

The *Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting*
A Reevaluation of the First Edition



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Art History 515
Professor Bogel
Fall, 2010

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“All my life I have loved landscape painting, but it has been the pleasure of looking at other people’s work, for I myself cannot paint.”¹

Thus wrote Li Yu, the Qing dramatist and playwright, who composed the introduction to part I of the *Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting* (henceforth *Mustard Seed Manual*) published in 1679.² Issued in twenty editions, this work is recognized by many scholars as China’s preeminent painting handbook.³ This notion might initially lead one to assume that the manual was widely read by and circulated among the Chinese public in varying levels of early Qing society. However, a closer examination of the aesthetic qualities of extant prints from the first edition of the *Mustard Seed Manual*, the nature of commercial book publications in the Qing, and the social environment of this period prompts one to ask who *was* the primary audience for the first edition of the *Mustard Seed Manual*? What significance did the manual have for its owners and readers in the early years of its publication?⁴

The *Mustard Seed Manual* was first published in late winter of the eighteenth year of the Emperor Kangxi’s reign. The story, however, begins earlier that winter of 1679 when Li Yu, a playwright and essayist, received a manuscript from Shen Shinyu, Li’s son-in-law and the manager of the Mustard Seed Garden Publishing House. The publishing house and the manual, itself, both drew their names from Li Yu’s garden and house located on a hillock near the South Gate in Nanjing. Shen Shinyu had commissioned the manuscript from the local landscape painter, Wang Gai, more than

¹ Wang Kai, *The Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting*, trans. Mai-mai Sze (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 11.

² Chun-shu Chang and Shelley Hsueh-lun Chang, *Crisis and Transformation in Seventeenth Century China: Society, Culture and Modernity in Li Yu’s World* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 95. In their biographical study of Li Yu, Chun-shu Chang and Shelley Hsueh-lun Chang note that the manual was actually published at the end of the Chinese lunar year in the eighteenth year of the Emperor Kangxi’s reign, which corresponds to late January of 1680 according to Western calculation.

³ The only source I have found that provides concrete evidence for this assertion is K’ai-ming Ch’iu’s article *The Chieh Tzu Yuan Hua Chuan (Mustard Seed Garden Painting Manual): Early Editions in American Collections* (See bibliography Ch’iu, 1951). Ch’iu cites the references made to the manual in official bibliographies, such as the *Ching Shi Gao (Draft Dynastic History of the Qing Dynasty, 1644-1911)* and the *Huang Chao Xu Wen Xian Tong Kao (A General Survey of the Institutional and Cultural History of the Empire, 1786-1911)*, as well as a reference in the private bibliography of the scholar-painter Yu Shaosong (b.1885) entitled *Shu Hua Shu Lu Jie Ti (A Critically Annotated Bibliography of Chinese Calligraphy and Painting)*.

⁴ For the purpose of this study I have defined the first edition as the printings issued in 1679 and 1701, which together constitute the first complete edition.

three years earlier, based on a draft by the poet-painter Li Liufang (1575-1629).⁵ Wang Gai was the only pupil of the renowned Ming-Qing transition painter Gongxian (1619-1689). Although he is not included among the eight masters of Nanjing, Wang Gai was associated with this painting circle.⁶

Thus, Wang Gai became the compiler and author of the first edition. The first publication, part I of the manual, consisted of five volumes on the theme of landscape painting. The original dimensions of the books were seventeen centimeters in width by twenty-seven centimeters in length. Wang dedicated the first volume to the various principles of Chinese painting. The following three volumes included the *Book of Trees*, the *Book of Rocks* and the *Book of Renwu* (“*People and Things*”). The final volume was a compendium of landscapes modeled on the paintings of contemporary and historical masters. In 1701 Wang Gai was assisted by his brothers, Wang Nie and Wang Shi, in the compilation of parts II and III.⁷ Part II included the *Book of the Orchid*, the *Book of the Bamboo*, the *Book of the Plum*, and the *Book of the Chrysanthemum*, collectively known as the “Four Gentleman.” Part III followed with the *Book of Grasses, Insects and Flowering Plants* and the *Book of Feathers-and-Fur and Flowering Plants*.⁸ Together, the five volumes of 1679 and the six volumes of 1701 were the first complete edition.

Though Li Yu, the original publisher of the manual, was delighted by the outcome of the 1679 publication and expressed interest in an expanded version, he died before the second printing in 1701. The 1679 printing was, however, Li Yu’s greatest publication success, and would have indeed left him gratified at the results of the expense and effort he had devoted to this commercial venture.⁹ In 1782 the entire manual was reprinted with newly cut blocks in a second edition; in 1800 a third edition was printed. Another edition was published in 1887-88 using the new lithographic process, but the product of the lithographic printing was far inferior in quality to that of the woodblocks. The twentieth-

⁵ Chang, 95.

⁶ Sally W. Goodfellow, ed., *Eight Dynasties of Chinese Painting: The Collection of the Nelson Gallery-Atkins Museum, Kansas City, and the Cleveland Museum of Art* (Cleveland: Cleveland Museum of Art in cooperation with the Indiana University Press, 1980), 295.

⁷ Wang Shi and Wang Nie were also assisted by the painters Wang Zhi and Zhu Sheng.

⁸ A spurious part V, a volume of human figures, appeared in 1818, but it was unrelated to the manual’s original authors and publishers.

⁹ Chang, 95.

century saw numerous re-printings, none of which, according to the scholar K'ai-ming Ch'iu, can be "compared in quality with the first three editions."¹⁰

Visual analysis of extant prints from the first edition of the *Mustard Seed Manual* demonstrate the luxury-commodity nature of these publications. The preserved first editions consist of several hundred pages, and are housed at various American institutions.¹¹ The British Museum also owns twenty-two first edition prints. The images used in this study were drawn from the British Museum Collection, as the author has personally seen examples from this group.

A beautifully preserved leaf from this collection is entitled *Iris and Rock* from part III of the 1701 edition (Fig. 1). The illustration is of a single iris flower and bud nestled against a water-worn rock. A few yellow wildflowers peer demurely around and through the rock's irregular surface. The registration of the image is precise.¹² The lines that delineate the petals and stems are delicate and un-modulated. The block-cutter labored over the multitude of striations in the elegant, elongated leaves and on the fragile surfaces of the iris petals. The rock formation exhibits a dynamic, expressive contour line, in addition to stippling and areas of shading that create a distinctly rough texture.

The coloring of the print is as sophisticated as the cutting of the block. The freshness of the print's various pigments, even after three hundred years of exposure, is a testament to their original beauty. The nuanced shades of yellow, green and blue are exquisite in their tonal delicacy. The colorist of this print employed an innovative color gradation technique, first used in the 1633 publication of the renowned *Ten Bamboo Studio Collection of Calligraphy and Painting* (henceforth *Ten Bamboo Studio*). This technique of hand-wiping color across the block was skillfully executed on the iris petals of the British Museum print. The result is a gradual lightening of color that proceeds from the inner part of the petal to its outer edge. The bottom of the petal appears to reproduce this coloration in reverse. The print is further punctuated with a red seal in the upper left-

¹⁰ Ch'iu, 60.

¹¹ Wang and Sze, xi. The following American institutions own prints from the first edition: 1679 (part I): Nelson Gallery of Art and Atkins Museum, Harvard-Yenching Institute, Rhode Island School of Design; 1701 (part II): Nelson Gallery of Art and Atkins Museum, Columbia University; 1701 (part III): Nelson Gallery of Art and Atkins Museum.

¹² One may note that the registration of the green and yellow blocks used for the small wildflowers was slightly less accurate.

hand portion of the print, preceded by a two-line inscription rendered in elegant semi-cursive script.

The leaf entitled *Lotus Flower*, also from part III of the 1701 edition, is yet another example of the artistic value of the manual's illustrations (Fig. 2). In this image a fully blossoming lotus and a semi-opened flower sway in a gentle breeze. The registration of these blocks was even more skillfully executed than that of the *Iris and Rock*. Once again, the attenuation and thread-like tension of the contour lines, especially those of the petals, speaks to a superior level of craftsmanship. The reeds behind the lotus flowers twist and bend in the pictorial space. The simple color palette is highly effective in suggesting the flowers' passing beauty, indicated by touches of yellow and brown on the tips of the petals and on the worm-eaten leaf. The calligraphy of the inscription, though rendered in a different style from that of the previous image, is no less sophisticated in its execution.

The graceful rendering of these images in wood, in a range of exquisite colors, provides sufficient reason to believe that the *Mustard Seed Manual* was a costly publication. The first edition exhibits the use of up to five colors, a technique that was used in very few publications at this time.¹³ In his preface to the first complete edition of 1701, Wang Gai, in fact, wrote, "Mr. Shen [Shen Shinyu] has a deep interest in calligraphy and painting and has spared no expense in commissioning the finest craftsmen to work on the (woodblock) reproductions of the examples."¹⁴

There is a paucity of information regarding the publishing details of the manual's first edition, however. How many printings were taken from the first blocks? How many publications were sold? For how much did these editions sell? A definite answer to these questions would require access to resources that are beyond the scope of research for this study. A comparison with *The Ten Bamboo Studio*, and with the commercial publications of Sibao, in Fujian Province, however, might shed light on how the first edition of the *Mustard Seed Manual* can be considered a luxury commodity that catered to an elite audience.

¹³ Wang Gai, Xun Chao, Peiheng Hu, and Feian Yu, *Jie Zi Yuan Hua Zhuan* (Jiulong: Zhonghua ShuJu, 1972), 2.

¹⁴ Wang and Sze, 318.

The *Ten Bamboo Studio* first appeared in Nanjing in 1643. In a preface to a later edition of this work, dated 1715, the publisher, Hu Zhengyan, wrote, “We have spent large sums of money and have not spared our efforts.”¹⁵ This remark suggests the significant investment, both human and monetary that Hu devoted to this publication. In scope, the *Ten Bamboo Studio* had some 180 illustrations, and only employed two to three color blocks (Fig. 3). In comparison, the first edition of the *Mustard Seed Manual* contained 202 colored illustrations, 126 of which were double page illustrations utilizing up to five colors. This relative comparison certainly indicates the financial investment involved in publishing a work like the *Mustard Seed Manual*, albeit nearly forty years after the *Ten Bamboo Studio*.

At the time of the *Ten Bamboo Studio*'s publication, it was cities like Nanjing that began to dominate higher-end production of woodblock printed books.¹⁶ However, a number of the major publishing centers of the late Ming, such as Hangzhou and Nanjing, suffered economically during the dynastic transition. In Nanjing the number of publishing houses in the early Qing numbered only seven, compared to thirty-eight in the late Ming.¹⁷ This is precisely the era in which the *Mustard Seed Manual* was published. The drastically reduced number of publishing houses in Nanjing in the early years of the Qing perhaps suggests that the publications of these houses, especially luxury works like art albums, could command even higher prices on the market than they had in the Ming.

The first indicator of the *Mustard Seed Manual*'s relative quality lies in the costs that were necessarily involved in cutting and printing the blocks. The cutting of the blocks, in fact, accounted for the greatest production expense. The highly skilled and literate carvers of Huizhou, including the Huang, Wang, Qiu and Liu family lineages, represent the high-level of refinement that was possible in the block-cutting craft. Because of their skill such carvers commanded significantly higher wages than those of untrained laborers.¹⁸ On the other hand, religious devotees, women, and peasants were often hired to carve blocks for lower-quality publications for negligible pay. Even the

¹⁵ Joseph Vedralich, *The Ten Bamboo Studio: A Chinese Masterpiece* (New York: Crescent Books, 1979), 10.

¹⁶ Lucille Chia and W.L. Idema, *Books in Numbers: Seventy-fifth Anniversary of the Harvard-Yenching Library: Conference Papers* (Cambridge: Harvard-Yenching Library, 2007), 147.

¹⁷ Cynthia J. Brokaw, *Commerce in Culture: the Sibao Book Trade in the Qing and Republican Periods* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2007), 10.

¹⁸ Brokaw, *Commerce in Culture*, 15.

most cursory examination of the *Mustard Seed Manual's* extant prints, however, demonstrates that the block cutters of this publication were more than competent in their craft and engaged in the task with great aesthetic sensitivity. The fluidity and delicacy of the lines and attention devoted to pictorial detail that characterize these images are visual proof of the expertise of the craftsmen whom Shen Shinyu employed for this project.

A more concrete idea of the cost of a work like the *Mustard Seed Manual* may be gleaned from Cynthia J. Brokaw's comprehensive study of the commercial publishing houses of Sibao, a small, rural town in western Fujian Province, during the Qing. The characteristic feature of the Sibao publishers was the profusion of their cheap, low-quality publications. Brokaw asserts that these works were primarily "texts of assured popularity rather than interestingly esoteric works of scholarship or literature."¹⁹ This included popular titles such as the *Sanzi Jing (Three-Character Classic)* and the *Shujing Liju (Classic of History)*. In her analysis of publication wholesale prices of certain Sibao imprints in the late Qing, Brokaw determined that over half of the titles listed in the sale account sold for less than 1.0 *qian*.²⁰

Among the more expensive Sibao printings were works like the *Kangxi Zidian* at a wholesale price of 8.3 *qian*. As Brokaw notes, however, neither, "great skill or literacy" were prerequisites for the carving of these kinds of publications, and thus the publication costs of such works were comparatively low.²¹ However, even these publications were beyond the means of most people. In 1884, some teachers may have earned as much as 48 *liang* (one *liang* equals ten *qian*), but many earned as little as eighteen *liang*, per year. Clearly for many, it was only possible to buy the cheapest Sibao imprints (i.e. under 1.0 *qian*).²²

Although these figures were calculated for the late Qing period and may not seem applicable to the price of publications in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth-centuries when the *Mustard Seed Manual* was first issued, it is significant that during the Qing the cost of printed books *decreased* beginning in the Jiaqing era (1796-1820).²³ This

¹⁹ Brokaw, *Commerce in Culture*, 6.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 514.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 14.

²² Cited in Brokaw, *Commerce in Culture*, 515, from Evelyn Rawski, *Education and Popular Literacy in Ch'ing China* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1979), 56-61.

²³ Brokaw, *Commerce in Culture*, 517.

indicates that estimates for sale prices during the early Qing would likely be even higher than the figures quoted here. Publications, even of basic texts, would have been prohibitively expensive for a significant segment of the non-elite population. In his article on niche marketing in late imperial China, the scholar Robert E. Hegel also notes that book producers in the Qing targeted higher and lower income audiences. In catering to these groups, commercial publishers discriminated against “general buyers, with fewer middling-quality imprints for the *sheng-yuan*, or the middle-level book buying public.”²⁴

Furthermore, although some of the Sibao works listed in Brokaw’s analysis may have included rather crude illustrations, it is doubtful that even the most expensive of the Sibao imprints were multi-colored. It becomes readily apparent, then, that a volume consisting of over two-hundred beautifully colored images would have been well beyond the purchase potential of people at the middle or lower levels of society. One scholar, Chang Chung-li, has proposed that during the Qing “the gentry class enjoyed a per capita income about sixteen times that of commoners,” thus placing expensive, high quality publications much more easily within their reach.²⁵ Did Li Yu’s Mustard Seed Garden Publishing House produce these kinds of publications?

Although there is a scarcity of information regarding the Mustard Seed Garden Publishing House, Li Yu’s biography does provide some clues as to the nature of this business venture. In 1657, after having established his career as a professional writer in Hangzhou, Li Yu settled in Nanjing. His financial anxiety over an outstanding debt was what perhaps prompted him to begin publishing books and to open a bookstore. Although the biographical information is vague, it seems likely that Li Yu published his own literary works through his publishing house, especially considering the difficulty he faced with publishers in Hangzhou who frequently issued pirated copies of his works.²⁶

By the time he settled in Nanjing, Li Yu was already well received as a playwright and essayist in literary circles, and his group of friends and acquaintances included other distinguished writers, intellectuals, and high government officials.²⁷ It is

²⁴ Robert E. Hegel, “Niche Marketing for Late Imperial Fiction,” in *Printing and Book Culture in Late Imperial China*, ed. Cynthia J. Brokaw and Kai-wing Chow (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 253.

²⁵ Richard J. Smith, *China’s Cultural Heritage: The Ch’ing Dynasty, 1644-1912* (Boulder: Westview Press, Inc., 1983), 57.

²⁶ Chang, 71.

²⁷ Ibid., 77.

reasonable to surmise that this group of elites patronized his bookstore and supported his publishing house. By 1669, the year in which he built the famed garden and house, the biographical record states the specific existence of the Mustard Seed Garden Publishing House. Of the publishing house, the author says, it was “very successful; even today books published by the Mustard Seed Garden are prized by bibliophiles.”²⁸

The publishing house provided Li with a supplementary hobby and an important source of income to maintain his extravagant life-style, but it was not his main devotion; that he gave to the theater and to drama. Management of the business fell to his eldest daughter’s husband, Shen Shinyu. When Li returned to Hangzhou, after twenty years of residence in Nanjing, he was forced to sell his bookstore and his publishing firm’s “valuable wood blocks,” which he was fortunately able to buy back shortly after his move.²⁹ Not until the winter of 1679 did Shen present his father-in-law with the manuscript for the *Mustard Seed Manual*. It is not clear whether the firm remained in Nanjing or relocated with Li to Hangzhou, but the printing of the *Mustard Seed Manual* proved to be the most successful of all Li’s publishing ventures.

Based on this information, it seems that Li’s publishing firm was rather small, certainly smaller in scale than a large commercial publishing house, but was quite lucrative, perhaps due to the relatively high prices for which his publications sold. Shen Shinyu employed fairly well known artists to design the illustrations. Although specific information regarding the block cutters and colorists is lacking, Li’s blocks were valuable, and thus they were presumably of high quality. Furthermore, visual analysis of the manual’s prints and Wang Gai’s own testament in the 1701 preface clearly demonstrate that the block cutters and colorists were highly skilled craftsmen. The fact that Mustard Seed Garden publications are treasured by collectors today provides further evidence in support of the high quality and luxury status of works like the *Mustard Seed Manual*.

In an attempt to clarify the significance of a work like the *Mustard Seed Manual*, and for whom the first editions were intended, it is necessary to examine the urban social environment of the early Qing. Urban centers flourished in this period, particularly the

²⁸ Chang, 81.

²⁹ Ibid., 93

cities of the Jiangnan, including Nanjing, Hangzhou and Suzhou. Nanjing, the home of Li Yu's Mustard Seed Garden Publishing House, was somewhat surpassed by Yangzhou, and even Beijing, in terms of cultural preeminence after the Ming-Qing transition. However, it maintained its identity as an important commercial city and as a center of cultural activities carried out by a population of educated elites and wealthy merchants.³⁰ A defining characteristic of this urban milieu was the blurring of traditional social boundaries and a gradual merging of certain social classes. This trend manifested itself in a number of ways. The effects of a burgeoning population and of Manchu rule meant that a number of degree-holding literati were unable, or unwilling, to pursue careers in government and turned instead to commercial endeavors or careers as professional painters. At the same time, professional painters, traditionally relegated to the low rungs of society, came to enjoy economic success and move among the elite.³¹

Merchants, also, by virtue of their wealth, could increasingly participate in cultural activities that had hitherto been the exclusive prerogatives of degree-holding elite. This included such activities as participation in literary societies, patronage of the arts and consumption of luxury products. As the scholar Mark Elvin has remarked of Shanghai's social environment in the Qing, "the more important merchants and gentry of Shanghai had become, to a substantial extent, members of the same class."³² This social mobility inevitably gave rise to certain tensions, particularly among the literati who sought to safeguard their privileged social status, yet it also created a distinctive urban culture "shared by urban residents who came not only from different social strata, but also from major cities throughout the empire."³³

Though society's "elite" class was rapidly being redefined to incorporate ambitious merchants and artisans, the literati still commanded authority in the realm of culture and aesthetic taste. This circumstance led to the emergence of a luxury commodity market, by which the socially ambitious could emulate and perhaps even gain entrance into the literati life-style. The scholar, Jonathan Hay, has termed this the

³⁰ Susan Naquin and Evelyn S. Rawski, *Chinese Society in the Eighteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 56.

³¹ Jonathan Hay, *Shitao: Painting and Modernity in Early Qing China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 20.

³² Cited in Smith, 60, from William G. Skinner, ed., *The City in Late Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1977), 468.

³³ Naquin, 56.

“commodification of literati culture,” a phenomena that developed within the framework of an expanding luxury market.³⁴ Society’s elite class engaged in the consumption of such luxury items as paintings, calligraphy and books. As Frederic Wakeman has written of urban merchants, “Emulating the gentry’s status manner on a colossal scale, they consumed their capital conspicuously...reaffirming the hegemony of the literati’s high culture.”³⁵ Among the most notable imitators of literati life-style were the pioneering Huizhou merchants who constituted the eighteenth-century’s most ardent book collectors. Art collections and paintings were also tangible embodiments of culture, in “high demand among men of wealthy and uncertain status.”³⁶

Perhaps, for the wealthy merchants and literati who owned the *Mustard Seed Manual*, such a work was not only a signifier of social status and taste, but also a tool of connoisseurship that served to reinforce their place in elite society. Beginning in the late Ming, knowledge itself became a commodity, “transmitted personally or through the medium of published books.”³⁷ As the scholar Craig Clunas has written of *Gushi Huapu* (*Master Gu’s Pictorial Album*), published in 1603, such works represent the “commodification of knowledge,” a complement to Hay’s theory of the “commodification of culture.”³⁸ Clunas goes on to say, “observable for the first time in a number of areas of sixteenth-seventeenth century culture, the purchaser acquires cultural capital by the acquisition of the volume.”³⁹ Wen Zhengheng’s *Treatise on Superfluous Things*, published between 1615 and 1620, is another example, as it contains detailed entries on a variety of topics, from flowers and rocks to calligraphy and painting. It was precisely this kind of publication that informed those of uncertain status of the kinds of pursuits and hobbies they should cultivate. It was the appreciation of antiquity, and one’s engagement in other privileged cultural activities that became an “essential form of consumption...central to the maintenance of elite status.”⁴⁰

³⁴ Hay, 20.

³⁵ Cited in Smith, 60, from Frederic Wakeman Jr., *The Fall of Imperial China* (New York: The Free Press, 1975), 51.

³⁶ Naquin, 69.

³⁷ Craig Clunas, *Superfluous Things: Material Culture and Social Status in Early Modern China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1991), 118.

³⁸ Craig Clunas, *Pictures and Visuality in Early Modern China* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 138.

³⁹ Clunas, *Pictures and Visuality*, 138.

⁴⁰ Clunas, *Superfluous Things*, 108.

During the Qing a number of merchant families devoted themselves wholeheartedly to this form of cultural cultivation. Because connoisseurship demanded a substantial amount of capital and leisure time, merchants were in a favorable position to pursue these activities. Before the nineteenth-century, in fact, many of the prominent book and art collections of the Jiangnan were founded on money made in the salt trade.⁴¹ The salt merchant An Qi (born c. 1683) from the Tianjin area, for example, amassed an envious collection of paintings and calligraphy, and became a connoisseur himself. His annotated catalogue of art works was highly valued among Qing collectors.⁴² Another notable figure is Gao Lian (act. late sixteenth century), the son of a prosperous mercantile family and the author of *Eight Discourses on the Art of Living*. Residing on the bank of West Lake in Hangzhou, Gao dabbled in elite hobbies, particularly in art appreciation and collection, but he did not paint. For all their efforts directed toward cultural pursuits, the great connoisseurs and collectors of the Qing did not necessarily devote energy to making art themselves. As Clunas has stated,

“Although histories of Chinese art sometimes succeed in giving the impression that facility with the brush was the birthright of everyone above a certain social level, even the most cursory mapping of collections of artists’ biographies onto the names of the top level of cultural/political elite of a given year, categorized as those three hundred individuals passing the highest level of the examination system, show that more than family-based reputation for artistic achievement was in fact quite rare.”⁴³

Huizhou merchants were also among the most active collectors and connoisseurs of art in the Ming and Qing. By the middle of the Ming they were renowned for being the wealthiest merchants in the south. They began associating with the literati class and cultivating themselves in the arts.⁴⁴ Through their accumulation of valuable art works they gradually assumed the role of connoisseurs and collectors. To these merchants, men who had not received full classical educations and were not necessarily well versed in China’s artistic traditions, would not a work like the *Mustard Seed Manual* have been a

⁴¹ Benjamin A. Elman, *From Philosophy to Philology: Intellectual and Social Aspects of Change in Late Imperial China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 149.

⁴² Richard J. Smith, *China’s Cultural Heritage: The Ch’ing Dynasty, 1644-1912* (Boulder: Westview Press, Inc., 1983), 156-157.

⁴³ Clunas, *Superfluous Things*, 15.

⁴⁴ Li Chu-tsing, ed, *Artists and Patrons: Some Social and Economic Aspects of Chinese Painting* (Kansas City: The Kress Foundation Department of Art History, University of Kansas in association with the University of Washington Press, 1989), 180.

valuable tool in training their eyes to look at and appreciate painting? As Cahill has written of merchants in seventeenth-century China, “Many of them, relatively new to the game, needed advice on what were the right kinds of art objects to collect and, once they had made their acquisitions, on whether they had bought wisely.”⁴⁵ The *Mustard Manual Manual* served this purpose.

The compendium of landscapes by contemporary and past masters, included in the fifth volume of part I of the *Mustard Seed Manual*, provided a visual aid for understanding and recognizing the particular style of certain painters. Another print in the British Museum Collection, from this section of the manual, is one such example (Fig. 4). It is a landscape in the manner of the Ming artist, Shen Zhou (1427-1509).⁴⁶ The British Museum catalog in which this print appears indicates that the inscription in the upper-right hand corner cites the specific Shen Zhou painting from which this print was copied, *Allaying the Summer Heat Under Wutong Trees*. It is doubtful, however, that Wang Gai actually saw many of the original compositions of famous artists that he re-created in the manual. The point, as Clunas has argued of similar landscape prints in *Master Gu’s Pictorial Album* (1603), is not that such images reproduced genuine works by these artists, but rather that they “encapsulate some quite real perception of what a typical work by a given named artist might be like.”⁴⁷

In this way the study of these images, and the manual’s detailed expositions, familiarized the reader with general components of landscape compositions by various masters. There was, so to speak, “‘a great synthesis’ of the art of the past spread out before you...essentially for your *private* and strictly personal consumption.”⁴⁸ At elite communal or social gatherings one could call upon this privately amassed storehouse of knowledge to better appreciate the paintings brought out for examination, and perhaps more significantly, to make educated and informed art-historical comments. In elite circles this demonstration of erudition would certainly have been expected of its

⁴⁵ James Cahill, *The Painter’s Practice: How Artists Lived and Worked in Traditional China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 11.

⁴⁶ This print is from the 1800 edition of the manual, but it would have been included in the first complete edition of 1701.

⁴⁷ Clunas, *Pictures and Visibility*, 144.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 142.

members. For aspiring connoisseurs working in an art market “rife with trickery,” such books also functioned to “safeguard the unwary against forgeries.”⁴⁹

A brief discussion of the *Mustard Seed Manual's* text and of the concept of literacy during the Qing may help to further clarify the audience for whom such a work was intended. It seems that the text of the manual was written in a semi-vernacular, semi-classical style of prose. The various introductions and text that accompany the detailed painting instructions both exhibit a multitude of references to China's master painters. One notable example of this can be found in Wang Gai's *Discussion of the Fundamentals of Painting*, which makes up the first volume of part I. The references are so numerous and obscure that someone unfamiliar with the art-historical tradition would struggle to gain full comprehension of its meaning. Wang writes, “Clear the barriers set by Tung and Chu, and pass straightway into the mansions of Ku and Cheng. Follow Nin Yun-lin painting in the style of Yu Ch'eng.”⁵⁰

The text is also characterized by a smattering of philosophical concepts, largely Daoist, but also Confucian in nature. In the first entry on the method of painting trees from the *Book of Trees*, Wang Gai states, “Mark well the way the branches dispose themselves, the *yin* and *yang* of them, which are in front and which in the back.”⁵¹ In the introduction to the *Book of Grasses, Insects and Flowering Plants*, the author writes, “The life movement engendered by the spirit (*ch'i*) should animate the whole picture... In establishing the structure (*shih*) of plants, it is necessary first to distinguish between plants with wood stems and those classes with the grasses.”⁵² In this context *ch'i* (*qi*) and *shih* (*shi*) are components of Daoist ideology, referring to the life force and the all-pervasive power of the Dao, respectively. In the section entitled *The Fundamentals of Bamboo Painting*, it is written, “Each movement of turning, bending, drooping, or rising holds a specific idea (*i*) and principle (*li*) that must be observed and felt through the heart

⁴⁹ Clunas, *Pictures and Visuality*, 143.

⁵⁰ Wang and Sze, 18.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 53. In a review of Mai Mai Sze's 1977 translation of the manual, Dawn Ho Delbanco criticizes Sze's characterization of the concepts of light (*yang*) and shade (*yin*) in this particular passage as representing the metaphysical principles of *yin* and *yang*, thus imbuing the text with a philosophical tone that Delbano believes was not intended in the original text. It should be acknowledged, however, that Sze did not necessarily intend for this interpretation, for she may have simply chosen to use the Chinese words *yin* and *yang*, in place of a translation, such as shade and light. Delbanco assumes that this implicitly refers to the Daoist notion of *yin* and *yang*. Furthermore, the pairing of these words in the Chinese suggests that perhaps this *was* the desired interpretation. In her review, Delbanco does not provide any evidence to show that such words were, in fact, devoid of Daoist connotations.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 471.

for full understanding of the expressiveness of bamboo.”⁵³ Here the reference is to the Confucian principle of *li*, the law that governs the inherent reason of things. In each of these cases the philosophical allusions are seamlessly woven into the artistic explanations without elaboration. The impression Wang gives is one of an assumed artistic knowledge and level of literacy shared by the readers of the manual.

In her study of the Sibao publishing industry, Cynthia Brokaw discusses the difficulty of determining a standard for literacy in late imperial China. When addressing this question, for example, one must consider the various levels of literacy that existed in Chinese society from the “full literacy” of the literati to the “functional literacy” of traders and merchants.⁵⁴ Some scholars argue that there has traditionally been an over estimation of literacy rates in Qing China. For instance, although many males received some education they were not necessarily able to maintain or develop full literacy.⁵⁵ The scholar Frederick Mote has proposed a rate of about ten percent literacy for nineteenth-century China, including those who had achieved full or functional literacy.⁵⁶ It seems likely that a comparable estimate for the late seventeenth and early eighteenth-centuries, when the *Mustard Seed Manual* was published, would be even lower.

Moreover, the literacy required for a classical education was certainly not available to a sizable segment of the population. Alexander Woodside, in his article on literacy in China, has noted that the classical education of the lower classes was limited to works like the *Sanzi Jing* and other language primers. This served to “preserve a small elite founded to a large degree on exclusive control over education/literacy – and thus on limited access to the kind of literacy that mattered, full literacy in classical texts.”⁵⁷ When analyzing the text of a work like the *Mustard Seed Manual*, therefore, one must not assume that the language and the ideas it conveys were readily comprehensible for the “average” person. In this regard, too, the manual seems to have catered to a more highly educated and fully literate audience of elites.

⁵³ Wang and Sze, 363.

⁵⁴ Brokaw, *Commerce in Culture*, 563.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 562.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Cited in Brokaw, *Commerce in Culture*, 569, from Alexander Woodside, “Real and Imagined Continuities in the Chinese Struggle for Literacy,” in *Education and Modernization: The Chinese Experience*, ed. Ruth Hayhoe (Oxford, Pergamon Press, 1992), 35-36.

For these educated members of elite society, it seems unlikely that the first edition of the *Mustard Seed Manual* was much more than a preliminary introduction to the art of painting. There is, however, documentary evidence in later years that some aspiring artists specifically used the manual as a teaching guide. The early twentieth-century artist Qi Baishi wrote in his autobiography that he faithfully copied the manual before he began studying with professional teachers. However, at the time when Qi Baishi was studying the manual, the lithographic editions would have been cheap and numerous. The irony is that, as Dawn Ho Delbanco has pointed out, what is completely missing in the lithographic version “are the subtle variations of the original in brushstrokes, in width of line, in tone and amount of ink, in the relationship between forms.”⁵⁸ The lithographic edition also included none of the color prints.

It is difficult to know conclusively if the first editions of the manual were, in fact, utilized as practical guides to painting. It is unlikely that the historical records explicitly contain the answer to this kind of elusive question. The preface to a lithographic edition of the *Mustard Seed Manual*, published in 1972 in Hong Kong, puts forth some pertinent points with regard to this matter. The authors emphasize that the manual was intended as a *preliminary* guide, one that familiarized the reader with the basic uses of the brush, and how to draw forms and compose scenes. Furthermore, they assert that the purpose of this familiarity was to nurture one’s understanding of the tradition, to inform oneself about China’s impressive artistic lineage. It is merely an initial step. The authors go on to say that as a true handbook for painting, the *Mustard Seed Manual* is rather superficial. In other words, it must not be seen as a “do-it-yourself” painting book. If one really wishes to learn the art of painting he must consult other manuals, such as the Ming Dynasty *Lidai Mingren Huapu* by Gu Anran or the early Qing *Wanxiao Tang Huazhuan*, in which the explanations and techniques are dealt with in more depth and detail. Though the *Mustard Seed Manual* may be of use in understanding the basics of brushwork, forms and compositions, these authors argue that it does not tell one *how* to use these skills to actually paint, *how* to coordinate these disparate components in a real composition.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Dawn Ho Delbanco and Mai Mai Sze, “Review of The Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 39, no. 1 (1979): 184-190.

⁵⁹ Wang and Chao, 1-4.

The history of the *Mustard Seed Manual's* publication and readership in the early years of its publication is an under-addressed area of English-language scholarship. Generations of scholars have hailed the *Mustard Seed Manual* as China's most influential painting manual, but the evidence in support of this assertion is elusive. This study has attempted to clarify some pertinent issues pertaining to the audience for the first edition of the manual and to the manual's significance for this audience.

The high-level of craftsmanship and aesthetic refinement of extant prints from the first edition speak to the luxury-commodity nature of this publication. An examination of the inexpensive, low-quality publications like those of publishing houses in Fujian Province, further suggests that a work such as the *Mustard Seed Manual* would have been prohibitively expensive for those outside the elite, wealthy echelons of society. This notion is also supported by the information that exists regarding Li Yu's publishing firm. Though information is scarce, one may surmise that the Mustard Seed Garden Publishing House was a relatively small-scale operation that produced high-quality, expensive publications. An exploration of the social environment of the early Qing, the period in which the first edition of the manual was published, further sheds light on to whom such a work would have appealed and in what kinds of capacities this audience would have used the manual. In this period, Nanjing, the home of the manual and publishing house, was a thriving center of culture supported by a society of wealthy merchants and literati. The effects of the Ming-Qing transition on the literati's government employment, coupled with increasing economic prosperity enjoyed by merchants, led to the emergence of an integrated upper-class, and of an expanded market in luxury products. During this period, merchants and other wealthy members of society sought to emulate literati culture and life-style.

In this context, the *Mustard Seed Manual* perhaps functioned as a luxury commodity, a signifier of class status in an increasingly class-conscious society. To the socially ambitious owners of the manual, it may also have been valued as a tool of connoisseurship, a tool with which one could learn to navigate the worlds of the elite. There remain, however, numerous questions that have yet to be explored. How did this audience and the function or significance of the manual change with succeeding editions? What might these developments say about contemporary art-historical and socio-

historical eras? Hopefully, this study, and these questions, may provide future guidance for research of this remarkable publication.

Fig. 1 “Iris and Rock,” from *The Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting*. Part III, 1701. Color woodblock print.⁶⁰



⁶⁰ *The British Museum*, <http://www.britishmuseum.org/>.

Fig. 2 “Lotus Flower,” from the *Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting*. Part III, 1701. Color woodblock print.⁶¹



⁶¹ *The British Museum*, <http://www.britishmuseum.org/>.

Fig. 3 “Buddha’s Hand Fruits,” from the *Ten Bamboo Studio Collection of Calligraphy and Painting*. 1633. Color woodblock print.⁶²



⁶² *The British Museum*, <http://www.britishmuseum.org/>.

Fig. 4 “Landscape,” from the *Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting*. Part I, 1800.
Color woodblock print.⁶³



⁶³ *The British Museum*, <http://www.britishmuseum.org/>.

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