Up the Social Ladder: How Chinese Merchants Excelled under the New Values of Ming-Qing China

James B. Townsend
University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, jbtownsend901@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/aujh

Part of the Chinese Studies Commons, and the Medieval History Commons

Recommended Citation
DOI: 10.20429/aujh.2023.130203
Available at: https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/aujh/vol13/iss2/3

This article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Digital Commons@Georgia Southern. It has been accepted for inclusion in Armstrong Undergraduate Journal of History by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons@Georgia Southern. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@georgiasouthern.edu.
After the Mongols receded from China and made way for the return of domestic rule, the resulting Ming dynasty ushered in a new era of Chinese history. The Song dynasty, which was ruled by ethnic Han Chinese and came before the Mongols/Yuan dynasty, exhibited a greater adherence to Confucian ideals such as frugality and piety. This belief system offered a social hierarchy that placed the gentry and even the peasants above merchants, despite the occupation’s potential for profit even in the Song period. The early Ming somewhat adhered to these ideals, but slowly the interest for domestic commerce (maritime trade banned in Ming) from the refinement of products such as porcelain gradually overtook these old ideals and created a rapidly expanding consumer society.¹ This fostered a perfect environment for social mobility and spread the wealth that formerly mainly fell to the scholarly elites. This extends further once maritime trade is reimplemented through the late-Ming and Qing dynasties, and merchants

¹ Kat Tai Tam, “The Social Status and Thought of Merchants in Ming China, 1368-1644,” PhD diss. (Queen’s University, 2009), 30.
capitalize on the rising influence of commerce in China to challenge the old Confucian attitudes to secure social mobility and rival the scholar-elites.

The rising influence of merchants would be result of years of shifting mindset towards the arts, crafts, and trade/commerce. Chinese society became increasingly more favorable to the merchant class as history became further removed from the traditional thinking inspired by the rise of Confucianism during the Han dynasty. By the Song dynasty, Daoism and Buddhism began to rival Confucianism, but they were still built on conservative principles similar to Confucianism such as rejecting wealth and greed, which often were seen as directly opposite to the lifestyle of a merchant. Merchant work was dishonorable because their profit came from the labor of others and worldly excess. Regardless of its status by the ushering of the Yuan and subsequent Ming dynasty, Confucianism was the cultural framework of the political system and because of this it heavily influenced succeeding dynasties. Agriculture was viewed as the root of society, or “benye,” even though peasant farmers lived in arguably worse conditions than the merchants of pre-Ming China.

This social order was relatively unchallenged until the Ming dynasty with the exception of famous pre-Ming Chinese thinkers, who may have aligned more with the West with their views on commerce. Their writings, which superseded the opinions of standard scholar-officials, are recognized as a turning point in attitude towards commerce before the Ming took power. These thinkers, such as Mencius and Sima Qian, enforced the need for commerce to offset the extreme social disparity present in ancient China. These philosophers felt that the cooperation of agriculture and private merchants would cultivate more economic equity (the word ‘private’

---

2 Tengda Hua, Merchants, Market, and Monarchy (Palgrave Macmillan Cham, 2020), 36.
3 Hua, Merchants, Market, and Monarchy, 53.
4 Hua, Merchants, Market, and Monarchy, 57, 58.
being paramount, as formerly most/all merchant activity was heavily monitored and orchestrated by the government, limiting the actual revenue the merchants bring in throughout the process). Regulations included maintaining fixed/inflated prices and policy favorable to monopolization.

Because of all this, we can conclude that merchants were marginalized in ancient China similar to peasants in a society where the majority lower class is exploited by the tiny wealth-accumulating elites. Because the scholar-officials and high class of early China managed to check the merchant class from gaining too much power, those who engaged in commerce needed a major change in government policy to secure a higher social standing. This change came with the Ming Dynasty and can be dissected into a few impactful shifts that allotted merchants to a position to rival the scholar-elites.

**Shifting Attitudes to Merchant Work**

The end of the Yuan Dynasty brought the beginning of the Ming Dynasty, replaced by forceful overthrow and the newly emerged emperor was none other than a former peasant – Zhu Yuanzhang. This would prove to have undertones for the coming centuries of Ming and Qing rule, as social boundaries were increasingly faded due commerce becoming much more integral in Chinese society. The market and consumer society that began to rise was assisted by Ming China’s desire to stabilize prices and encourage domestic trade (which eventually led to a temporary ban on maritime trade to cultivate this internal commerce). These changing attitudes demanded more diverse sources of food, clothes, furniture, and other products that were linked to

---

5 Hua, *Merchants, Market, and Monarchy*, 60.
6 Hua, *Merchants, Market, and Monarchy*, 47.
the perception of someone’s wealth, which made the demand for merchants increase.⁸ Even in early Ming China, most merchants experienced a good amount of autonomy in their dealing, and being much less regulated by the government ensured that their commissions were not as scalped as seen in previous dynasties.⁹

The empowerment of the lower classes led to these wealthier non-elites flaunting their wealth through extravagant consumption. Before, only the elites could afford to engage in this kind of conspicuous consumption, but increasing interest among non-elites created a competition between scholar-officials and merchants, and fashion became a major part of the equation. This led to scholar-officials changing their attitudes towards consumption as well and leaving the old Confucian ideals by the wayside.¹⁰ This proved to be a very effective method for all classes in China before the Ming Dynasty, as even women began to flaunt consumption and wealth through headdresses. This didn’t shred gender inequality entirely - these were only afforded by the noblewomen - but the practice of adorning elegantly colored and designed headdresses became a symbol of a woman’s status.¹¹ This not only shows how effective conspicuous consumption was at challenging the status quo but also highlights the extent of consumption during the Ming Dynasty.

The rapid growth of consumer society that emerged during the dawn of the Ming Dynasty cleared the path to a generally more open society, where an individual’s engagement in the agriculture, crafts, and commerce were simply one’s chosen career.¹² Previously, Chinese society

---

⁸ Tam, “Social Status and Thought of Merchants in Ming China,” 27, 28.
⁹ Hua, Merchants, Market, and Monarchy, 52.
¹⁰ Tam, “Social Status and Thought of Merchants in Ming China,” 29, 32, 33.
could be divided into 4 distinct groups – scholar officials, farmers, artisans, and merchants, with their standing in society decreasing in that order featuring scholar officials at the top. These were known as the ‘four occupations’ and were the backbone of China’s economy. As the merchants as well as the artisans gained influence, scholar-officials were diminished, and this became evident in Ming society through the shifting perceptions towards consumption in the lower classes.

Maritime Trade Prohibition

Despite the rising influence of merchants in Chinese society, Ming and Qing China have a confusing history of maritime trade bans that were used to limit European encroachment and piracy. However, these policies had several underlying effects that provided advantages for Chinese merchants which historian John E. Wills Jr. refers to as the ‘maritime matrix.’ Essentially, Chinese prohibitions resulted in illegal trade operations to Europeans while also fostering China’s domestic trade through the Ming and Qing dynasties.

The maritime trade ban was arguably successful in some ways. By the beginning of the 1600s, domestic trade was flourishing between China and its tributary states with a large diversity of goods and foods because of China’s shift in attitude toward the artisan class, providing the merchants with much to sell and with little worry of external competition.

---

13 Tam, “Social Status and Thought of Merchants in Ming China,” 10.
14 Hua, Merchants, Market, and Monarchy, 194.
16 Wills, China and Maritime Europe, 1500-1800, 55.
domestic trade situation was perfectly cultivated for merchant success, but they weren’t limited to the Chinese sphere, despite what the prohibition may have said.

The maritime ban imposed by the Ming dynasty paved the way for corruption and extortion that Chinese merchants took compete advantage of. Relations between China and the Portuguese, English, and Dutch were patchy in this era, mainly because of their intentional encroachments on maritime policy. However, rules were bent, and corruption was beneficial to merchants and foreign interests. Enforcement became erratic, allowing seasoned and established Chinese merchants to consistently find ways to circumvent. The maritime trade ban enacted in China benefitted merchants in a two-fold way – increasing their prospects domestically and making their services extremely valuable to foreigners as some of the few bearers of Chinese goods on the global market. Merchants enjoyed great profits under these conditions. Their centrality in Chinese society during this period enforces their rising influence.

Government Assistance

The Ming didn’t only construct policy that benefitted those who engaged in commerce. Namely through the salt trade, salt merchants were able to develop connections with government officials who in turn were influenced to pass legislation that benefited merchant endeavors. Salt, which was a high commodity, benefitted in sales from the allowance of paper money to be used to purchase salt at the request of the merchants – a rare use for common paper money at the time.Officials spoke in interest of commerce and actively sought to eradicate problems that merchants faced, such as attempting to impeach the ‘shih-yao’ (those who possessed power and

influence and were subject to favoritism from the Emperor) who would buy large quantities of salt for resale, cutting into the salt merchants’ overall profits and dominance of salt commerce.\textsuperscript{18} At the turn of the 16\textsuperscript{th} century, this involvement increased, where merchants were able to have direct influence in government and benefitted from protection achieved from connections with officials. This included special accommodations for family and offspring of merchants to gain access to better quality schooling and allow them to take the shengyuan examinations.\textsuperscript{19}

Merchants also used their connection with officials to circumvent official policy and restrictions. In the early 1500s, many involved in commerce were beginning to understand the effectiveness of controlling the industry and the trade, which salt merchants attempted to do in the salt brewing industry despite being illegal under Chinese law.\textsuperscript{20} Friendships with officials also were the key for many merchants to beat the maritime trade policies and illegally engage with the Europeans in trade. Illegal foreign trade most often happened through the tributary states, for which officials were able to issue forged permits to merchants to engage in trade on these tributary ports.\textsuperscript{21}

The presence of special quotas and educational opportunities for merchants that arose in areas that were dominated by commerce exhibits proof for the importance of merchants in Chinese society during this time. If merchants were stagnated to their original position in Confucian society, they would have never been able to form any sort of meaningful connection with officials. Yet, in the prime of the Ming Dynasty, merchants were challenging government policy and influencing the future for their own betterment.

\textsuperscript{18} Sun, “Social and Economic Status of the Merchant Class of the Ming Dynasty: 1368-1644,” 103.
Jinshi Examination

The Shengyuan examinations that merchants were able to sneak themselves and family into were one thing, but the increase of merchant participation and success in the Jinshi examinations undoubtedly prove their newfound power in commercial Ming society. The significance of degree-holding was paramount in social perception, and the basic degree (somewhat comparable to the modern-day bachelor’s degree) was becoming overcrowded and devalued because of the accessibility of it and the ability for the rich to simply purchase a title. Through Kat Tai Tam’s analysis of the distribution of Jinshi degrees among family classifications, we can argue that merchant were afforded much greater opportunities to become Jinshi than their scholarly-elite counterparts. The four categories ascended based on previous family success in the Jinshi and sheng-yuan examinations, with Category A representing families with no production of any form of academic degree within the previous three generations. For the majority of the years from 1457 to 1580, this group dominated in terms of representation, sometimes holding more than half of the total Jinshi degrees in some years. Their share of the total pot of degrees teetered between Category C- which had family history of officeholding (scholarly-elites) and this group also included purchased titles. Both groups hovered near 50% of the total number of Jinshi during most of the years of the Ming, exemplifying the ability of merchants to rival scholars on the academic plane. This was because merchants, even of smaller status, earned plenty enough during this period to purchase their way into the Imperial Academy.

---

22 Tam, “Social Status and Thought of Merchants in Ming China,” 51.
23 Tam, “Social Status and Thought of Merchants in Ming China,” 145.
families were able to lift themselves up through merchant work summarizes the power that the merchant class gained and maintained throughout the Ming and Qing dynasties in China, forging the path to the commerce-driven society of China today.

In summary, the Chinese merchant class was able to climb significantly up the social ladder, which was facilitated by several determining factors that experienced radical change at the beginning of the Ming Dynasty. These included shifting attitudes towards the crafts and commerce, maritime trade prohibition, government assistance, and the Jinshi examination (among other educational strides for the merchant class). Without the commercialization of the Ming, modern-day China would look much different. This volatile period saw the replacement of the old guard of Confucianism with modernization and commerce, where extravagant wealth and consumption would finally find their seat in Chinese popular culture. The social mobility experienced by China in this time would become a challenge to those previously entrenched at the top, devaluing the concept of nobility because of growing preference for wealth, trade, and a removal from traditionalist ancient Chinese thought.

About the author

James Townsend is a master's student and graduate research assistant in American Studies at Kennesaw State University, as well as a Research Coordinator for the Institute of Computing and Cybersystems at Michigan Tech University. This article was written during his undergraduate studies at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga.
Bibliography


