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The Westward Movement of Chinese Export
Harbour Views: Significant Paintings with a Social
Function
Rosalien van der Poel, Leiden University

Introduction
If we were to sort the Dutch public collections comprising Chinese paintings made for export (or exported) as inventoried in the author’s *Rijk Palet. Chinese exportkunst overzee* (2008: 155-99) into subject matter, we would see that a substantial number have a recurring maritime leitmotif (figure 1). This article offers a closer examination of these harbour views and, in doing so, reveals that waterfronts and ports – essential places in the transcontinental movement of commodities – were a significant topic of ‘Chinese export paintings’.

Indeed, export paintings from China for the Western market were so appealing to foreign powers active in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that they can be found in museums and private collections around the world. The term ‘Chinese export painting’ was coined by Western art historians following the precedent set by the term ‘Chinese export porcelain’. As Ming Wilson & Liu Zhiwei (2003: 10) state, this term came into use after 1949 in order to distinguish this type of painting from traditional Chinese painting.

This article will first discuss the material of harbour views and ship portraits as commodities, before it touches briefly upon some theoretical approaches, which seem useful to open up these works of art. A case study of a nineteenth-century Chinese port scene, currently in the collection of the National Museum of Ethnology in Leiden will
conclude the article. This study shows us that, though the first owner of a harbour view might have attributed intrinsically personal value to this painting in the first phase of its social life, by analysing its cultural biography and its material complex, we notice a changing use value in the course of time.

**Chinese export harbour views and their function**

In the nineteenth century, paintings made in South Chinese harbour cities in the Pearl River Delta and the ‘treaty ports’ were sold across the globe (figure 2 and 3). In some cases we can trace the journeys of these art works and detect their impact on patterns of consumption. This article attempts to demonstrate the social function and the practical value of these paintings.

Paintings of ports and anchorages frequented by Western ships can be viewed as representations of places where the first buyers had lived for years (figure 4 and 5). However, to describe such paintings as souvenirs does not do justice either to their quality, which was often high, or to the context in which they were acquired. These paintings played an important role in revealing the reality of the merchants to their families at home. ‘A certain measure of visual truth-value was crucial to the desirability of Canton trade paintings’, as Winnie Wong argued in her PhD thesis *After the Copy: Creativity, Originality and the Labor of Appropriation—Dafen Village, Shenzhen, China (1989-2010)* (2010: 141). Wong explained that, in this respect, these images served not simply as a body of seemingly empirical representation, but as a means of communication and translation amongst linguistically limited populations. The representational and social function of a Chinese export harbour view might, therefore, be thought of as its use
value. Much of the value of such a painting lay in its subject matter. Regardless of the technical quality or pictorial content, possession of these paintings also conferred a special status on their owners. To those who were in a position to buy an export painting, the picture would commemorate an arduous sea journey to Asia, a major commercial enterprise with immense rewards, or contact with the great empire of China, either personally or via friends who were there. Nineteenth-century owners of these kinds of images had, to a degree, been in contact with the fascinating and highly esteemed China, a place that many people viewed at that time as a source of limitless wealth (Conner 1996: 9). When we consider such social functions of harbour views, it becomes clear that the value of these paintings is not limited to the worth they accrue as representations seen (or consumed) by individual viewers. They also accrue value through the social processes of accumulation, possession, circulation and exchange.

In the nineteenth century, new emphasis on the achievements of the individual merchant-entrepreneur in China encouraged (visual) documentation of his exploits. The navigators themselves became potential patrons of art and were ready customers for Chinese goods and (stereotyped) scenes of China. As a result, we find paintings that no longer simply conformed to fashions prevalent in Europe, but which would stand as records of their travels, personal and significant in the context of their own enterprises. They wanted to bring back home a pictorial record of what they had seen and experienced in a remote country like China. In the nineteenth century, the ship became increasingly important to the individual mariner. Baird writes (2007: 110) that ‘the painting of his ship became a very popular export product; her faithful image was as personal a portrait as a man could
look for’. This particularity of function of nineteenth-century Chinese export paintings marked them as very distinct from the types of export paintings brought over to Europe during the eighteenth century. The details of national and company flags, waterfront architecture and ship design were carefully recorded, as they were of particular interest to the ship owners and merchants who were likely purchasers (figure 6). Ship portraits and harbour views were very popular export products, and this was clearly a demand that was supplied at every port (Ayers 1980). Before the opening of the Chinese ‘treaty ports’ in 1842, four harbour views were pre-eminently popular among Western traders: views of Macao, Bocca Tigris, Whampoa and Canton were an artistic by-product of the highly complex commercial relations that grew up between Chinese and Western merchants (figure 7 to 10). These four places, still signifiers of the China trade in our time, understandably meant something special to the Westerners who were in China because of sea trade.

**Theories on export painting**

Hitherto, most scholarly research on this specific art genre concentrated on stylistic differences, Western and Chinese painting conventions, literary sources, historical models and cultural influences, dating and iconographical issues, and representational aspects. This current research focuses on the fact that these paintings can be treated as media in a visual trade culture. To shed new light on these kinds of paintings this research will use authoritative extant theories, instrumental for opening them up.
Approaching Chinese export paintings from a commodity perspective requires us to follow the paintings themselves, for their meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses and their trajectories. As Arjun Appadurai writes in the introduction of his seminal study *The social life of things* (1986: 5), ‘it is only through the analysis of these trajectories that we can interpret the human transactions and calculations that enliven things’. The term ‘commodity’ is a problematic one. The ‘spirit’ of commodities oscillates between the Marxist idea that these are products intended principally for exchange, and that such products by definition emerge in the institutional, psychological and economic conditions of capitalism, and the less purist view, which considers commodities as goods intended for exchange, regardless of the form of the exchange. The commodity perspective on things represents a valuable point of entry to material culture. That is to say: not to look at these paintings as art works emerged from a specific art historical style or development per se, or which caused a fundamental break with former tendencies, or were important to new trends, but rather approach them as products intended for exchange. Things, which can be transferred to another and which have a use value. Both barter with its direct exchange, and the exchange of gifts can be conceived as forms of trade linking the exchange of commodities in widely different social, technological and institutional circumstances.

When we follow the idea of a commodity as an object in a certain situation – something which can characterise many different kinds of things at different points in their social lives – then we must focus on its total trajectory from production, through exchange or distribution, to consumption (Appadurai 1986: 13). A definition of the
commodity situation in the social life of Chinese export paintings is the situation when their exchangeability (past, present, or future) for other objects becomes their socially relevant feature. Furthermore, Appadurai claims in *The social life of things* (1986: 13-5), that defining commodity situation this way can be disaggregated into three aspects of ‘commodity-hood’: the commodity phase, the commodity candidacy and the commodity context. By explaining these three aspects, he clarifies that commoditisation acts at the complex intersection of temporal, cultural and social factors. We can say, to varying degrees, that Chinese export paintings are frequently found in the commodity phase, they fit the requirements of commodity candidacy and they appear in a commodity context. In other words, they are quintessential commodities. For now, it is outside the scope of this essay to go into more detail about the commodity features of Chinese export paintings.

After the consumer setbacks of the late eighteenth century, with the French Revolution and Europe at war, the ‘transport revolution’ of the nineteenth century boosted the trade system. Use of new commodities brought by this trade spread rapidly in both geographical and social space. The results of a growing number of inventory studies provide us with evidence of a wider social dispersion of Asian durable goods. Given this information, we may assume that Chinese export harbour views also had such a range.

New research on art and material culture in the Dutch households of Cape Colony and Batavia by Michael North (2011, forthcoming) conveys a general image of a steady increase in Chinese export paintings in the households and inventories of these places. North confirms the idea that these Chinese pictures were imported from Canton, where the intensification of trade gave rise to an export
industry. Connoisseurs collected these newly fashionable objects, not only in colonial households, but also in the Dutch Republic and in England. Moreover, North’s study reports that most of these export paintings concern harbour scenes. A sizeable market for Chinese cultural goods, not only paintings, emerged in Batavia as early as the 1620s. Only later were these products traded by the VOC and its successors in Holland. It was not only travellers from Europe and America purchasing these paintings, but foreign expatriates in Chinese ‘treaty ports’ too, looking for objects to decorate their houses in the Cape Colony and Batavia. These export images were cherished ornaments and became emblematic of both the trade and of China.

- Visual economy

In *Vision, Race and Modernity*, Deborah Poole discusses the concept of a ‘visual economy’ (1997: 8-10). This term seems useful for thinking about Chinese export paintings as part of a comprehensive organisation of people, ideas and objects, as this trade was similar. Poole explains that the word ‘economy’ suggests that: ‘the field of vision is organised in some systematic way. It also clearly suggests that this organisation has as much to do with social relationships, inequality, and power as with shared meanings and community. In a more specific sense, it also suggests that this organisation bears some relationship to the political and class structure of society as well as to the production and exchange of the material goods or commodities that form the lifeblood of modernity’. This concept allows us to think clearly about the global channels through which images have flowed between Europe and China.

This article touches briefly upon at least three levels of
organisation that are involved in a ‘visual economy’. Firstly, there must be an organisation of production encompassing both the individuals and the technologies that produce images. Previous analyses of Chinese export harbour views emphasise the organisation of production within the construction of the Chinese image world, rather than focusing on the works of individual painters. Although some nineteenth-century Chinese export painters have been identified, there is a tendency to hold the trade system as a whole responsible for the representational practices and the production of these kinds of paintings. A second level of economic organisation involves the circulation of goods or, in this case, of paintings. At this level, the technological innovation of the production of oil paintings with the use of linear perspective and other Western painting conventions plays a determining role. Moreover, the effect of the characteristic module-orientated way of working, along with the mass-production seen in Chinese painting studios, was a spectacular expansion of both the quantity and the accessibility of Chinese images. It is probable that an increased demand led to mass production, with the sea and port scenes being painted in advance and individual ships being painted into the scenes to order at a later date.

The third level at which an economy of vision must be assessed is, as Poole argues, ‘the cultural and discursive systems through which images are appraised, interpreted, and assigned historical, scientific and aesthetic worth. Here it becomes important to ask not what specific images mean but, rather, how images accrue value. The images value or utility is seen to reside in its ability to represent or reproduce an image of an original or reality’ (1997: 10).
- Material complex and use value

‘Once unleashed in society’, Poole argues (1997: 18), ‘an image can acquire myriad interpretations or meanings according to the different codes and referents brought to it by its diverse viewers’. To understand how this acquisition of interpretations works, we must focus on processes in which meaning and value are constructed and at the same time recognise the importance of materiality. The following case study gives a clearer insight into how a Chinese export painting operates as a vehicle in the construction of reality and of value. To grasp this method, the inherent static natures of matter in the production process of Chinese export paintings for particular markets or in their usage is crucial in shaping cultural realities and allocating value. As Pieter ter Keurs clarifies in Condensed Reality (2006: 51-70), objects are best seen as items in which existing meanings are materialised or condensed. As well as condensation, we must study the opposite process of evaporation, namely of extracting meanings from physical objects, when viewed in a different context. The whole complex of the object and its multiple meanings can be described as a ‘material complex’ (figure 11). Alongside Ter Keurs’ theory (2006), this essay also takes the viewpoints of Igor Kopytoff (1986: 64-91) into account. His formulation of the cultural biography perspective, which is appropriate to specific things as they move through different hands, contexts and uses, thus accumulating a specific biography or set of biographies, seems an essential tool for opening up the work of art that is central to the next paragraph.

A Leiden Chinese export harbour view

In 1905, a huge panoramic view of the Pearl River and the Quay at
Canton was donated as a long-term loan to the collection of the National Ethnology Museum in Leiden (figure 12). The biography of this oil painting may reveal something about its meaning, function and value over the course of time. That is to say, from the moment of the intentional purchase by Tonco Modderman (1813-1858), the first owner, in the mid-nineteenth century in China (the material condensation process), to its neglected life as a long-term loan in the early-twenty first century in the basement of a Leiden museum, through to its future status as a didactic and exposable object, accessible in its former glory for anyone who would like to learn about the past (the evaporation process).

By Royal decree, of 21 March 1843, Modderman was nominated by the Netherlands Trading Society and ordered to go to China as a reporter and investigate what the prospects were for the growth of trade between Holland and China after the opening up of four more Chinese harbour cities following the Treaty of Nanking in 1842. Subsequent to this trading mission to China in 1846 Modderman returned to his home in the Netherlands Indies. During his last governmental service as a Consul for the Netherlands he lived in Canton and Macao from 1854 to 1855. A letter in the Jardine Matheson Archive, written by Modderman in October 1854, indicates that he established himself in business in Canton as well as in Macao, alongside his official consular duties. He also offered his services as a trading agent to the Jardine Matheson Company. Speculation suggests that he obtained this Canton harbour view in this Chinese period in the 1850s.

If we consider the painting style, the depicted scene and the size of the canvas, it is evident that this painting was produced shortly after 1845. This is also supported by the fact that other paintings identical to this one came on the market around this time. The famous Chinese export painter
Youqua was a specialist in these kinds of harbour views (figure 13).

This remarkably wide panorama, looking north from Honam, the island lying south of the city along the mainland, and encompassing the entire river frontage from the western suburbs on the left to the French folly fort at the extreme right. Life on the Pearl River appears to play a more important role in this painting than do the Western trading stations. The river, with hundreds of boats, is depicted in the foreground. The quay, with its dwellings, as seen from the river, is depicted in the middle ground. Above this scene is a high sky, in which light cloud cover can be discerned. The Western trading stations can be seen left of the centre. From left to right the flags of these stations can be identified as those of France, the United States, Great Britain, with the Red Ensign or Red Duster, and Denmark (figure 14 and 15; Van der Poel 2007: 29-31).

The painting offers some clues about its production date. The Dutch trading station, together with the British station and the Creek hongs, burned to the ground in December 1842. As we can read in the authoritative work of Carl Crossman (1991: 436), in 1845 two imposing buildings arose on this site, in the architectural style of the Western buildings in Shanghai and Hong Kong. These white, three-story-high buildings are represented on this painting at the location of the three old stations (figure 16). It is known from Crossman (1991: 434) that in late 1847 a Protestant church was erected between the end of Hog Lane and the riverbank. The church does not appear in the scene. We may conclude, therefore, that the painting was produced shortly after 1845.

The exact conditions under which Tonco Modderman obtained this painting remain unclear. There are serious doubts about whether this mystery will ever be solved. Thorough analysis of records in the
National Archives in The Hague and the Modderman family archives in Groningen, relevant documents (letters, other correspondence, private cashbooks, wills, notary deeds, prenuptial agreements) in Amsterdam and Leiden, interviews with the composer of the family archive and one of the descendants of the first owner have all failed to yield any clues. Unfortunately, the documents are rather vague and the thoughts of Modderman himself about this painting, as well as his initial intentions regarding the commissioning and purchasing of this expensive and exceptionally large oil painting are yet to be discovered. Fortunately, there are some archival documents still to be researched, leaving a few stones unturned and offering a chance to garner new information. Nevertheless, given what we do know, we can form a cultural biography of the painting with some degree of certainty. At the same time, the ideas that formed this painting; that is, the condensation of ideas, the designation process, the material choices and the intentions in this work of art, probably tell yet another story. Does the painting communicate the artist’s ideas independently of the subject matter of the work? As Craig Clunas states in *What about Chinese art?* (1999: 127), ‘the relationship between the picture, the maker of the picture, and the subject of the picture is much more of a shared enterprise’. In addition to this statement he says, that ‘it seems impossible seeing works of art exactly as their original makers and viewers did’.

When Modderman passed away in 1858, it is likely that his daughter Louise Jacoba Modderman (1852-1875) inherited the painting. In the notary deeds related to the division of the properties and estate of Tonco Modderman, appears the description ‘various items of furniture and furnishing’ (April 7, 1871, Judge Van der Meer-de Nijs, Amsterdam) as having been left to Louise. She was married in 1871 to
Cornelis Leembruggen (1838-1905), director of the successful international textile factory Clos & Leembruggen in Leiden. When Cornelis died in 1905, his son Willem Leembruggen (1871-1925), the then director of the family’s Leiden textile factory, inherited the canvas. In the same year, Willem Leembruggen moved from the huge family house in Leiden to another much smaller house along the coast in Scheveningen; he subsequently donated the painting as a long-term loan to the National Museum of Ethnology in Leiden, where it has remained ever since. This loan to the museum clarifies something about the private valuation put upon this work of art by its owner at that time and, consequently, the constructed meaning given to the painting. Ter Keurs call this the ‘evaporation process’ in which change of meaning is a process from matter to idea.

In both cases, the upshot was the act of renouncing the painting. Instead of treating the painting as an ordinary and saleable commodity and putting it up for auction at the art market, it was considered to be a valuable item, worth keeping for future generations. Moreover, the family must have felt that selling the painting was, as Igor Kopytoff calls it ‘trading downward’ (1986: 82). This idea springs from the notion that things called ‘art’ or ‘historical objects’ are superior to the world of commerce. After the painting had been absorbed into the museum collection, it is likely that it underwent a simple restoration. Records going back to the 1960s, however, show that the painting has never been shown to the public in the regular museum display. Indeed, since the 1950s, the harbour view has sat in the racks of the museum’s storeroom, where one can only enjoy the painting by appointment.

We can only guess at the future status of this painting. As far as
the current art market on Chinese harbour views is concerned, it is clear that, in general, their financial exchangeability and saleability, their cultural biography and use value have shifted in recent decades. The biography of this particular harbour view reveals a variety of states. We know a little of the nineteenth century export painting practice in Canton and Macao. Indeed, at the moment that this expensive painting was purchased its function was to impress. Its size suggests that a successful enterprise preceded its acquisition; certainly, a business-like meaning can be given to it. We can imagine this painting hanging on the wall of a richly decorated boardroom of the Jardine Matheson Company in Canton, or in the drawing room of one of the luxurious expatriate houses near the Praya Grande in Macao. Or, if the painting was used as barter or a gift (we are reminded that we do not know the exact circumstances under which it was obtained), as part of trading negotiations, the economic value of the painting comes to the fore.

As we have seen before, the social function of these kinds of artworks was inevitable; they convey the reality of the merchants to their families at home. As soon as the social or emotional relationship of the owner with the painting is gone, its status changes. This heirloom of Tonco Modderman, which was brought into the family of her in-laws by his daughter Louise on her marriage to Cornelis Leembruggen, furnished the walls of the Leembruggen family house, before being exchanged as a long-term loan to an ethnology museum. It deserves a place on the main stage again. With reference to the passage of time, this painting is currently considered to be a collectible and antique ware. On top of the fact that it has now moved into these categories, the subject matter of the painting means that it also acts as an exemplary didactic object. After all, this skilful painting represents European and
Chinese maritime and trading history. A rich story arises from it to accrue new meaning and use value and make the painting significant to contemporary viewers. The scene depicted teaches us about aspects of history, the terms globalisation and glocalisation, politics, transport, architecture, international trade, former daily life in Canton, mutual exchanges between Euro-America, China and Asia in the nineteenth century, and the export painting-phenomenon as a whole. From an interdisciplinary perspective, along the cross-cultural lines of production, distribution and consumption, this research endeavours to argue that this artwork is an active player in a network that connects material goods, human practices and current ideas and concepts.

Further research, employing the theories of Ter Keurs about material complex and those of Appadurai and Kopytoff about the social life and cultural biography of things, is necessary in order to reveal the significant role of harbour views and ship portraits. By using the provenance of Chinese export paintings in this meaningful way, within the concept of Poole’s visual economy of images of China, a new perspective on this phenomenon emerges.

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Mrs Toos Zandvliet, Leiden & Mr Philip A. Modderman, Wassenaar: Family archives family Leembruggen, letters, private cashbooks & various correspondence.

Manuscripts Reading Room Cambridge University Library London: Letter Mr Tonco Modderman in the Jardine Matheson Archive.
Captions with the pictures

Figure 1  View on Canton, detail. Unsigned. Water colour on silk. 95x368 cm. c. 1780. Collection Rijksmuseum Amsterdam.

Figure 2  Pearl River Delta.
Figure 3  Treaty ports and foreign leased areas late 19th century.
Figure 4  View on Macao Praya Grande. Unsigned. Water colour on paper. 56x116 cm. c. 1840. Collection ABNAMRO Historical Archive Weesp.

Figure 5  Quay of Canton. Unsigned. Oil on copper. 11.9x15.5 cm. c. 1810. Collection Groninger Museum.
Figure 6    Dutch ship *De Planter of Amsterdam* at Whampoa Anchorage. Unsigned. Oil on canvas. 46x60.5 cm. 1836. Collection Maritime Museum Rotterdam.

Figure 7    View on Macao Praya Grande. Unsigned. Oil on canvas. 45x79 cm. c. 1845. Collection National Maritime Museum Amsterdam.
Figure 8  Bocca Tigris. Unsigned. Oil on coppers. 11x15 cm. c. 1790. Collection National Maritime Museum Amsterdam.

Figure 9  Whampoa Anchorage. Unsigned. Oil on canvas. 46x60 cm. c. 1845. Collection Maritime Museum Rotterdam.
Figure 10 Quay of Canton. Unsigned. Oil on canvas. 44x59 cm. c. 1825. Collection National Maritime Museum Amsterdam.

Figure 11 Material complex model from: Pieter ter Keurs, *Condensed reality*, 2006.
Figure 12    View on Canton. Unsigned. Oil on canvas. 87.5x200 cm. c. 1845-1855. Collection National Museum of Ethnology Leiden.

Figure 13    View on Canton. Youqua. Oil on canvas. 83x195 cm. c. 1840s. Collection Guangdong Provincial Museum Guangzhou.
Figure 14 View on Canton, detail with the hongs of France and America. Unsigned. Oil on canvas. 87.5x200 cm. c. 1845-1855. Collection National Museum of Ethnology Leiden.

Figure 15 View on Canton, detail with the hong of Great Britain. Unsigned. Oil on canvas. 87.5x200 cm. c. 1845-1855. Collection National Museum of Ethnology Leiden.
Figure 16  View on Canton, detail with the two new buildings from 1845. Unsigned. Oil on canvas. 87.5x200 cm. c. 1845-1855.