

Study of the Urban Image of Guangzhou in Late Qing Dynasty Painting

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Abstract:

The surviving painting works from the late Qing Dynasty provide crucial evidence for studying the urban image of Guangzhou and the history of Lingnan. This paper uses export paintings as a case study to examine the urban image of Guangzhou depicted in late Qing Dynasty artworks. By analyzing export paintings, this study explores the representation of the urban environment, economic trade levels, lifestyle, and folklore of Guangzhou as portrayed in these artworks.

Keywords:

Late Qing Dynasty Paintings, Export Paintings, Urban Image

1. Introduction

The urban image encompasses the built environment of the city (such as urban architecture), the economic level, lifestyle, and folklore of the city. It represents the essence of the city and provides fundamental, profound, and lasting support for its development.

In studying the urban image of Guangzhou as depicted in late Qing Dynasty paintings, it is essential to mention export paintings. In the 21st year of the Qianlong reign, Guangzhou became the only port in China open to foreign trade. The city developed into a hub for Westerners and a trade zone centered around the Thirteen Factories, showcasing a thriving Sino-Western trade scene. At that time, a large number of paintings depicting the scenery of Guangzhou and China were exported to Europe and America. These artworks, known as export paintings, were a primary means for Westerners to understand China before the invention of photography. The existence of numerous export paintings representing the city of Guangzhou provides a basis for studying the urban image of Guangzhou and the history of Lingnan. This paper uses export paintings as a case study to explore the urban image of Guangzhou in late Qing Dynasty artworks, delving into the origins, evolution, and prospects of Guangzhou's culture, while also contributing to the preservation and dissemination of cultural heritage.

2. The Built Environment of Guangzhou

The built environment of a city typically refers to the artificial external environment within the city, including man-made terrain, water bodies, greenery, open spaces, and architectural spaces. Export paintings, known for their rich content and diverse subjects, often depict various aspects of Guangzhou's built environment, such as ports, buildings, and garden landscapes.

Starting from the mid-18th century, many Chinese and foreign artists created works based on the Guangzhou port, providing detailed depictions of the port, the city of Guangzhou, and the landscapes along the Pearl River. There are three main formats of these artworks: single paintings, series of four to ten segmented paintings, and long scrolls. Among these, long scroll paintings that combine Western painting techniques with traditional Chinese scroll formats are relatively rare. Currently, seven known long scroll paintings exist. The most prominent and detailed of these is the “Guangzhou Port and the City of Guangzhou” painting, which is not only the largest in size but also the most exquisitely crafted and renowned. Although created earlier, this long scroll painting is considered an exceptionally fine piece, often referred to as the “Qingming Scroll of Guangzhou.” It vividly and accurately represents the bustling scene of Guangzhou's trade port, which extended approximately eight to nine kilometers at that time.

A later example is a long scroll painting housed in the Peabody Essex Museum in the United States, created in 1860. This painting depicts the landscape from the Thirteen Factories area to Huangpu along the Pearl River. Both early and late scroll paintings thoroughly present the built environment of Guangzhou during the late Qing Dynasty. These artworks reveal changes in the city's layout, such as the Thirteen Factories, Shamian Island, and Huangsha Avenue, and document Guangzhou's foreign trade history, showcasing the city's deep economic and trade heritage.

Among the buildings depicted in export paintings, notable works include depictions of the “Nanhai Academy,” which is related to the educational history of Guangzhou. The academy was an official school during the Qing Dynasty, holding a prestigious academic and educational status. Scholarly works on historical architecture rarely mention the academy, and the remaining traditional academy buildings are now extremely scarce. Historical records indicate that there were three academies in Guangzhou during the Qing Dynasty: the Guangzhou Academy, the Nanhai Academy, and the Panyu Academy, all tasked with perpetuating Confucian culture and implementing ritual and music education. The Nanhai Academy, established by the ancient Nanhai County government, produced numerous talents for Guangdong, including notable figures such as the Ming Dynasty scholar Lun Wenxiu and the Qing Dynasty's wealthiest man, Wu Bingjian.

The export paintings of the Nanhai Academy highlight its most prominent feature: the towering, arch-like red brick “Lingxing Gate.” Through this gate, stone steps lead to the Pan Pools on either side, which are crescent-shaped. Beyond the pools, directly in front of the Lingxing Gate, stands the Dacheng Hall. Flanking the Dacheng Hall are green-roofed buildings. This depiction provides viewers a glimpse of the Nanhai Academy's appearance and conveys the scholarly atmosphere and rich cultural memory of Guangzhou. Thus, the architectural representations of the academy in export paintings are significant for studying the educational and architectural history of Guangzhou and its cultural image.

Lingnan gardens are a crucial part of Lingnan culture and help uncover the local characteristics of Guangzhou's built environment. During the Qing Dynasty, garden construction began in earnest, with private gardens becoming increasingly sophisticated. Lingnan gardens primarily refer to those in the Pearl River Delta. From the 22nd year of the Qianlong reign to the period of the Five Ports Trade, Guangzhou experienced a boom in private gardens built by local merchants, known as "merchant gardens." These gardens represent the pinnacle of Lingnan garden design and influenced European garden styles. The Pan Family Garden is one such representative of merchant gardens.

The export painting series "Gardens and Residences" includes two paintings depicting the private garden of Pan Youdu. Although the garden is less grandiose compared to northern gardens, it is refined and functional, integrating both practical living needs and aesthetic enjoyment. The painting shows that Pan Youdu's garden was designed to suit the Lingnan climate, enclosed by buildings to shield against wind and heat. The garden features a pavilion with a hanging mountain structure, surrounded by rectangular pools and flower beds containing numerous small bonsai and plants that can be rearranged according to the weather. This arrangement is also visible in the painting of Liu Jinshi's residence from the garden series. The flower bed's outer edge is paved with small lawns, and the garden paths are laid with cobblestones, combining elegance with practicality and showcasing the distinctive Lingnan garden characteristics of Guangzhou.

3. The Economic Level of Guangzhou

Guangzhou has a long history of economic and trade significance, serving as a crucial node on the Maritime Silk Road since the Qin and Han dynasties and establishing itself as the leading trade port in the East. By the Qing Dynasty, Guangzhou's foreign trade reached new heights, especially with the establishment of the Thirteen Factories, making the city the Qing government's exclusive "special zone" for trade with Europe and America. During this period, Guangzhou not only supported the growth and development of modern Chinese commercial economy but also showcased its important position in global trade. In the modern era, the Canton Fair, held biannually in spring and autumn since 1957, has become a significant platform for Guangzhou's foreign trade. This highlights Guangzhou's long-standing prominence in global trade and reinforces its image as a "thousand-year commercial hub."

The export paintings titled "Scenes of Guangzhou Street Markets and Trades" realistically portray the thriving economic and trade activities in Guangzhou during the Qing Dynasty. This series, presented in album format, includes several known collections: 60 paintings purchased by Mason in Guangzhou in 1789; over 100 paintings from 1790 held by the John Rylands Library at the University of Manchester; 100 paintings in the Victoria and Albert Museum; 100 paintings in the Peabody Essex Museum; and 61 paintings in the British Library. Many of these street market paintings share similar compositions and content, leading scholars to believe they originated from the same batch of originals, possibly created by "Pu Gua." Even into the 1860s, some of these market scenes continued to use these original templates. The "Scenes of Guangzhou Street Markets and Trades" depict numerous industries, including manufacturing, retail shops, and street vendors, such as bamboo basket makers, clogs, oil lamps, tobacco sellers, scales, rain shelters, steamed wine, flour mills, tobacco, iron pots, lanterns, traditional shoes, glass shops, and pork butchers.

The “Seventy-Two Trades” of late Qing Guangzhou, unlike other historical periods where industry numbers were approximate, actually included seventy-two taxable trades. This term later became a general reference for Guangzhou’s industrial and commercial sectors. The fame of Guangzhou’s “trades” was due to their remarkable prosperity and the presence of trade regulations and guilds. Additionally, by this time, the Guangdong region had institutions resembling modern banks, known as “silver trades,” further demonstrating the city’s economic development and commercial prosperity, as well as its deep-rooted trade heritage.

“Chinese Commodity Trade in Watercolors of 1825” is a collection of independent watercolors that likely depict the local handicrafts and commercial conditions observed by Western and Chinese traders in Guangzhou around 1825. Most of these watercolors are housed in the Peabody Essex Museum. Among them, sixteen portray various shops in Guangzhou, reflecting the diversity and richness of local trade at the time. These include gold and silversmiths, silk shops, mat shops, and bamboo ware shops selling Chinese handicrafts; lantern shops, incense shops, and tinware shops showcasing Chinese religious customs; and tea shops, traditional medicine shops, and porcelain shops representing Chinese cultural heritage. These shops highlighted the unique allure of Chinese culture to Western customers.

Additionally, paintings of Western-style shops, clock shops, furniture shops, and ready-to-wear clothing shops reveal the influence of foreign trade on the styles of items sold in Guangzhou. Western-style clocks, tables, chairs, and clothing are prominently displayed, indicating their popularity among customers at the time. The export paintings of Guangzhou’s commerce illustrate how the city, as a southern gateway of China, leveraged its geographical advantages. From the ancient Silk Road to modern global trade centers, Guangzhou has always been a crucial node in commerce and economic trade. The development of industry and manufacturing provided a solid foundation for the city’s economic growth, while the flourishing of foreign exchanges and trade injected vitality into Guangzhou’s economy and urban development.

4. Lifestyle and Customs of Guangzhou

The lifestyle and customs of Guangzhou are key components of the city's image. Export paintings capture countless traditional scenes of life in Guangzhou, reflecting the lifestyles and customs that 19th-century export painters favored. These paintings catered to the intense curiosity of Western buyers about Chinese culture. Through Qing Dynasty export paintings, one can gain insight into the daily life and traditional culture of Guangzhou during this period and explore the enduring symbols of the city’s heritage.

Export paintings not only depict the lives of ordinary citizens in Qing Dynasty Guangzhou, such as the unique fishing communities of the area, but also capture the refined pleasures of the city’s elite. For example, “The Fisherwoman on a Sampan,” painted by Youchang in the 1870s and influenced by George Chinnery, uses dramatic light and shadow to portray two fisherwomen rowing on the Pearl River. The painting features realistic movement and meticulous detail of the fishing boat.

By the late 18th century, export paintings also began to appear on transparent glass panels, with urban scenes of Guangzhou being a common subject in 19th-century glass paintings. Works such as “Ladies Playing Chess” and “Figures in the Garden” vividly depict scenes of leisure among wealthy families in Guangzhou. Both paintings

feature distinctive Lingnan garden architecture and floral arrangements. The figures in these artworks are shown enjoying activities such as playing chess or drinking tea, contrasting sharply with the laborious life of the fisherwomen and highlighting the leisurely and comfortable lifestyle of Guangzhou's affluent families at the time.



Figure 1. *"Ladies Playing Chess" Glass Painting, Anonymous, Early 19th Century, Oil Paint on Back of Glass, Guangdong Provincial Museum Collection.*

Export paintings are typically dominated by oil paintings, watercolors, and gouaches, with monochromatic line drawings being relatively rare. "The New Year Parade" is a work by the renowned Guangzhou export painter Shun Gua. This piece meticulously depicts the lively scenes of New Year celebrations in Guangzhou using the bai-miao (fine-line) technique. The painting features over a hundred people, with clear depictions of their clothing, lanterns, and musical instruments, demonstrating fine craftsmanship. The work is presented in the traditional Chinese handscroll format, which is uncommon in export paintings. The scroll is outlined in lines and lacks color, possibly representing an early draft by the artist.

Many export paintings are created on paper made from tung oil, including watercolors and gouaches. These works cover a wide range of subjects, often illustrating traditional customs and festivals of Guangzhou. Examples include "Spring Plowing Ceremony," "Lantern Festival," and "Life Rituals."

"Spring Plowing Ceremony" depicts the celebration of the "Spring Plowing Festival," a traditional agricultural holiday, showcasing the grand spring plowing rituals. "Lantern Festival" illustrates the Lantern Festival held on the 15th day of the lunar new year, also known as "Spring Color." It displays exquisite folk crafts and various performing arts, reflecting people's love for life, labor, and hopes for a bountiful harvest in the coming year. "Life Rituals" portrays the life cycle of a boy from birth to death, including scenes such as birth, breastfeeding, the first month, education, passing the imperial examinations, returning home to worship ancestors, taking up new office, returning to the hometown with imperial permission, dividing family property, celebrating birthdays, and departing from this world.

These realistic artworks provide a valuable visual record of the social life in Guangzhou during the 18th and 19th centuries, serving as precious materials for studying Guangdong's folklore.

5. The Legacy of Guangzhou's Urban Image Through Late Qing Artworks

In the context of contemporary society, the preservation and dissemination of Guangzhou's urban culture can be approached from multiple perspectives. From the historical perspective, export paintings offer a realistic depiction of the cultural and environmental aspects of Qing Dynasty Guangzhou, preserving a wealth of historical

information with high archival value. These paintings are particularly significant for archival research, exhibitions, and historical and cultural studies, providing a basis for historical material exhibitions.

From the economic perspective, the image of Guangzhou and the export of Lingnan culture should align with contemporary industrial products. For instance, elements from export paintings could be integrated into traditional brands of time-honored enterprises, thus advancing both cultural and industrial promotion simultaneously.

From the perspective of urban art and culture, studying export paintings provides a theoretical foundation for art creation related to Guangzhou and for organizing high-quality art and cultural history exhibitions in the city. This research translates into practical applications through artistic works, helping to spread local culture.

6. Conclusions

In summary, the urban image represents a city's intrinsic historical depth and external characteristics, encompassing its overall traits and style. Export paintings are not only artworks but also witnesses to Guangzhou's history, disseminators of its culture, reflections of its economy, and valuable resources for education and academic research. Therefore, using late Qing export paintings as a starting point to explore Guangzhou's urban image and local characteristics, and to discuss the social value and developmental prospects of Guangzhou's urban culture in contemporary contexts, is a key approach for preserving and promoting Guangzhou's culture, enhancing the influence of Lingnan culture, and boosting cultural confidence.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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