spin on such mundane advice as the undesirability of the relentless pursuit of profit. Moreover, in their desire to make such advice respectable, the manuals adopted some terms used in canonical Confucian texts such as *junzi* (gentleman), *ren* (benevolence), and *yi* (righteousness) and applied them to the commercial contexts in which Confucius and traditional scholar-officials rarely ventured. This adaptation of terms also implied claims of the attainability of gentlemanly status for mid-level merchants, since terms like *shishang* (gentry-yet-merchant) and *junzi* (gentleman) could not be meaningfully invoked in merchant manual advice had the manuals and their readers not assumed that a mid-

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<sup>205</sup> Brook, *The Confusions of Pleasure*, 215-218.

level merchant could somehow rise to the respectability of a gentleman. Seen in another light, however, much of this talk of gentlemanly status was superfluous because in other pieces of manual advice the manuals were quick to advise mid-level merchants to fear and show deference to officials, whom manuals seem to view as mid-level merchants' superiors. Manuals' advice to fear and show deference, moreover, contradict the impressions given by the Ming founder and officials in Chapters 1 and 3. Where modern-day scholars reading the injunctions of the Ming founder and the statecraft writings of prominent Ming officials might find a paternalistic approach to commerce and merchants, merchant manuals reveal that mid-level merchants probably wanted to keep their distance from officialdom, fearing the strength of the power in the hands of officials of all ranks. Indeed, as I suggested at the very end of Chapter 4, members of the elite and members of non-elite classes probably had contrasting worldviews, the intellectual origins of which could be better understood with further research.

### **An Appeal to Focus on Individuals and Lived Experiences**

At this point one might ask whether there is any unifying purpose to this thesis besides the provision of individual statements that tries to clarify the social status of commerce and Ming contemporaries' thought on merchants. While I am not an expert on any particular topic, it seems to me that given the findings of this research a 'human' dimension is lacking in much of the scholarly work that intersects with and draws from descriptions of Ming commercialization. Over the decades scholars have produced a steady stream of valuable works on early Ming politics, late Ming intellectual and cultural currents, and specialists with an interest in China's long-term economic development have constructed a solid foundation on themes such as the evolution of

late imperial fiscal and monetary policy.<sup>206</sup> But missing in much of this scholarship are less specialized works that focus on amorphous topics that tell us about how particular segments of the population lived. Missing also are works that bridge the distances between political organization, economic development, and intellectual and cultural trends. The lives of people in the past, after all, were not compartmentalized into separate political, economic, and cultural spheres. Merchants, for example, were influenced by the decisions of officials of all ranks, the vagaries of market conditions, and the everyday ideas and practices with which they came into contact. Much of our knowledge of Ming commerce and society, for instance in the CHC, concerned political developments, economic conditions, and infrastructure that in many ways do not readily tell us about their effects on people's lived experiences. Similarly, the lived experiences of individual persons and how they were influenced by larger economic forces and cultural trends are often obscured in scholarly debates about trajectories of development. Again, to use merchants and commerce as an example, there is much that we do not know about the culture of mid-level merchants. Without this knowledge of the worldview and assumptions of the

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<sup>206</sup> The following is a selective list of notable works in English. On early Ming politics: Edward Dreyer, *Early Ming China: A Political History, 1355-1435* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1982); Ray Huang, *1587: A Year of No Significance: The Ming Dynasty in Decline* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980); Edward L. Farmer, *Early Ming Government The Evolution of Dual Capitals* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976). On late Ming intellectual and cultural currents: Craig Clunas, *Superfluous Things: Material Culture and Social Status in Early Modern China* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991); Willard J. Peterson, *The Bitter Gourd: Fang I Chih and the Impetus for Intellectual Change* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979). On China's long-term economic development: Richard von Glahn, *Fountain of Fortune: Money and Monetary Policy in China, 1000-1700* (Berkeley: University of California, 1996); Madeline Zelin, *The Magistrate's Tael: Rationalizing Fiscal Reform in Eighteenth Century China* (Berkeley: University of California, 1984); Ray Huang, *Taxation and Government Finance in Sixteenth-Century Ming China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974).



“rabble of the streets”（市井之徒），to use a Chinese cliché, our interpretations of Ming commerce and society would strongly favor the opinions of scholar-officials and observations reported by scholar-officials. The privileging of elite views would not only undermine the comprehensiveness of our understanding of Ming China’s past, but it would furthermore undermine efforts to construct an accurate comparison of different trajectories of development in the early modern world.

### **A View of the Long-term Development of China’s Commerce**

This thesis’s focus on merchant social status and state-merchant relations has attempted to add to our understanding of facets that hitherto had not featured prominently in many discussions of commercialization and sixteenth century Ming society. One may ask, however, whether this thesis has anything to say about the long-term commercial development of late imperial China. Two points may be suggested in this regard. Firstly, the disjunction between the Yuan and the Ming must be addressed.<sup>207</sup> Although the quotation from the Pei gazetteer at the very beginning of this thesis would have us believe that people in the Ming period saw the preceding Yuan Dynasty as a period of alien rule and an aberration from indigenous Chinese practices, this hides the fact that Ming and Qing China kept some Yuan practices and harbored no particular ill will towards Mongols and the Inner Asians they brought with them.

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<sup>207</sup> I do not claim originality for the following suggestions for a reappraisal of the significance of the early Ming regime. To my knowledge, a new appraisal of the contributions of non-Han Chinese contributions to China and the general course of China’s past is gathering momentum. It can be seen, for instance, in Joanna Waley-Cohen’s book on foreign but particularly European influences on China, written for a general audience. See her *The Sextants of Beijing: Global Currents in Chinese History* (New York: Norton, 1999). I am not, however, aware of any scholarly literature specifically devoted to Mongol and other Inner Asian peoples’ contributions to China’s past.

Administratively, the Ming and Qing inherited the Mongol division of China into provinces ruled by provincial officials appointed by and serving at the pleasure of the central government.<sup>208</sup> Culturally, the Mongols generally were not considered as hated alien rulers, all of whom must be expelled from China. During the Yuan period, some literati sought to ‘sinicize’ their Mongol rulers and “worked out a creative *modus vivendi* under the Mongol order.”<sup>209</sup> In many respects the Ming continued to live quite peacefully with the Mongols and Inner Asians who remained inside China. Before the Ming founder’s ascension to the throne, the would-be emperor issued a statement in 1367 that downplayed the ethnic rhetoric of the Red Turban rebels of which he was a former member. In the first years of the founding emperor’s reign he made repeated gestures to show that he held no particular malice towards his Mongol and Inner Asian subjects.<sup>210</sup> The relative peace with Inner Asian minorities continued for the remainder of the Ming period and can be seen through the lack of major Muslim revolts up to the seventeenth century.<sup>211</sup> Moreover, prominent Manchu families of the Qing regime, including the imperial family, were intermarried with and allied to some Mongolian factions which supported the Qing conquest of China with troops. The disjunction between Yuan China and late imperial China bears relevance to our understanding of China’s long-term commercial development because it bears upon our understanding of the character of the Ming regime. An older generation of Ming historians, particularly those focusing on court politics and political institutions, tended to think of the Ming

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<sup>208</sup> Qian Mu 钱穆, 《中国历代政治得失》 (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2008 [1952]), 105-108.

<sup>209</sup> John D. Langlois, Jr., “Introduction” in John D. Langlois, ed. *China Under Mongol Rule* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 10-12.

<sup>210</sup> F.W. Mote, *Imperial China, 960-1800* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 559-561.

<sup>211</sup> Morris Rossabi, “The Muslims in the Early Yuan Dynasty” in Langlois, ed., *China Under Mongol Rule*, 295.

period as a break from foreign domination of China.<sup>212</sup> From some of their work, one gets the impression that Yuan China was an aberration and Ming China was a return to the normal pattern of indigenous rule and indigenous ways of running affairs. Yet the sharp divide between the aberration of foreign rulers and the normalcy of native rulers does not stand up to scrutiny once we consider the retention of Mongol practices and earlier patterns of trade and migration. Most crucially, trade with Inner Asia did not cease and China's Mongolian and Inner Asian communities were not expelled *en masse* as a result of the military victories and establishment of the Ming Dynasty. This calls into question the presentation of early Ming China as a regime that orientated towards the construction of a frugal and agricultural society.<sup>213</sup> Although the bulk of evidence and scholarly literature suggest that economic transactions in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth century were not heavily monetized and trade tended to be carried out between short distances, it seems to me that an alternative explanation to the relatively unsophisticated patterns of commerce of the early Ming, particularly in the founder emperor's Hongwu reign (1368-1398), was that China at the time was recovering from years of natural disasters, strife, and government's weakened position in society due to the fall of the Yuan and internecine conflict between competing rebel groups. In this sense, it was the process of recovery in the early Ming that was the aberration to the long-term commercial development of China.<sup>214</sup>

The particular focus on the sixteenth century as the period of the most intense commercialization and growing scholar-official anxiety of a fast-changing society, then, seems

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<sup>212</sup> This can be seen in the title of Part 4 of Mote's *Imperial China*, which focuses on Ming China: "The Restoration of Native Rule Under the Ming, 1368-1644." See Mote, *Imperial China*, 517.

<sup>213</sup> See for instance Brook, *The Confusions of Pleasure*, 17-85.

<sup>214</sup> To be fair, Brook did say that Ming commerce grew, not only in spite of some of the Ming founder's policies that tended to favor frugality and agriculture, but also because of the development of roads and other communication infrastructure in the early Ming. See Brook, *The Confusions of Pleasure*, 10-11.

misplaced. This is the second point I wish to make. Overland trade with Inner Asia was a legacy of earlier times and evolved through the Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing. In the Song and Ming periods, the tea and horse trade featured prominently in the commerce with Inner Asia, but certainly teas and horses were not the only items exchanged. Similarly, despite the prohibition of non-state sanctioned vessels between 1371 and 1567, the populations of east and southeast China who participated in illegal maritime commerce were continuing trades that had evolved for centuries. While much evidence suggests that trade intensified in the sixteenth century, without reference to earlier centuries it would be difficult to fully explain the reasons for their expansion in the sixteenth century. Sixteenth century officials and merchants, after all, were building upon preexisting foundations and not acting without precedents; to focus narrowly on the sixteenth century would be to miss asking some obvious and rather fruitful questions. Why did domestic and overseas commerce not feature as prominently in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries as the sixteenth? And why did scholar-officials not grow as weary of commerce in these centuries as scholar-officials did in the sixteenth and early seventeenth century?

To answer the first question, we might turn to known contributing factors to sixteenth century economic development, such as population growth, the development of industries and market towns, and monetization – in short, the factors that had already been identified in the CHC and elsewhere. But this only tells us why commerce expanded in the sixteenth century, and not why this expansion did not occur earlier; in order to do that we need to explain why in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the population did not grow as much, industries and market towns did not develop as quickly, and money was not as well established, as in the sixteenth century. Perhaps these may be the result of outbreaks of infectious disease, lower levels of agricultural output and agricultural produce exchanged through well-established markets, the

damage to infrastructure and foreign trade due to the unrest of the transition from Yuan to Ming, and the hindrance to economic development stemming from paper money's loss of credibility in the late Yuan and early Ming and the subsequent lack of a credible system of currency until China gradually settled into a bimetallic standard consisting of silver and copper coins.

The second question is much more difficult. Neither the imperial state nor the scholar-official class was a homogenous bloc. Modern-day scholars would readily admit that, in terms of intellectual inclinations and sources of intellectual authority, scholar-officials were divided into many different groups with different beliefs and interpretations of canonical texts. We might further insist that scholar-officials were divided in their economic thought.<sup>215</sup> As Chapter 3 suggests, the fact that some officials accommodated merchants' calculations and refrained from a one-sided approach that favored coercion against merchants in illicit trades, and the fact that some of these officials lived before the sixteenth century, challenge the perception that the mindset of sixteenth century scholar-officials suddenly changed, as they lost their fear of extravagance and belief in the low social status of merchants. Indeed, as mentioned above, the findings of Chapter 3 challenge us to take a longer view of changes in scholar-officials' views of merchants as a gradual historical process. The quotation from Shen Yao in Chapter 1 of this thesis also encouraged us to look to the *longue durée*, although Shen's observation was marred by his impression that there was a complete reversal of scholar-officials' and merchants' fortune, which Chapter 2 has suggested was underway but not completed in the Ming period.

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<sup>215</sup> This is the approach of Lin Man-houng's book on late Qing writers of statecraft. See her *China Upside Down: Currency, Society, and Ideologies, 1808-1856* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006). In the field of Ming history, Richard von Glahn has drawn a division between proposals for "bullionism" and "economic autarky." See his *Fountain of Fortune*, 215-223. While intellectual historians have identified many different Neo-Confucian schools of thought, a comprehensive treatment of the different strains of economic thought in late imperial China is lacking.

To accept this long view of China's commercial development would encourage us to look for the social effects of commerce across a longer time span than the sixteenth and early seventeenth century. Many accounts of early modern Chinese commerce and society tend to focus on one of three relatively distinct periods: the sixteenth and early seventeenth century, the eighteenth century when Qing power was at its apogee, and finally the late nineteenth and early twentieth century when China was caught in comparative technological backwardness and an adverse international climate.<sup>216</sup> As Chapter 4 has shown, merchant manuals show much promise of illuminating the worldview of a late imperial subordinate class, that of the mid-level merchants. Yet, as was noted in Chapter 4, most surviving merchant manuals date from the Qing period up to the nineteenth century. In the study of commerce and merchant culture through merchant manuals, it seems sensible to me to cover all three of the above periods. In this way, we may eventually come to a picture of the evolution of China's commerce and the social effects of commerce that breaks out of the confines of the late Ming.

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<sup>216</sup> I am aware that, by temporally delimiting this thesis to the Ming period, I am focusing on only one of the three periods identified here. My defense for this, and other scholars might share my feeling, is that dynastic institutional sources complicate the task of writing a unified general history of commerce and the social effects of commerce for all three periods. Yet, if we were to reduce our dependence on state-sponsored sources and focus on the less voluminous and unwieldy corpus of statecraft writings and merchant manuals, it may yet be possible to do this.

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## Appendix 1

“Regional Differences in the Production of Successful Ming *Jinshi*”

For lack of space, the names of Ming provinces have been abbreviated as follows:

BZ = North Zhili; FJ = Fujian; GD = Guangdong; GX = Guangxi; GZ = Guizhou; HN= Henan; JX = Jiangxi; NZ = South Zhili; SD = Shandong; SX = Shanxi; SAX = Shaanxi; SC = Sichuan; YN = Yunnan; ZJ = Zhejiang; LD = Liaodong

Periods	Regions and Provinces					Total Number Produced in Period
	Lower Yangtze	Southeast China	Coastal North China	Interior China	Southwest China	
<b>1368-1449</b>	NZ: 485 ZJ: 673	FJ: 482 GD: 157 JX: 837	BZ: 171 SD: 146 LD: 2	HG: 222 HN: 226 SAX: 88 SX: 140	SC: 135 YN: 10 GZ: 3 GX: 43	
<b>Period Total</b>	<b>1158</b>	<b>1476</b>	<b>319</b>	<b>676</b>	<b>191</b>	<b>3820</b>
<b>1450-1505</b>	NZ: 910 ZJ: 710	FJ: 407 GD: 206 JX: 837	BZ: 747 SD: 306 LD: 32	HG: 292 HN: 336 SAX: 234 SX: 214	SC: 378 YN: 49 GZ: 15 GX: 46	
<b>Period Total</b>	<b>1620</b>	<b>1220</b>	<b>1085</b>	<b>1076</b>	<b>488</b>	<b>5489</b>
<b>1506-1572</b>	NZ: 1100 ZJ: 1039	FJ: 674 GD: 264 JX: 695	BZ: 863 SD: 567 LD: 24	HG: 436 HN: 481 SAX: 315 SX: 381	SC: 473 YN: 81 GZ: 28 GX: 72	
<b>Period Total</b>	<b>2139</b>	<b>1633</b>	<b>1454</b>	<b>1613</b>	<b>654</b>	<b>7493</b>
<b>1573-1644</b>	NZ: 1397 ZJ: 1022	FJ: 774 GD: 256 JX: 617	BZ: 638 SD: 715 LD: 14	HG: 551 HN: 641 SAX: 385 SX: 404	SC: 436 YN: 107 GZ: 53 GX: 48	
<b>Period Total</b>	<b>2419</b>	<b>1647</b>	<b>1367</b>	<b>1981</b>	<b>644</b>	<b>8058</b>
<b>Total Number Produced by Region</b>	<b>7336</b>	<b>5976</b>	<b>4225</b>	<b>5346</b>	<b>1977</b>	<b>24860</b>

Note: Two candidates from Korea and Vietnam not included here.

## Appendix 2

Reproduction of Ho Ping-Ti, *The Ladder of Success in Imperial China*, Table 9, "Social Composition of Ming-Qing *Jinshi*"

(The sum of A, B, and C = 100 percent)

Year	Total Number of <i>jinshi</i>	Category A		Category B		Combined Percentage of A and B	Category C		Category D	
		Number	Percentage of Total	Number	Percentage of Total		Number	Percentage of Total	Number	Percentage of Total
1371	28	21	75.0	---	---	75.0	7	25.0	---	---
1412	106	89	84.0	---	---	84.0	17	16.0	9	8.5
1457	294	182	61.8	---	---	61.8	112	38.2	9	3.0
1469	248	149	60.0	---	---	60.0	90	40.0	11	4.5
1472	250	137	54.8	---	---	54.8	113	45.2	13	5.2
1496	298	140	47.0	---	---	47.0	158	53.0	14	4.6
1505	303	126	41.6	---	---	41.6	177	58.4	12	4.0
1521	330	156	47.3	---	---	47.3	174	52.7	13	3.9
1535	329	154	47.0	---	---	47.0	175	53.0	22	6.9
1538	317	154	48.6	1	0.3	48.9	162	51.1	23	7.3
1544	312	151	48.4	2	0.6	49.0	159	51.0	24	8.0
1553	384	182	47.4	24	6.2	53.6	178	46.4	15	3.9
1562	298	133	44.6	---	---	44.6	165	55.4	17	5.7
1568	405	203	50.1	---	---	50.1	202	49.9	17	4.2
1580	302	134	44.4	---	---	44.4	168	55.6	12	4.0
1586	356	105	29.5	54	15.1	44.6	197	55.4	18	5.0
1610	230	61	26.5	40	17.4	43.9	129	56.1	18	7.8

Note: Qing period data not included; only data pertaining to the Ming period are reproduced here.