Preface to the Paperback Edition

The occasion of introducing the republication of a work which first appeared over ten years ago, and which was conceived well over fifteen, gives the author the opportunity to do a number of things. (As this is a photographic reprint of the 1991 edition, it should be admitted straight off that it does not give him a chance to correct any mistakes or errors of fact in the main body of the text). He ought properly to begin by thanking the University of Hawai‘i Press, and in particular its editor Patricia Crosby, for their interest in bringing this work back into circulation and for their belief in its continuing scholarly relevance. He can also reflect on the intellectual processes and influences which led to the book’s original composition. He can gauge its relationship to the wider field of the study of Chinese art and history. He can direct the reader’s attention to new work done in the field since its first appearance and to the ways in which the conclusions of others would either support or contest the views which appear here. And finally he can indicate the extent to which the scholarship of the intervening years, whether by himself or others, would lead to a revised approach. Put bluntly, if I were to address this material again, what could or should be done differently?

Superfluous Things was written in the late 1980s in a particular intellectual context, that of the Victoria and Albert Museum’s Far Eastern Department. The burden of objects, of the inventory, the list, of sorting and display, was an important issue in my daily routine; it was not just things in the abstract which demanded my attention, but things in a very real and present sense. As I have mentioned elsewhere, it was in the course of working on an exhibition of Chinese ivory carving, held at the British Museum under the auspices of the Oriental Ceramic Society in 1984, that I first encountered the Chinese text of the Zhang wu zhi, the ‘Treatise on Superfluous Things’, by Wen Zhenheng (1585–1645), which
forms both the starting point and the central material of this study of the
culture of late Ming China. I used it then initially as ‘raw data’, scanning
through it for mention of ivory objects which could be used to support the
dating of individual pieces in the exhibition or, more subtly but no less
problematically, to provide a ‘context’ for them in a wider Ming culture.

My own formal training up to that point, largely within the reach of the
text-based discipline of sinology, had led me without much conscious
reflection to the view that the Chinese written record was the way to
understand surviving Chinese things. This was added to a dissatisfaction
with the way in which imprecise terms like ‘scholars’ taste’ were used in
both the museum and the art market to add lustre to objects presented to
a viewing or buying public. If I read what Ming connoisseurs and con-
sumers said at the time, I reasoned, I would know what they really
thought about things. Why this procedure was intellectually problematic
took a long time to dawn on me, but it did so in the arena of debate around
the museum and its purposes, which was in the mid–1980s loosely
assembled under the heading of the ‘New Museology’ (after the pattern
of the ‘New Art History’) and which elicited a range of responses
from myself and certain close colleagues. What an object from the past
‘really’ meant, whether such a position was even tenable at all, was one
of the key issues of the debate. But the central catalyst in my thinking was
(as alluded to in the original introduction reprinted below) the range of
people, ideas and writings made available to me through participation in
the museum’s then-innovative partnership with the Royal College of Art
on a masters-level degree programme in the history of design. It was
in trying to explain the relevance of Bourdieu or Foucault to students that
I was forced to address the implications of this work (until then of
little importance in my intellectual formation, which was one of a rather
strictly sinological nature). Many of the scholars—Chandra Mukerji,
Richard Goldthwaite, Jules Prown, Henry Glassie, Peter Burke, Lorna
Weatherill—whose work on issues of material culture and consumption
are cited here, passed through the course rooms as visiting speakers, and
it was in listening to them that I was led for the first time to think about
the nature of the sources as pieces of writing, rather than as mines of raw
data. I realised that sitting at the back of the room interjecting, ‘But what
about China!’ was of no value to them and limited satisfaction to me
unless I were to put some of the Chinese material into the wider debate
through publication. To an extent, therefore, this book was written for
scholars of other parts of the world who might
be willing to engage with a truly comparative perspective. The optimism,
perhaps naivety, of this appears only more striking as time goes by. With
certain notable exceptions, it remains largely standard practice among
historians of early modern (a term to which I shall return) Europe to dis-
cuss the evidence for the ‘birth of a consumer society’ in that part of the world without reference to any other. This tendency is the subject of a more recent and explicitly polemical piece of writing which revisits some of the issues in *Superfluous Things* from a comparative point of view.¹

One of the great advantages of a job as a museum curator, the position from which the book was written, was that it allowed a certain side-stepping of, or at least strategic blindness to, disciplinary boundaries. This perhaps meant that the work, gratifyingly, was of interest to people occupying a range of disciplinary positions. A casual web-based search for the range of syllabi on which the book appears therefore reveals the following incomplete list: ‘Decorative Arts of Late Imperial China’; ‘Chinese Cultural History’; ‘The Artist in Traditional China’; ‘Consumer Society’; ‘Art of China’; ‘Material Culture in the History of Modern Japan’; ‘Late Imperial and Modern Chinese History’; ‘Chinese Social History’; ‘Theories of Art in China and Japan’. The British Library subject index entry rather bizarrely reads: ‘Social classes. China. History. 20th century [sic]’. What this diversity suggests is that the book can be situated as part of a loosening of the boundaries between, in particular, art history and social history, an intellectual development which has been much commented on, and which has been seen as positive or negative according to taste. The terms ‘material culture’ and ‘visual culture’ have both played a major part in providing a sort of strategic neutral territory on which both sets of specialists can meet. The increasing willingness of historians to take these realms of culture seriously has been part of the context in which this book and a subsequent volume entitled *Pictures and Visuality in Early Modern China* (London, 1997) have circulated.²

This means that at least some of the issues raised in *Superfluous Things* have continued to interest historians of Ming China, with a number of recent surveys addressing cognate issues. The 1994 work of John Meskill on Songjiang addresses ‘the behavior and attitudes of the educated circle of one prefecture’ in what he sees as an era of late sixteenth century change to a more commercialised society.³ James Cahill’s *Painter’s Practice* (1994) put the authority of one of the founders of Western scholarship on Chinese art behind continuing investigation of the social history of Chinese art, its consumers and its practitioners.⁴ Timothy Brook’s 1998 volume, the best single-volume introduction to Ming social history, makes the links between commerce and culture explicit in its subtitle.⁵ A salutary reminder that economic historians are by no means united in their interpretation of the types of economic change which cultural historians have to take on trust is provided by the work of Richard Von Glahn and Kenneth Pomeranz, to name the authors of only two of the most significant monographs to appear since 1991.⁶ One of the most interesting developments in the field, and one only touched on sketchily in this book,
is the issue of gender and material culture, which has been opened up by
the work of Dorothy Ko, Wai-yee Li and Francesca Bray among others.7

Whether related to this book’s appearance or not, one of the trends
within scholarship in the decade or so since 1991 has been to draw atten-
tion to ways in which the claims made here for the distinctiveness of the
attitudes to material culture in the late Ming period are or are not sustain-
able. This can be done very legitimately in at least two ways: by pointing
to earlier manifestations of the relevant phenomena and by indicating that
they did not effectively end with the fall of the Ming in 1644 but rather
continued and even intensified in the succeeding Qing period. One of the
central arguments of this book, picked up by reviewers and subsequent
scholars, is that it was in the sixteenth century, above all in the later six-
teenth century, that traditional elites saw their social position threatened
and hence turned to the ‘invention of taste’ as a mechanism to stress not
just the things possessed but the manner of possessing them. This is clear-
ly an argument which is heavily indebted to the model of the late Pierre
Bourdieu, and as such could be attacked on the grounds of the critiques
of his work in general.8 But it could also be modified on the grounds of
empirical problems. Jonathan Hay among others has drawn attention to
‘earlier manifestations of aestheticism’ in China as grounds for caution
regarding the distinctiveness of the equations of cultural capital and
social status made here.9 Ankeney Weitz has shown how the operations of
the art market, the texts and the practices which make up its discourse at
a much earlier period, require a revision of thinking on this issue, the cen-
tral theme of Chapter 5 below.10 And Kathlyn Liscomb’s meticulous work
on both the detailed contents and the wider implications of the tomb of
the merchant Wang Zhen, interred in 1494 with his collection of paint-
ings, shows us in the clearest possible terms that individual members of
the merchant class were partaking of the trappings of the ‘scholarly’
lifestyle in the early Ming, well before the period in which Wen
Zhenheng lived and wrote his ‘Treatise’.11 My own more recent work on
the patronage networks in which Wen Zhenheng’s great-grandfather, Wen
Zhengming (1470–1559), enmeshed himself provide ample evidence for
merchant collectors of paintings and antiquities in the first half of the six-
teenth century.12 It would therefore be wholly wrong to insist that the
period around 1600 represents a material landscape of total novelty, or
that the kinds of anxieties about the connections between things and sta-
tus which are examined here were totally unknown at an earlier period.
However, it is often the case that single transgressive acts do not so much
challenge the rules as reinforce them. The occasional merchant with a
fine collection does not threaten traditional types of scholar-gentry hege-
mony any more than the occasional female poet challenges patriarchy;
indeed, quite the reverse. Moreover, there remains the issue of the degree
to which observers alive in the late Ming felt that something novel was
going on, and of the impulses which drove Wen Zhenheng and his contemporaries detailed here to write so much that was new about the details of what things were ‘elegant’ and what were ‘vulgar’. There is always a risk of the historian becoming the prisoner of the sources. Certainly the texts one has read always seem more compelling as evidence than those one has not. This textual positivism always makes the cultural historian, including the present author, a historian of discourse, but of a rather particular kind. This perception is sharpened in the case of the late Ming discourse of taste by Jonathan Hay in his 2001 monograph on the seventeenth-century painter Shitao, and in his discussion of ‘modernity’ as an issue in Qing China. He writes, à propos the present study:

What made taste a compelling issue in the late Ming was the realisation that social status was not, after all, immutable; anything bearing on this sudden social fluidity was a matter of wide concern. The fall of the Ming dynasty inevitably rendered such rapid changes suspect, a shift reflected in the replacement of discourses of status advancement with discourses of social stability. . . . It would be a mistake, however, to infer from this shift in discourse the substance of sociocultural change (as opposed to its interpretation) had radically changed. At best it may have slowed down; more important, by 1700 it was a much more familiar and thus less noteworthy phenomenon.13

This puts more elegantly as well as more accurately than I did in 1991 the situation which prevailed in the half-century after Wen Zhenheng starved himself to death on the Manchu conquest of Suzhou in 1645. The text as published comes dangerously close to seeing the Qing period as some sort of ‘step back’ from a fluid and socially mobile late Ming, and the reader should consequently be on guard against any such sub-text. Recent monographs by Ginger Cheng-chi Hsü and Tobie Meyer-Fong have deepened understanding of the Qing context of luxury consumption in another city of the empire, Yangzhou, and reduced still further the plausibility of a loss of interest in such matters on the part of elites.14

In revisiting an earlier publication, one becomes very aware of what has been missed. These can be specific pieces of bibliography, as for example Chuang Shen’s important 1970 article on Ming antiquarianism, a reading of which would have benefited the analysis in Chapter 4.15 Or they can be more substantive issues of methodology. The single most important of this latter category is probably the work of Roger Chartier, whom I had not yet read at the time of writing this book. Chartier’s attempt to ‘close the false debate between the objectivity of structures and the subjectivity of representations’ seems to take us a step, and a relevant step, forward.16 So too does his central idea of ‘appropriation’, and his insistence that it is wrong to see intellectual or cultural divisions as
following social boundaries, as scholarship in the Marxian tradition
(including Bourdieu) would tend to do more or less mechanically.\textsuperscript{17} It is
probably a fair criticism of this book that it is unaware of the extent to
which its two major points of reference, Bourdieu and Foucault, are ulti-
mately incompatible with each other in their purest form. Perhaps a more
nuanced body of work such as that of Chartier might point a way out of
this dilemma. I feel this to be the case, even if my more recent work has
made me wary of the term ‘representation’ as one too heavily indebted to
its Platonic roots to be safely deployed in regard to images and texts within
China.

Another major criticism concerns the historical object reified in this
book’s title as ‘Early Modern China’. In an important polemic published
electronically, the Danish scholar Søren Clausen has identified the prob-
lems inherent in this formulation, which I have now been guilty of foist-
ing on the reader twice. He shows how the term ‘early modern’ China
exists only by virtue of its relationship to the less threatening ‘late impe-
rial’ China, as the ‘glass-half-full/glass-half-empty’ pairing of historio-
graphical enquiry, and remarks of \textit{Superfluous Things} that the ‘basic
structure of its argument’ involves ‘the idea of an internally-produced
“early modern” trajectory of change in China that was somehow inter-
rupted, perhaps due to the particularities of the Qing dynasty and the cir-
cumstances of its victory.’\textsuperscript{18} He observes of \textit{Pictures and Visuality in
Early Modern China} that, \textit{pace} its title, ‘the analysis there has in fact
parted ways with the EMC historiographical strategy’, the term there
being used more as a ‘provocation’ than a description.\textsuperscript{19} This is a shrewd
analysis, and its critique is on target; writing in 2003 I would like to think
I would probably now be sensitive enough to the historiographic traps
lurking under the surface of ‘early modern China’ not to use the term so
casually. I would however wish to stick to its value as a provocation, or
rather as a conscious move within a micro-politics of scholarly publish-
ing, reading and reviewing practices. Books entitled ‘… in Ming China’
will be received in a wholly different way from those which attempt,
however crudely, to gate-crash the celebration of European exceptional-
ism which too often still passes for global history.\textsuperscript{20} By putting
\textit{Superfluous Things: Material Culture and Social Status in Early Modern
China} back into circulation, with its anachronistic title unaltered, the
University of Hawai‘i Press has made it possible for the arguments
around its validity to go on for a new body of readers.

Craig Clunas
London,
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Notes


2 See, for example, the special issue of *Asia Major*, third series, 12.1 (1999), on ‘the visual dimensions of Chinese culture’.


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19 Clausen, “Early Modern China”, p. 22.