
Learning about Precious Goods: Transmission of Mercantile Knowledge from the Southern Song to Early Ming Period

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The current paper studies the transmission and transformation of mercantile knowledge about precious goods (*baohuo* 寶貨) in the middle period of China, from the Southern Song dynasty (1127–1279) to the early period of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), by scrutinizing the appropriation and modification of texts among three handbooks dealing with these good, namely, (A) *Baibao zongzhen ji* 百寶總珍集 (Compendium of Numerous Treasures and Rarities) compiled by an anonymous author in the Southern Song dynasty, (B) “Baohuo bianyi” 寶貨辨疑 (Assessment of Precious Goods) collected in an everyday encyclopedia of the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368), and (C) “Zhenqi lun” 珍奇論 (On Precious Objects) in the *Gegu yaolun* 格古要論 (Essential Criteria of Antiques) compiled by Cao Zhao 曹昭 (fl. 14th c.). By comparing the entries on jade, gold/silver and pearls in the three texts, the paper points out that later appropriation of early mercantile experience was a result of the pursuit of profit, while the differences among them reveal changes in consumer preferences and in the transmission and transformation of specialist knowledge throughout the ages.

Keywords: Precious goods, *Baibao zongzhen ji*, *Gegu yaolun*, mercantile handbooks, history of consumption

This article investigates the transmission and transformation of mercantile knowledge about precious goods (*baohuo* 寶貨) in the middle period of China, from the Southern Song to Early Ming dynasty, by scrutinizing the appropriation and modification of texts among three handbooks dealing with these goods.¹ In a departure from previous scholarship on merchants' handbooks, this investigation focuses on the specialized knowledge about the commodities themselves and therefore examines how a commercial pursuit of profit affects the ways in which information about artifacts is transmitted.² The paper contributes to recent studies on merchant cultures and knowledge in Chinese history, to complement the previous focus on scholar-officials.³ In analyzing "mercantile knowledge" I draw inspiration from James A. Secord's recent approach to knowledge transfer in the field of the history of science.⁴ Instead of conceiving knowledge as a kind of pre-existing entity that is codified and conveyed through publications, his model contends that knowledge itself *is* communication and that the communicative process is transmitted and

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- 1 There is extensive scholarly literature on merchants' manuals in English, Japanese, and Chinese, dating from Late Ming to Early Republican era, and early studies provide informative appraisals of such manuals. See Endymion Wilkinson, "Chinese Merchant Manuals and Route Books," in *Chinese History: A New Manual* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2012), 8–34.
 - 2 In the past two decades, scholars have delineated an ethics of mid-level merchants in the context of late imperial Confucian society. They have also investigated the professional education gained by merchants in terms of character building. See Richard John Lufrano, *Honorable Merchants: Commerce and Self-Cultivation in Late Imperial China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997); Chiu Peng-sheng 邱澎生, "From Everyday Encyclopedia to Merchant's Handbook: the Construction of Commercial Knowledge in Ming Qing" 由日用類書到商業手冊：明清中國商業知識的建構 (paper presented at the conference of the International Symposium on Financial Change and Entrepreneurial Culture in Modern China 近代中國的財經變遷與企業文化研討會, Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica, Taipei, December 17, 2004).
 - 3 The discourse and behaviors for exhibiting good taste in early modern societies have been thoroughly studied as strategies in converting financial, social, and cultural capital. See Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984); Craig Clunas, *Superfluous Things: Material Culture and Social Status in Early Modern China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004). This article does not focus on how the gentry and the *nouveau riche* negotiated their social status through consumer choices — here "taste" refers to the spectrum of economic preferences that merchants tried to categorize and make profit from.
 - 4 James A. Secord, "Knowledge in Transit," *Isis* 95.4 (2004): 654–72. See also Gillian Beer and Herminio Martins, "Introduction," *History of the Human Sciences* 3.2 (1990): 163–75.