

Superfluous Things

Material Culture and Social Status in Early Modern China

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- 34 1590-1650 - rise of "lit. of mat. cult."
- 28 = 1 elite discourse
- 53 = elite consensus about how things ought to be
- male vs. female, 男/女, 士/农, 雅/俗
- 57 female of market mkt. in luxury manufatures
- 60 trade-making = ming invents
65 - but x "red. artist" model (101 - 黄 ao labels)
- 67 #1 21 sy. of discrimination - extended to other luxury goods
- 68 collecting no means to make 美 善 正 cult. values,
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- 89 vs = judgement on an object by comparison / abstract, 书 in
isolate / abstract
- 109 hist. of forgery = hist. of dev. of luxury collectibles
- 113 singularization marked by read
- 120 tension Y. making art rtho commodity & discern. first about it
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- 73-4, 108, 162 - From 1530 on, elite status derived from let
University of Illinois Press ownership → author
Urbana and Chicago Collecting

Chapter 1: Studios and retreats

The teahouse: Build a structure of one column's span, adjacent to a mountain studio, and set therein the tea utensils. Train a boy to the exclusive service of tea, so that the whole day may be spent there in pure talk, the chilly night spent in sitting there in a dignified attitude. This is the first priority of the recluse, which cannot be dispensed with.¹

Chapter 2: Flowers and trees

Camellias: Sichuan camellias (*Camellia japonica*) and Yunnan camellias (*Camellia reticulata*) are both valuable, and the yellow ones are particularly hard to obtain. People often match them together with magnolia, since they bloom at the same season, and the white and red make a dazzling show. This is rather vulgar. There is another variety called 'Drunken imperial concubine' (*Camellia japonica var. anemoniflora*) which opens when the snow is on the ground and is particularly attractive.²

Chapter 3: Water and rocks

Lake Tai rocks: Those Lake Tai rocks which come from under water are valuable, where long years of buffeting by the waves have pierced them through and turned them into caverns and hollows, reticulated on every side. Those from the mountains are called 'dry rocks' and have a dull, unlustrious surface. They can be faked up into the water-pierced rocks and have an elegant appearance only after a number of years when the traces of the chisel have completely disappeared. The artificial mountains which are so valued in Suzhou are all made of these rocks. There are also smaller rocks which have been long submerged in the lake and which are dredged up by fishermen in their nets. These are rather like *lingbi* or *yung* rocks, but they have an inferior tone and do not ring clearly when struck.³

Chapter 4: Birds and fish

Parrots: Parrots are capable of speech and, thus, must be taught short poems and harmonious phrases. They must not be allowed to hear the chattering of the market-places, well-heads and villages, a violent

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Ideas about things

Themes in Ming connoisseurship literature

In order to convey in as short a space as possible some sense of the types of issues raised by the literature discussed in the preceding chapter, there follows a selection of extracts taken from Wen Zhenheng's *Treatise on Superfluous Things* of about 1615-20, one drawn from each of the twelve chapters into which the book is divided. I would remind the reader at this point that no claims are being made for the originality or intrinsic interest of this material as opposed to that of other contemporary texts nor for its value as a guide to Wen's personality or individual psyche. The ideas contained in what follows are in the main generally accepted commonplaces across a number of separate texts, and in several cases their wording is even identical to that found elsewhere. The entry on how to store picture scrolls is, for example, found in exactly the same words in Tu Long, who in turn derives it from Gao Lian.

The chapters all take more or less the same format, with an introductory general statement and a number of individual entries, that number ranging from ten in the case of the shortest chapter, 'Clothing and adornment', to fifty-eight in the case of the longest, 'Vessels and utensils'. A typical entry would be of about seventy Chinese characters, though some are as short as thirty, while the longest, concentrated in the 'Calligraphy and painting' chapter, can reach just over a thousand characters. An example of the introductory statement, that from the chapter on 'Tables and couches', is also given below. Some chapters also contain 'General discussions' of a number of topics. Each of the extracts translated below forms a complete entry in the text, with its own title.

assault upon the ear. Their bronze perches and feeding jars must all be elegant and curious. However, these birds, just like golden pheasants, peacocks, collared finchbills and turkeys, are all categorically things of the women's quarters; they are not among the necessities of the recluse.⁴

Chapter 5: Calligraphy and painting

Storing paintings: Paintings should be stored in caskets of fir wood, with absolutely no use of lacquer or glued paper linings internally, lest they seep out and stain the picture. In the fourth or fifth month, you should unroll every piece and give them a brief sight of the sun, then return them to their boxes at a distance of ten or so feet from ground level, to prevent foxing. Generally, when displaying pictures, they should be changed every three to five days, to prevent both fatiguing the eye and damage by dust. When taking them down, first whisk the dust off both sides of a scroll, so that the surface will remain undamaged.⁵

Chapter 6: Tables and couches

Tables and couches: When the men of old made tables and couches, although the length and width were not standardized, they were invariably antique, elegant and delightful when placed in a studio or room. There was no way in which they were not convenient, whether for sitting up, lying down or reclining. In moments of pleasant relaxation they would spread out classic or historical texts, examine works of calligraphy or painting, display ancient bronze vessels, dine or take a nap, as the furniture was suitable for all these things. The men of today make them in a manner which merely prefers carved and painted decoration to delight the vulgar eye, while the antique pieces are cast aside, causing one to sigh in deep regret.⁶

'Natural' tables [i.e. tables with a top made from one solid plank, as opposed to a framed top of several pieces]: 'Natural' tables are made of some grained wood, such as *huai* (*Pterocarpus* sp.), *teli* (*Mesua ferrea*) or *xiangnan* (*Machilus odoratissima*). The length should not exceed eight feet, nor the thickness of the top five inches. The end flanges must not be too sharp, but smooth and rounded, which is the antique pattern. Those which have stretchers between the feet at ground level, like a Japanese table, are even more curious. They

should not have four legs like the pattern for a writing table. Some are set into supports of old tree roots. Otherwise, use pieces of thick, wide timber like that of the top, hollow them out and carve them lightly with designs such as cloud scrolls and *wuyi* heads. They must not be carved with such vulgar patterns as dragons, phoenixes, flowers, and grasses. The long, narrow ones made recently are abominable.⁷

Chapter 7: Vessels and utensils

Incense burners: The bronze *ding* and *yi* vessels of the Three Ages and of the Qin and Han dynasties and those ceramic vessels of *Guan* ware, *Ge* ware, *Ding* ware, Longquan ware or Xuande ware are objects of connoisseurship and are not convenient for daily use. The most suitable are the rather larger bronze incense burners dating from the Xuande reign (1426–35), and those cast by the Jiang family in the Song dynasty are also acceptable. However, it is unacceptable to use temple burners, or those of gilt white brass, or those in the shape of pairs of fish or of elephants. Particularly to be avoided are all the vulgar forms such as the 'eight precious emblems', 'Japanese landscapes' or 'hundred nail head' burners cast by the bronze-workers of the Pan and Hu families at Yunjian, as well as the recently made ceramic burners of Jian ware or of porcelain decorated in five colours. Antique blue-green Boshan incense burners can be used sometimes, while wooden tripod burners are acceptable in the mountains, and stone ones are solely acceptable for Buddhist worship. All the rest are not worth considering. The tripod vessels of the ancients all have stands and covers, and nowadays people make these of wood, with ebony being the best, though *zitan* wood and *huai* wood (*Pterocarpus* sp.) are also acceptable. Avoid the vulgar shapes like water-caltrop flowers or mallow flowers. The knobs of these lids should be Song dynasty jade buttons, mythical animals or sea beasts, and of a size appropriate to the incense burner. Materials like agate and crystal can be used if they are old.⁸

Chapter 8: Clothing and adornment

Bed curtains: Bed curtains for the winter months should be of pongee silk or of thick cotton with purple patterns. Curtains of paper or of plain-weave, spun-silk cloth are both vulgar, while gold brocaded silk curtains and those of *bo* silk are for the women's quarters. Summer

curtains can be of banana fibre, only these are not easy to obtain. Curtains of blue fine gauze from Suzhou, or curtains of patterned towelling are also acceptable. There are those which are made of silk for painting, with landscapes or monochrome ink paintings of plum blossom on them, but these all achieve vulgarly white striving for elegance. Then there are some particularly large curtains, known as 'sky-covering curtains'. To sit or lie inside them in the summer months, with tables, couches, cupboards or shelves, is rather suitable, although not in the antique style. In the months of cold one should place curtains of cotton over the window frames of the studio, but only blue or purple can be used.⁹

Chapter 9: Boats and carriages

Small skiffs: A small skiff should be just over ten feet long and about three feet wide. It can be set on a pond or lake, sometimes speeding along in mid-current, sometimes tethered in the shade of willow trees to a meandering bank, where you can fish with a pole, enjoying the moon and channing with the breeze. Make a long awning of blue cotton, attached to the gunwales at both sides, held on two bamboo poles at the front and tied round the two stern posts at the back of the boat. One boy is enough to row it.¹⁰

Chapter 10: Placing and arrangement

Placing vases: Depending on the style of the vase, set it on a Japanese table of appropriate size, using bronze in the winter or spring, porcelain for the summer and autumn. Vases for the reception hall should be large; those for the studio should be small. Value bronze or ceramic, and hold gold and silver cheap, avoiding those with ring handles, or which come in pairs. Flowers should be emaciated and curious; they should not be over-complicated. If using a cut branch, then it must be selected to be curious and antique. If there are two, then their relative heights must be suitable. It is particularly important to have no more than one or two varieties, since too many gives the appearance of a wine shop. This does not apply to a small vase with an arrangement of autumn flowers. In placing flowers do not burn incense with the windows closed, lest the smoke blight the petals. This is particularly the case with narcissi. Nor should flowers be placed on a painting table.¹¹

Chapter 11: Vegetables and fruits

Mandarin oranges: Mandarin oranges from the region of Lake Dongting are particularly sweet, while those from Xinzhuang have no juice and need to be peeled with a knife before eating. There is another variety with an even thicker skin, called *miluo* mandarin oranges which are particularly fine. The little ones are called 'golden mandarins', and the round ones 'golden beans'.¹²

Chapter 12: Incense and teas

'Tiger Hill' and 'Heaven Pond' teas: 'Tiger Hill' is of the most refined quality, supreme throughout the empire, but unfortunately very little is produced and that is mostly commandeered by the officials. The humble mountain dweller, if he gets hold of one or two potsful, considers this a rare treat, but its flavour is in fact inferior to that of 'Cen' tea from Changxing in Zhejiang. As for 'Heaven Pond' tea, that which comes from the area around Longchi is fine, but that from Nanshan is picked very early and has a slight flavour of grass.¹³

These few brief extracts can only give an outline of the sort of ideas contained in *Treatise on Superfluous Things*, ideas which are conveyed in language which is, in the context of the total range of Ming prose, relatively direct and easy to understand, even at times suggesting something of the patterns of elite speech. (The question of the vocabulary used is discussed in more detail below.) Although selections from this and related texts have been translated before,¹⁴ and however valuable these renditions are, they suffer from the common weakness of privileging one type of object of the discourse of Ming connoisseurship at the expense of studying that discourse itself. The concentration on painting and on ceramics in the choice of what use to make of the total texts has to an extent skewed our perception of what those texts are 'about'. Subjects such as dress and food, areas where there is no contemporary connoisseurship or market for the goods, have received much less attention, certainly not as much as their positioning within the text would justify.

Looking, then, at the total picture of Ming elite material life given in Wen's *Treatise*, to what extent does it match James Watt's description of it as 'encompassing the full range of objects organised as a reflection of spiritual values'?¹⁵ What does it, in fact, include, how does it categorize, and how do those categories match those of other, differently focused, contemporary descriptions of the material world?

Clearly the objects described by Wen omit several important categories of artefact. There is no mention of any sort of productive technology, either the tools of the artisan or, more significantly, of the peasant population on whose labour Wen Zhenheng depended for his wealth. This elision of any mention of production may hardly seem surprising, but it is not inevitable. The contemporary almanacs and householders' manuals do deal with questions of production in the same way as they give instruction on how to ape the consumption patterns of the higher levels of the elite. They situate production and consumption in the same space. We may be seeing represented here one of the almost imperceptible lines of fissure within the larger ruling class, between those who could literally afford not to know where their wealth came from and those who by intimate involvement in the supervision of hired labour could be expected to be personally interested in how to effect repairs to a plough, or manufacture noodles.

The twelve categories of the *Treatise* can also be compared profitably with the much longer list of headings given in a very important but under-utilized text entitled *Tian shui bing shan lu, A Record of the Waters of Heaven Meeting the Iceberg*. Although not published until the early eighteenth century, in the context of a *congshu* collection of rare manuscript texts,¹⁶ this is a reliable account of the breakdown of elite material culture through the eyes of the lower reaches of the bureaucracy. It is, in effect, a total inventory of the property of a man named Yan Song (1480-1565; DMB, 1586-91), who as a Grand Secretary from 1542 to 1562 was one of the effective leaders of the national political elite. Having long been a focus of hostility within the official world, he was dismissed from office and died in disgrace, his entire property being forfeit, as was standard, to the state. His fame, or rather his infamy, as one of the most vilified men of the dynasty seems to have ensured the survival of the inventory made of his property long enough for it to be printed as an object of historical curiosity. (The allusion in its curious title is to the effect of imperial wrath in melting the gross bulk of Yan Song's over-mighty position.) Although it has been suggested by at least one author that it was exaggerated by his political enemies, the bland bureaucratic language in which it is written is not that of prurient excitement but rather of a dispassionate listing of seemingly inexhaustible riches.

In any case, it seems unlikely that the categorization is markedly eccentric, and this provides useful comparisons with that in the more self-conscious connoisseurship literature, both in the actual headings used and in the order (presumably reflecting some at least unconscious ranking) in which they appear. Certainly of quite major significance

is the division of the inventory into two sections, the first being of material simply absorbed into the storehouses of the Imperial Household Department and the second being of material converted by sale into its monetary value. The two groupings are as follows:

I: Material confiscated by the state

- Gold (i.e. gold in ingot form)
- Vessels and dishes of pure gold
- Silver
- Silver vessels
- Jade vessels
- Jade belts
- Belts of gold-inlaid tortoiseshell, rhinoceros horn, ivory and incense wood
- Belts, bracelets and other items of gold filigree
- Vessels, chopsticks, etc. of gold-inlaid mother of pearl, rhinoceros horn, ivory and tortoiseshell
- 'Dragon eggs' (pearls?)
- Hats, hair-nets and other items encrusted with pearls
- Pearls, precious stones and amber
- Coral, rhinoceros horn, ivory and other items
- Precious and rare vessels and bibelots
- Antique water-measures and other items
- Minerals and cinnabar
- Incense materials
- Bolts of woven, gold-patterned satin, spun silk cloth, self-patterned twill, openwork silk, gauze silk, plain weave silk, *gaji*, velvet, brocade silk, cloth of feathers, *kudzu* cloth (*pueraria hirsuta Matsumoto*) and cotton
- Male and female woven, gold-patterned silk clothing in various colours
- Antique and modern famous *qin* zithers

Antique inkstones
 Elegant writing accessories
 Screens and folding screens
 Beds inlaid with marble and mother of pearl, etc.
 Antique bronzes
 Bronze cash and notes
 'Veritable Records', Classics, Histories, Philosophy, *Belles-Lettres*
 and other books
 Rubbings of inscriptions on stone and works of calligraphy
 Antique and modern famous paintings, handscrolls and album leaves

II Material converted into its money value (the categories here have been simplified)

Textiles
 Garments
 Fan pendants
 Vessels of bronze and pewter
 Books
 Writing accessories
 Couches
 Bedding
 Sedan chairs
 Furniture
 Utensils of wood, lacquer, ceramic, etc.
 Musical instruments
 Shrines
 Weapons
 Property, further subdivided into houses, land, livestock and stored grain

The Yan Song inventory list, in that it is by its very nature an attempt to list everything in the possession of the disgraced grandee, turning him from a free, agent who might be expected to present himself through things in the terms most agreeable to his elite peer group into an essentially passive object of the state's wrath, provides a valuable cross-check on the more self-conscious presentation of Wen Zhenheng in the *Treatise on Superfluous Things*, some two generations later. Clearly, however, there are continuities. Yan Song's landed interests may of necessity have been recorded with some precision, but they are recorded last, deprived of the prominence to which the crucial nature of landholding as a source of wealth in Ming China might have been expected to entitle them. Other similarities and dissimilarities will emerge in the course of this study.

One important element of continuity, however, lies in the use of language and in the degree of precision of description used by both sources. There was clearly a Ming readership for lists of things. A third example would be the *Wan shu za ji, Miscellaneous Records of the Administration of Wanping County* of 1591, with its enumeration of every sheet of paper, stick of ink and table frontal to be used in the examination process, and its careful count of pewter as opposed to ceramic wine ewers to be used in the 'mounting' and 'dismounting' feasts offered to examiners and successful candidates.¹⁷ That such precision should exist in an inventory or a manual of bureaucratic procedure is only to be expected and is, indeed, paralleled by the language of contemporary inventories from early modern Europe, though they tend not to make as many separate categories of goods as do the compilers of the Yan Song document, being preoccupied with more broadly-defined significant groupings such as 'plate'. Only an exceptional document such as the 1607-11 inventory of the *Kunstkammer* in Prague of the Emperor Rudolf II displays the same degree of subdivision.¹⁸ However, the precise specification of dimensions (not in terms of 'large' or 'small' but of standard units of measurement), of materials, of form and of decorative schemes is common to both the literary text and the administrative document in China.

This is, thus, a language very far from the typical rhetoric of Western art history (and also of most Chinese types of writing about pictures), language which has been characterized by Michael Baxandall as 'ostensive', that is, as operating by 'showing', in a rhetorical posture of pointing out features of the representation which only receive their full degree of meaning when juxtaposed with the object itself or with an accepted reproduction of it.¹⁹ The 'descriptions' of pictures in Vasari, for example, would not enable us

to reconstruct the artefact of the painting in a situation where we lacked any surviving evidence for the visual appearance of either that object or of other objects of the same class. However, Wen Zhenheng's works not only enable us to attempt a reconstruction of certain elements of the Ming material world which no longer survive (the way displays of fruit were laid out on plates, for example, something not based on visual sources, or some types of lacquered furniture of which no examples have come down to the present); they allow us to pluck out from the poorly differentiated mass of material in museums and circulating in the art trade objects which fit his forensically exact descriptions and describe them as 'clearly the kind of thing he had in mind'.²⁰ Without this degree of precision in his descriptions, Wen Zhenheng would be of no more value to the museum/market complex now than is Sabba di Castiglione, a rather earlier Italian writer whose work touches on issues of taste which in some ways parallel that of the Chinese writer, but who employs very different types of language in sustaining the essentially social nature of distinctions between things.

The Lombard nobleman Sabba di Castiglione (1485-1554) was a relative of the better-known Baldassarre Castiglione, the author of the most widely known of all Renaissance conduct books, *The Courtier* of 1528. He is remembered by western historians principally as the author of a set of *Ricordi* of 1546, addressed to his nephew, a group of 134 short essays on subjects as diverse as choosing names for children, ingratitude, the clerical life, how children ought to behave in front of their parents, and the end of the world. The book was extremely popular in sixteenth-century Italy, going into eleven editions between 1546 and 1584. Art historians in particular have been attracted by Ricordo 109, *Cerca gli ornamenti della casa*, which gives advice on interior decoration in a manner which has some interesting points of comparison and contrast with a writer like Wen Zhenheng.²¹ What is immediately apparent is the much greater degree of imprecision involved:

Others decorate and ornate their halls with hangings of Arras and Tapetries of Flanders made with figures, foliage or greenery; rugs and moquettes from Turkey and Syria, barbarous carpets and tapestries; painted hangings by good masters; Spanish leather ingeniously wrought; others decorate them with new, fantastic and bizarre, but ingenious, things from Levant or Germany, subtle inventiveness of beautiful and artistic things. I favour and praise all these ornaments, too, because they are a sign of judgement, culture, education and distinction . . .²²

Here, there is a heavy reliance on generalities, 'ingeniously wrought', 'beautiful and artistic things', as against Wen's precision of colour, form, decoration and dimensions. Ricordo 13, *Cerca il vestire*, is similarly restricted to generalities on the appropriate dress of a gentleman. And it must be remembered that the *Ricordi* are in no way devoted exclusively to material culture in the manner of Wen's *Treatise*. The oft-quoted remarks on ornamenting the house are placed between an entry, *Cerca la cupidità delle ricchezze*, and one entitled *Cerca il tiranno*, both classic humanist topics which are far removed from a concern with the things of the material world.

The unwillingness to descend to specifics in the matter of material goods is a constant of early modern European conduct books. Sabba di Castiglione has been referred to so often because he is unusually detailed in this respect. There is nothing comparable in the *Civil Conversation* of Stefano Guazzo, another international best-seller, written in 1574 and published in an English edition in 1586.²³ Guazzo is concerned with what makes 'gentrie' or a 'gentleman' in terms of the distinction between blood alone and blood plus 'virtue'. Wealth and conspicuous consumption are an important part of 'liberality' and can add to the esteem in which a gentleman is held, but there is no guidance offered as to what exactly wealth is to be spent on. Later, when deploring the growing tendency of rich peasants to attire themselves unsuitably like gentlemen, to the degree where 'a man can discern no difference in estates', he recommends that the lower orders should be forced 'to wear such apparel as may be at least different from gentlemen, if they will needs have it as costly'. His readership is presumed to be acquainted with the dress of a gentleman, without the need for specifics. A native English example of the genre, Henry Peacham's *Compliat Gentleman* of 1622 (and, thus, closely contemporary with the *Treatise on Superfluous Things*) is also willing to allude but not to describe. His chapter 15, 'Of reputation and carriage' includes advice on clothing, but again only in terms of the broadest generalities.²⁴ His language elsewhere, like that of all early modern European writing on the question of luxury consumption, is that of morality and of humanist idealism and not in any way comparable to the material precision of the Chinese writings.

This precision of language, good enough to serve as an identifying label for surviving types of object after some four hundred years, may partly be the answer to a question which has never, to my knowledge, been posed. Why is a book about things, like the *Treatise on Superfluous Things* or the relevant sections of *Eight Discourses on the Art of Living*, not illustrated? Not only was the technology easily available to publishers (illustration in wood block was essentially the same

technology as that used to print the text of a book), but the period of the late sixteenth – nearly seventeenth century was one which saw a massive increase in the publication of illustrated books of all kinds; not just literary works like novels, plays and collected volumes of poetry, but reprints of the major Song treatises on archaeology, religious works and books of popular moral instruction, books on geography and travel, volumes of reproductions of paintings, works on technology and medicine, botany and natural history, and accounts of foreign peoples are just some of the categories produced.²⁵

Gao Lian's *Eight Discourses* does, in fact, contain a number of illustrated pages, which serve in the treatise on preventative medicine to show various therapeutic exercises akin to yoga (Plate 1). There are also a couple of illustrated pages showing how to pack a travelling case. But there is no use of pictures when it comes to the sections on contemporary material culture, such as furniture, or on antiquities. The obstacles to the use of such pictures can only have been ideological, rather than technical, since there exists one rather curious text from a slightly earlier period which does juxtapose pictures of things, some of them contemporary, with written commentary on them. This is *Shi you tu zan*, *Illustrated Praises of my Ten Friends*, written towards the end of his life by the Suzhou author Gu Yuanqing (1487–1565; MRZJ, 949), contained in the *congshu*, *Tales Within a City Wall*, *Continued*, not published until the last decades of the Ming dynasty.²⁶ It describes the following ten possessions, listed as the author's inseparable 'friends': a slate table-screen, an 'ancient pottery vessel', a jade-handled whisk, a speckled-bamboo couch, a gourd water vessel, an iron *ruyi* (a sort of ornamental sceptre, but with no ritual significance), a bamboo flute, a bamboo staff, a jade chime and an inkstone. The picture of each item is followed by a brief and simple description, incorporating precise measurements (the couch is 1 ft 2 in off the floor, 7 ft long by 3 ft 5 in wide), then by a more florid and literary 'encomium' (*zan*), which is quite unlike anything seen later in Gao Lian or Wen Zhenheng. This unusual text stands on its own without initiators, as a hybrid of the very old tradition of 'poems celebrating objects' (*yong wu shi*) and the developing late Ming interest in a precise verbal fixing of the material world.

Both the meticulous and archetypally bureaucratic listing of object after object found in the Yan Song inventory and the more mannered phrasing of Wen's *Treatise* are structurally equivalent in one crucially important way, which is quite distinct from Gu Yuanqing's celebration of ten favourite possessions. They are not so much about things as entities in themselves, but as entities in opposition to other entities. On the linguistic model, they do not so much provide us with a

complete grammar of Ming objects as with a number of significant features which allowed one utterance to be distinguished from another by contemporaries. Wen Zhenheng in particular rarely introduces an object except to state what it is *not*. Here in the pre-industrial world of goods of the Ming elite is a clear parallel to the situation described by Adrian Forty as intrinsic to the more complex world of the nineteenth century in Europe and America:

To look at the ranges of goods illustrated in the catalogues of nineteenth-century manufacturers . . . is to look at a representation of society . . . For, like any representation, be it in the form of painting, literature or film, this strange and cumbersome masterpiece created by manufacturing industry not only corresponded to what was seen to exist, but, without recourse to language, metaphor or symbolism, also showed people social boundaries and distinctions that might otherwise have been invisible to them, or to which they might have been indifferent . . . to know the range of different designs was to know an image of society.²⁷

With the always crucial caveat that, in the case of Ming China the overwhelming majority of the population concerned itself not with choices about consumption but about whether it could consume enough of the necessities of life to avoid, death, there is nothing in Forty's formulation which is not applicable to the minority of the population living above subsistence level, that minority itself being the subject of further very complex social stratification and differentiated access to power. That differentiation of access was made manifest by differentiated choices in the range of commodities to be consumed. Forty, however, seems to me to place too much emphasis on the role of manufacturing as against consumption, particularly as his basic thesis holds up equally well in the context of China, where the accumulation of political, economic and cultural power on the part of elite consumers far outweighed the resources of the relatively weak producers, un-centralized, unorganized and relatively unconscious in their responses to the demands made on them by their customers, as we shall see. The distinctions which Wen Zhenheng enunciates are not those made manifest to him by the actions of producers of clothes, or tables, or incense burners. Rather they are the product of elite consensus about the way 'things ought to be', both in the precise and the figurative senses. It is the separate grounds, the different poles of opposition along which the configurations of objects were negotiated, on which Wen and his contemporaries made these distinctions that will form the subject of the remainder of this chapter.

One of these poles of opposition, present as much by virtue of its deliberate exclusion as by and explicit statement, is male/female. Adrian Forty again has highlighted this as one of the more important cleavages through society made manifest by different sorts of goods in Europe from the nineteenth century.²⁸ It seems to be the case, however, that prior to this period of European history this social distinction was not one which was constantly manifested through society in the form of different male and female material cultures, except in the case of garments, and of types of object only ever used by one or the other sex, such as weapons or cosmetics. There does not appear, in seventeenth-century Italy, for example, to have been such a thing as a 'woman's chair' or 'man's cup'. (The point is not that such differentiation did not exist, but that it was not raised to the level of conscious pronouncement). However, as we see above in the case of 'Parrots' and and 'Bed curtains', Wen Zhenheng is prepared to state explicitly that certain types of object, or certain sub-types of object, defined either by material, decoration or both are not suitable for use by men at all.

This of itself may not seem very startling. Ming China was a society strictly segregated on gender lines, a segregation which extended even to close blood relations in the same family. Those whose dwellings were large enough to allow it divided them strictly into a male part of the house (at the front) and female quarters, with very little crossing of the boundaries between except by the male master of the house. This crossing of boundaries, potentially dangerous in its mingling of the male *yang* and female *yin* principles, would most probably occur largely in the private quarters of the women, where sexual relations would be likely to take place. Thus, it seems powerfully symbolic that most of Wen Zhenheng's anxieties about possible upsets to the natural order of things, through male misappropriation of objects and types of material or decoration intended for women, should be focused on the bed or the bedroom.

In addition to his comments on bed curtains already quoted, his chapter on furniture contains a differentiation of the type of beds more suitable for women, while another more general entry on 'Bed-rooms' in the 'Placing and Arrangement' chapter explains the necessity for great simplicity and plainness there, lest the slightest touch of 'pretiness' produce an effect more suitable to a woman's room. Balustrading carved with an openwork pattern which we know as the *swastika* (a common Ming decorative motif) was suitable only for women's quarters, being not very 'antique or elegant'.²⁹ He does not manifest these sort of worries with regard to, for example, dress. There, he simply disregards the clothing of women altogether, and the

general 'Clothing and adornment' stands, by a process also observable in Western writing, for the specific 'Men's clothing and adornment'. No fear of the female is felt here, where boundaries are clear cut.

There is, however, evidence from sources other than Wen Zhenheng that the boundary between men's things and women's things was felt more widely than his concentration on the area of greatest danger would suggest. A much-quoted entry in *Essential Criteria of Antiquities* uses it in its description of what it calls 'Syrian ware', the copper vessels decorated in cloisonné enamelling which were at the time of writing a recent import from Islamic west Asia: 'I have seen pieces such as incense-burners, flower vases, boxes and cups, which are appropriate for use [only] in a woman's apartment, and would be quite out of place in a scholar's studio'.³⁰ If we look more broadly, there are further suggestions that the sexual segregation made concrete in the upper-class dwelling by a division into men's and women's parts of the house was echoed by a distinction between men's and women's things. This is often clear as much by omission as by statement. For example, Wen Zhenheng's chapter on furniture, when dealing with storage, is interested only in the storage of books and works of art. Any other form of cupboard or coffer (and we know quite a lot about the various types in existence in his day from the numerous surviving examples) is simply not worthy of notice, as the sole concern of women and servants.

Similarly, it seems likely, on the basis of graphic rather than textual evidence, that women never sat on the typical high-backed armchairs of the period when men were present. This was not an absolute rule, but a distinction based on precedence, as the most important or aged woman in an all-female grouping would make use of such a seat in the absence of any men. One particular type of low-backed armchair may, as the etymology of its Chinese name suggests, have been destined specifically for the use of women. There are even more tantalizing hints of a separate women's attitude to things in the case of furniture, where items such as chests of clothing, and more particularly the large canopied beds which dominated the women's quarters of the house, formed part of a woman's dowry, publicly carried through the streets to her intended husband's home at marriage. These pieces of furniture remained the woman's property, available to be removed by her on any dissolution of the marriage.³¹ A woman's bed acted very much as a symbol of her status within the household, its quality serving to differentiate primary from secondary consorts within the polygamous family unit.

Decoration, too, could act as a way of marking some things off as the exclusive provenance of women. Despite the existence of a number

of famous female scholars, poets and artists at the period – one of the most famous of all, Wen Shu (1595–1634) was a cousin of Wen Zhenheng³² – the more general position appears to have been that women even in wealthy families were not taught to read, or at best had only a little functional literacy which still denied them access to the more prestigious written traditions. If this was in fact the case, then the non-verbal methods of presenting to women paradigms of behaviour and expressions of cultural norms deemed appropriate to their subordinate position assume much greater importance, beside better-studied ways of inculcating these norms, principally the theatre, other performing arts, such as those provided by hired storytellers, and the practice of religious cults.³³

Judging by the evidence of surviving Ming artefacts, women were constantly exposed to objects which carried messages reinforcing the view that their principal social function was as the bearers of male children who could carry on their husbands' ancestral lines. Textiles decorated with the motif of the 'Hundred Boys' have been found in the tomb of the principal wife of the Wanli Emperor (r. 1576–1620), showing a degree of consensus right up to the highest levels of society about what a woman should aim for. Plants symbolic of fecundity, such as the lichee, decorated the cosmetic boxes used by women, while a particular kind of lacquer box, employed probably for the exchange of horoscopes between the bride's and the groom's family in the course of marriage negotiations, was invariably decorated with the same few scenes (anecdotes drawn from history and literature), at least one of which was a classic instance of the appropriate ritual formality ideally prevailing between man and wife.³⁴ This was, indeed, a material culture for the women of the Ming period, but it cannot be taken for a material culture of Ming women, whose distinctive cultural patterns are submerged in the silence to which their subordinate status consigned them.

To switch rather arbitrarily from a distinction between things on the basis of the gender of their ultimate users to one based on the conditions of their production, one of the most prominent seen in the literature is that of geography, of where a thing was made. This is a criterion on which to rank objects which had a particularly venerable pedigree in China, going back at least as far as the late Bronze Age text, the fifth-century BC *Tribute of Yu* chapter of the even older *Classic of Documents* purporting to describe the particular products, both raw and manufactured, of the nine divisions of the empire presented by his subjects to the mythical emperor Yu the Great, tamer of the primeval flood and inventor of the crucial technology of water management. The enumeration of the 'special products' (*te chan*) or

'famous products' (*ming chan*) of the different parts of China remained a feature of official historiography right through the early imperial period, enjoying a prominent place in the dynastic histories and in other sorts of quasi-official writing. Several of the famous descriptions written in the thirteenth century around the fall of the Southern Song capital and commercial centre of Lin'an, the modern Hangzhou, lovingly list the production centres for the best teas, silks or other luxuries.

Wen Zhenheng's entry on types of tea comes from within this tradition of writing about 'famous products'. However, he also displays to the fullest possible extent something which was only beginning in the Song period, but which had reached an advanced stage of development by the sixteenth century, and which has attracted a great deal of attention on the part of Marxist scholars working from the 'sprouts of capitalism' hypothesis, and that is the formation of a national market in luxury manufactures. The networks of commercial activity, but also of commercial information, had by his day reached the point where products of a particular locality could enjoy a reputation on an empire-wide (which is to say a continental) scale. Merchant networks centred on Anhui, south of the Yangtze, and on Shanxi province in north-central China were, for example, able to circulate the products of the great ceramic kilns of the town of Jingdezhen throughout the empire and beyond. Merchant handbooks were published listing the particular specialities of each province, in conventionalized terms like 'an abundance of bamboo, wood, lacquer and tallow is concentrated in western Zhejiang', or of Jiangxi 'the region abounds in bamboo, arrows, gold, lacquer, copper and tin', together with hints on the best markets for these products.³⁵

Thus, it is hardly surprising that we get from such a sophisticated consumer as Wen Zhenheng statements like 'Hangzhou brushes are best for painting', and the assertion that the best contemporary paper is made in Anhui province.³⁶ In the case of the carved stones used for grinding cakes of ink to manufacture the essential medium of writing and painting, Wen lists a great number of localities specializing in different types of stone, from eight separate Ming provinces ranging from nearby Zhejiang to Guangdong in the deep south and Gansu in the remote north-west of the country. As a type of luxury of particular interest to the scholar class (and, thus, by extension to all who imitated their lifestyle), inkstones were particularly finely differentiated as to place of manufacture, but all types were equally available through the workings of the commercial process in the late Ming. They were available not only to the very wealthy group of Suzhou families of whom Wen Zhenheng was a representative but also