

Zheng Xie's Price List: Painting as a Source of Income in Yangzhou

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In the twenty-fourth year of the Qianlong era, 1759, the retired-official painter Zheng Xie (1693 - 1765), better known by his style name Zheng Banqiao, wrote a price list for his paintings. In this price list he speaks openly about the sale of his own paintings, and informs his customers that they are to pay according to the size and format of the work, and that the form of payment is to be straight cash:

A large hanging scroll costs six taels, a medium-sized one is four, a small scroll costs two. Couplet and streamer are one tael a pair, while fan and album leaf are a half tael each. Those who bring gifts and food are certainly not as welcome as those who come with silver, because what you give is not necessarily what I desire. If you come with cash, my heart will be filled with joy so that paintings and calligraphy will be excellent. Gifts cause nothing but trouble, not to mention deferred payment. Furthermore, in my old age, I get easily tired, therefore, please excuse me from accompanying you gentlemen in unprofitable conversations.

The list is followed by a poem of seven-character lines which reads:

One earns more from painting bamboo than planting bamboo;
A painting six feet tall costs three thousand cash.
However much he may talk about old friendships or connections,
It is like the autumn wind blowing past my ears.

Again, Zheng stresses the cash transaction and asks to be exempt from engaging in social niceties. At the end of the list, Zheng explains his motivation for putting together such an unusual document: 'Following Monk Zhuogong's suggestion, I wrote this so as to decline visitors.'

I would like to explore in this paper some of the implications of Zheng Xie's price list. Its first and most obvious function was sheer practicality. Earlier in his life, he found it difficult to sell his calligraphy for a

living; later, as an official, he must have experienced the burden of social obligations and the trouble of coping with increasing demand. And five years after Zheng had retired from his official post, his paintings had become such sought-after items that he was compelled to invent some kind of device for self protection.

What annoyed Zheng Xie was an incident that occurred shortly after he retired. In the autumn of 1753, a visiting friend had asked him for a painting and did so in such a forceful manner that the artist felt reluctant to move his brush, and yet could not refuse the request because of a sense of obligation. The best Zheng could do was to write a mocking colophon on the picture to release his frustration.² As in the case of exchange of poetry, such a request, coming from a respected individual, could be taken as sign of appreciation or of mutual admiration. However, when this practice was pushed to the extreme it could become unwieldy and downright awkward. For instance, Dong Qichang (1555 - 1636) encountered such a situation when he served his official term in Beijing. As witnessed by the younger painter Cheng Zhengkui (*jinshi* of 1631), Dong was once visited by a high official who came unexpectedly and ordered his attendants to set up a table and paper for the artist. Grinding ink with one hand, the official literally dragged Dong to the table with another, forcing him to do a painting right on the spot.³

The practice prevailed that one could request painting and calligraphy from literati artists without paying. Unlike professional painters who treated painting as a source of income, scholar-official-painters like Zheng Xie and Dong Qichang were considered amateurs and were supposed to consider painting a leisurely activity, not a means of earning income.

On the other hand, selling one's literary work had a long tradition, especially regarding funerary inscriptions, biographical accounts, eulogies or farewell essays. Under the term *runbi*, 'moistening the brush,' the practice may have begun as early as the Han dynasty and was well established by Tang times. For writing a funeral essay for his friend, the poet Bo Juyi (772 - 846) is said to have received valuable goods such as horses and carriages, silk and wool, jade and silver. Han Yu (768 - 828) demanded high monetary payments for his writing. With his skill in prose writing, Han Xizai (902-70) accumulated substantial wealth, sufficient for him to acquire more than forty concubines. Su Shi (1036 - 1101) received enough reward from one piece of writing to pay for a friend's funeral. Zhao Mengfu (1254 - 1322) once acted as a go-between

in getting a commission for a needy friend. Tang Yin (1470 - 1523) put together a whole album of his own writing for sale, naming it *lishi*, 'profit.'⁴ In other words, the practice of 'moistening the brush' became standard in later periods and was taken as a source of income among Chinese literati. In Zheng Xie's time, the poet Yuan Mei (1716 - 1797) was well known for having received very large sums for his writings; among his patrons was the Yangzhou salt merchant Bao Zhidao (1743 - 1801). In Yuan Mei's case, his reward for a single biographical account of four pages or a tomb inscription of eight hundred characters could bring as much as one thousand taels of silver.⁵ Zhao Yi (1727 - 1814), an historian and poet of similar stature though not so flamboyant, is reported to have enriched himself by selling writing after he retired.⁶

When this practice, so well established in literary circles, was transferred to the sphere of literati painting, it acquired a negative connotation. Only artists of craftsman origin were supposed to sell their paintings - not the literati. Thus, they, as well as their biographers, were reluctant to record sales, even though the practice existed. For instance, Wen Tong (1018 - 79) is said to have been paid for his bamboo painting. Zhu Yunming (1460 - 1526) refused to do calligraphy without a fee to 'moisten his brush.'⁷ In fact, the scarcity and brevity of documents concerning this aspect of Chinese painting reflect not the rarity of sale but the negative attitude toward it. This attitude may have relaxed during the eighteenth century, when the frequency of records of this type increased and more details were revealed in contemporary writings. Nevertheless, a price list written by the artist himself and requiring monetary exchange must still have been considered eccentric at that time, especially coming from someone with Zheng's social status. He was a *jinshi* degree holder, a retired seventh-grade official, and one who had previously been known as a non-professional painter.

In eighteenth century Yangzhou, painters found more opportunities to acquire patrons for their works. While professional painters, such as Huang Shen (1687 - 1766) and Hua Yan (1682 - 1756), were allowed to sell their paintings openly and to negotiate payments in public, literati painters were subject to a different set of conventions for their transactions. For example, the popular Orthodox landscape painter Fang Shishu (1692 - 1751), who was a lower degree holder and member of an established family of Shexian in Anhui, was invited to stay in the Yangzhou salt merchant Wang Tingzhang's household as a guest of honor. That was after he had failed in the family salt business and given up attempting a career in the civil service. Host Wang not only

welcomed him as a honored guest but treated him as an equal. In addition, he invited Huang Ding (1660 - 1730) to come and paid him a thousand taels of silver to serve as painting instructor for Fang.⁸ Under this arrangement, Fang was expected to fulfill his obligation as a painter-guest, participating in social gatherings and accompanying his host in all kinds of literary activities. In this context, painting became a means of discharging the artist's obligation, a tool for him to perform his duty. Although the duties of such private employment were usually not well-defined, Fang was more than aware of his obligations. He felt, for instance, pressure from not finishing a long-overdue painting while staying in his host's household.⁹

By gaining access to the elite group of Yangzhou high society, Fang Shishu was essentially making painting a profession and a source of income. At the same time, Fang's case typifies the traditional form of private patronage, in which the relationship between painter and patron was basically built on friendship or connection and the reward was an unspoken agreement of mutual obligation. In the case of the painter Wang Hui (1632 - 1717) in the previous century, after he had stayed with Wang Shimin (1592 - 1680) and finished making copies of old paintings for his host, the nature of the reward was neither discussed in front of him nor negotiated in advance.¹⁰ Wang Hui, of course, came from a family of professional painters and held no academic degree.

Thus, if a painter with Zheng Xie's background wanted to sell his own painting, it would normally have taken the form of a private transaction, with no prior discussion or negotiation of the reward involved. Looking back at Zheng's price list from this aspect, one realizes that he was breaking the rule as a scholar-official-painter. He admitted sales of his paintings to the public and disclosed the prices, in a detailed and commercialized manner. One may credit this to his romantic and eccentric temperament and one can also argue that he was either following the literati tradition of selling writing or adopting the practice of the craftsman-painter. In any case, the existence of such a document breaks down the myth that high-minded literati took painting only as an amateur activity, a tool of self-cultivation, and a vehicle for self-expression. It also reveals the hypocrisy of those who in effect sold their paintings and yet feigned indifference toward the monetary value involved. Having made painting a source of income, Zheng Xie was essentially renouncing his social status as a retired official to become a professional painter. One may also argue that, in doing so, he was showing his respect for those who made painting their profession.

More specifically, although the art of painting was not the most desirable profession for an educated man, it nonetheless could be an alternative during times of hardship. So argues Zheng Xie in one of his famous family letters:

Calligraphy and painting are considered fine arts, but are also vulgar occupations. Is it not a vulgar thing for a man who cannot do some service to the country and improve the lives of the people to occupy himself with pen and ink for the amusement of other people?¹¹

In his opinion, the ultimate goal for an educated man should be public service. When this goal could not be maintained then one could turn to painting and calligraphy as an alternative. Private patronage, the so-called *menke* ('guest under the gate') or *qingke* ('pure guest') status in which Fang Shishu and many other eighteenth-century scholars had found themselves, was simply not a decent option. As a matter of fact, Zheng despised those who depended on their talent and served in private households in exchange for board and room as a way of life. To him, 'the talent of protégés in officials' homes and the skills of friends of leisure are good only for trimming flowers, building pavilions and terraces, and examining curios and tasting tea. They are worthy to give orders to the doorman and butlers, but what are they?'¹² To Zheng their position was essentially no higher than that of the servants.

On the whole, as the road to officialdom became narrower in later Imperial China, many talented men of letters chose private patronage, especially in Yangzhou, the resurgent cultural center in the Jiangnan area. With its unmatched wealth amassed by those of the newly-risen merchant class eager to add some cultural flavor to their riches, Yangzhou provided a nurturing environment for those who sought financial support and literary accomplishment. The extensive lists of guests following each garden and household recorded in the *Yangzhou Huafang Lu* reveal the scale and the popularity of this practice. Among them were scholars of national fame such as Li E (1692 - 1752), Quan Zuwang (1705-55) and Dai Zhen (1723-77), as well as men with special talents in landscape architecture, music, poetry and painting. Yangzhou painters such as Jin Nong (1687 - 1763) and Fang Shishu sought such patronage for given periods of time.

In retrospect, those of whom Zheng Xie was contemptuous probably served their hosts in nothing but social functions. Typically, besides being holders of lower academic degrees, such guests were equipped with the talents of writing good calligraphy, playing chess, singing *kunqu*, composing poems on a moment's notice, and drinking.¹³

Concerning scholars who associated with merchants' households, a fashionable trend of his time, Zheng expressed his disapproval in these words:

A scholar should be independent. It is all right to listen to merchants' advice concerning trivial day-to-day matters, but I have never heard that one should seek their opinions regarding literature and scholarship. Our scholars from Yangzhou, however, flock to their homes and react with undue seriousness to their pronouncements. I cannot reiterate how this has damaged their scholarly integrity and destroyed their scholarly spirit.¹⁴

Even teaching, a legitimate alternative for the educated in the Confucian system, was hardly rewarding. When Zheng Xie reviewed his own experience as a private tutor teaching beginning level students earlier in his life, he considered it a stain on his career:

A private tutor is truly low in class,
 Clinging to others' doorways for a living.
 Half full and half hungry, he is a vagrant guest;
 Without handcuff or lock, he is a prisoner with freedom.
 Fewer classes brings the complaint of laziness;
 More homework arouses the hatred of the students.
 Fortunately, I am on the way to 'blue clouds' now,
 Most of the shame can be covered by success.¹⁵

In this poem, Zheng Xie describes the pathetic life of a village teacher and his dilemma, keeping a balance between the wishful parents and their unmotivated children.

Between public service and private patronage, Zheng Xie found his place as a freelance artist. After more than ten years in an official career, he treasured the simple and enjoyable life of a painter. He no longer had to bow to his superior or beg at the doorway of the powerful, but could simply enjoy life in solitude and ease. Even though painting was not considered a high occupation, it had been a source of extra income during his early difficult years. After having held office, Zheng felt secure enough to admit this fact. In a letter dated 1745, Zheng told his brother:

Your stupid brother had no profession in youth, achieved nothing in middle age and lives in poverty in old age. I have therefore been forced to earn a living by my writing brush, but in reality it may be regarded a shame and disgrace. I hope you will have some higher ambition and not fall into my footsteps.¹⁶

To Zheng Xie, the career of a freelance artist was equal to that of a farmer. He saw plowing with one's brush in the literary field as no less decent than the plowing of a farmer in the rice field; he respected farmers and felt that they should be placed higher in the social hierarchy than the literati. 'Instead of plowing the field, I sell paintings and earn one hundred cash daily. Refinement is but an excuse, saving myself from poverty is the truth.'¹⁷

It is acceptable then for an educated man to engage himself in a lowly profession for the purpose of supporting himself and becoming independent. Sharing this attitude was another Yangzhou master, Jin Nong. When Jin Nong was involved in lantern and inkstone making, traveling around the country to seek clients for his products, he compared himself to ancient people who could not help but engage in lowly professions before making a name for themselves.¹⁸ Jin repeatedly lists groups of 'ancient sages' to support his view and comes to the conclusion:

It was not that I meant to stoop so low and demean myself. It is important for one to be independent. As long as one is supporting himself, whatever his profession may be, it is neither lowly nor disgraceful.¹⁹

Not only was Jin Nong involved in the making of handicrafts, but he also engaged in antique dealing throughout most of his life and sold his paintings in Yangzhou during his late years. In other words, painting was only one of the sources for his income. Using ancient sages and Zheng Xie as his role models, Jin made bamboo paintings into a commodity. Looking back at the age of sixty-five, Jin viewed his own life without regret and felt proud of himself for having been able to achieve self-sufficiency and financial independence.

Zheng Xie's price list, in this context, can be seen as a document intended to defend those who sell their paintings and to stress the idea of professionalism. With the price list and the ideology behind it, Zheng, in a sense, was trying to define a legitimate social status for those freelance artists whose role was far from clear within the traditional social classification of scholar, farmer, craftsman and merchant.²⁰

Notwithstanding the dramatic way Zheng Xie announced his change of social role, one wonders whether he really needed to depend on painting as a major source of income after retirement. The study of his financial situation can provide us with a better perspective. According

to his own words, Zheng's life can be divided into three stages. The first pertained to those extremely impoverished years before his advancement to the second degree in 1734, when teaching was his major source of income, supplemented by selling paintings and calligraphy. During this period, Zheng appeared to be constantly in debt. In the second stage, having served two terms as a magistrate in Shandong, his financial status improved enormously. Houses and resorts were built and several hundred *mu* of land were purchased as an investment, as was a piece of funerary property for his future use. In addition, Zheng Xie was able to publish his own writings. His retirement in the year 1754 marked the beginning of the third phase, which Zheng refers to as a time when he was comparatively poor after having been modestly rich.²¹ In other words, Zheng was on the whole financially secure, not counting the extra income he received occasionally. For instance, on a trip to Hangzhou in 1754, he gathered fifty-six taels of silver in addition to other valuable gifts from local officials. Apparently, once one had been an official, one lived the life of an official and enjoyed its privileges for the rest of one's life. Zheng Xie was thus in a financially sound position, unless he were inclined to conspicuous consumption.²² He wrote while making his retirement plans at the end of his first term of office:

There is nothing to be afraid of in being a poor official; [on the contrary,] one should be worrying about being a wealthy official. If I were to retire, I would have extra money and would be free from worry. People would not find fault with me, ghosts would not stare at me. I am not greedy, and you are in good health. If I hesitate, then I will lose the timing. It is wise to make up my mind now!²³

Taking these factors into consideration, one begins to realize that painting was not the major source of income that Zheng Xie depended on for his retired life. The price list, among other functions, served more as a gesture. The sale of paintings implied that he was to live modestly after retiring from officialdom. Retroactively, this could further serve as an indicator of his honesty and incorruptibility during his service, distinguishing him from other officials who amassed great numbers of possessions. In disclosing the need to sell his own paintings, Zheng Xie sought to disperse the rumor of his having retired rich, of hiding his properties in Shandong.

A poem inscribed on a painting dated 1765 best explains Zheng's concern:

Coming back from officialdom with two empty sleeves,
I paint fresh breeze and sell bamboo [paintings].
Why should I be worrying about defending myself with words,
Yet vainly, for not having hidden possessions all over Eastern Shandong.²⁴

The metaphors of empty sleeves and fresh breeze are conventional terms suggestive of an incorruptible official who lives in poverty after retirement. At the end of the inscription Zheng, with pride as well as sarcasm, signs himself as the 'Old man Banqiao Zheng Xie, self-complimenting and self-mocking.' In this context also, the aforementioned price list served Zheng as a self-evident document addressed to his contemporaries.

In addition to these ideological aspects, Zheng Xie's unique price list also sheds some light on the practical problem of patronage, and the identity of those 'consumers' of paintings in eighteenth-century Yangzhou. It is generally accepted that the rich salt merchants of Yangzhou were responsible for making the city a cultural center. Therefore, it is usually assumed that cultivated merchants like the two Ma, Ma Yueguan (1688 - 1755) and his younger brother Ma Yuelu (1697 - after 1766), and Jiang Chun (1724-93) were the major patrons of art in their time. However, in assessing the affordability of Zheng's painting, one realizes that his price range indicates the existence of another level of patronage, one which is neither the very rich nor the poor in Yangzhou society. It is recorded in the *Yangzhou Huafang Lu* that a very popular actor from a Suzhou theatrical troupe earned only about ten taels of silver annually,²⁵ not much more than Zheng Xie's price for a hanging scroll.

However, looking from the other end of the spectrum, at extremely wealthy merchants such as the Ma brothers, Jiang Chun, or those whose penchants for conspicuous consumption are amply described in *Yangzhou Huafang Lu*,²⁶ Zheng Xie's price list was clearly not directed at them either. Those merchants frequently donated hundreds of thousands of taels of silver to the court and local government. For instance, to finance Emperor Qianlong's trip to the South, the salt merchants of the Lianghuai district contributed almost one million taels of silver for each visit. Jiang Chun, along with several other merchants, donated 200,000 taels for the Emperor's mother's eightieth birthday in 1772.²⁷

Ma Yueguan was recorded as responsible for the total expenses of restoring a local Yangzhou school in 1734.²⁸ They also invested in antique collecting and sponsored literary activities in lavish style.²⁹ Patronage on this high level often took forms other than direct monetary payment. For instance, the two Ma brothers hosted a number of poets and scholars in their household, providing them, besides board and room, with intermittent favors of gifts, such as paying for Li E's expenses for acquiring a concubine or for Quan Zuwang's funeral. In a well-known anecdote, Jin Nong saved a merchant from embarrassment over a poorly phrased poetic line by fabricating a literary source for it. So appreciative was the latter that the next day he delivered a thousand taels of silver to his savior.³⁰ In other words, what these patrons paid in the form of gifts was usually much more than any work of art would have cost. And the value system on this level could not be measured in cash. Jin Nong's plum blossom painting dedicated to Jiang Chun on the occasion of his acquiring a concubine, now in the Freer Gallery of Art, was probably more a token marking their long relationship than a commissioned work. The fact that Jiang sponsored the publication of Jin's writing indicates that their relationship was more complicated than that between client and painter.³¹ It is also recorded that Zheng Xie and the older Ma initially met without knowing each other's identity. Mutual admiration for poetic skill led to an invitation for a brief sojourn. However, after Ma Yueguan learned of his friend's financial difficulty, he secretly sent two hundred taels of silver to Zheng's family.³² In this relationship, painting probably served Zheng more as a tool to discharge an obligation than as a source of cash; he dedicated several paintings to the Ma. Another painting, dedicated to Jiang Chun with an extensive colophon, is likely to have had the same function.³³

From scattered bits of information, one realizes that the prices Zheng Xie set for his paintings reflect a new level of clientele. Wealthy patrons like the Ma brothers and Jiang Chun played the role of promoters; the new patrons were the principal consumers of eighteenth-century Yangzhou painting. They were engaged in direct monetary transactions with the artist and purchased paintings from him with cash. In terms of economic status, they were neither people of the lower class nor were they the wealthy elite of Yangzhou; instead, they would have been his fellow officials, lower-level gentry, smaller-scale merchants and monks. This was the market to which Zheng Xie aimed his price list. The patrons were likely to remain anonymous. For them, one suspects, were produced a number of Yangzhou paintings which bore standardized subject matter, for instance, Zheng Xie's bamboo and

orchids, Jin Nong's plum blossoms and Li Shan's flowers, and which contained no dedications but repetitive, non-specific inscriptions. A series of letters by Jin Nong in the Tokyo National Museum confirms that the recipients of his commercial paintings were usually anonymous, rather than identifiable, patrons.

If we use two important indicators, wealth and education, to show the cross section of the social structure, then this anonymous group falls into the middle section, excluding the extremely wealthy at one end and the poor and illiterate at the other. It included a wide range of people who appreciated works of art or admired the artists, who had enough knowledge of reading and, most importantly, enough leisure and money to acquire cultural products of this sort. In other words, the spread of literacy in late Imperial China produced an appreciative audience for works of literary and artistic merit, painting included. In Yangzhou, intense commercial activity served as the setting for commercializing the production of painting. Similarly, the residents of Yangzhou, along with visitors to the city, provided opportunities for a group of freelance artists and stimulated their growth. In this aspect, Zheng Xie's price list underlines the popularity of literati painting in the city of Yangzhou during the middle of the Qianlong era.