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## The Cloud Brocade and Yangzhou

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## The Cloud Brocade and Yangzhou

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The cloud brocade, *yunjin*, is a unique production of Nanjing. The royal court had monopolized this kind of textile during the Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties. The incredibly rich textures and fantastic designs of the so-called cloud brocade fascinate people even today. The textiles studied in this paper are from the collections of the Research Institute of Yunjin at Nanjing. This research institute has been working on preservation and excellence for the cloud brocade in its classical style and technique.

Yunjin is the only kind of textile of China that cannot be replaced by modern weaving machines; in present-day China, there are less than 50 crafts workers that are experts in this skill. During the Kangxi and Yongzheng Emperors' reigns of the middle Qing Dynasty, while yunjin production reached its high peak, there were 30,000 weaving machines in Nanjing and about 300,000 people in Nanjing district depended on it for their livelihood.

This was also the period when the salt industry of southern China provided 50 percent of the annual imperial revenues through its center in Yangzhou. Yangzhou is not far from Nanjing but is on the north of the Yangtze River. Today, it is a one and a half hour ride to reach one town from the other, but only a few years ago, there was no such easy way connecting these two cities, and the Yangtze separated them into two different worlds. So how was the Cloud Brocade of Nanjing connected to the salt of Yangzhou?

This study investigates the connections between the two cities through two of the richest industries of imperial China with a view toward understanding the relationships between the social and cultural worlds of the royal officials, salt merchants, and silk trade managers of the middle Qing dynasty.

### **The cloud brocade yunjin of Nanjing and the Cao family**

The silk industry of Nanjing was developed during the Eastern Wu Period of the third century (220-280 CE). In 417 CE the Eastern Jin Dynasty established a particular department for brocade weaving at Nanjing. The vast silk producers of southern China provided the best quality silk, and most skillful crafts workers to a number of silk producing centers along the Yangtze. Nanjing, Suzhou, Hangzhou and Chengdu had been the largest centers of textile production.

Following the Mongolian rule, gold was introduced into the traditional world of Chinese weaving as the nomads preferred gold to any other valuable. Weavers of northwest China, Central Asia and West Asia passed on their skills and designs as well. By adding pure gold, silver, and rare bird feathers to long silk threads, the textiles were made more valuable, for the royalty cared for nothing more than quality, and at any cost. The machines that are in use at Yunjin Research Institute of Nanjing are the replicas of the 13<sup>th</sup> century's wooden weaving machine, *dahualou*, which means 'the big patterned building'. It is 5.6 meters long, 4 meters high, and 1.4 meters wide and requires two skillful crafts workers to work together. 14,000 counts of thread are needed to weave a 78 cm wide piece of fabric. It requires advanced design,

including the careful calculations of the wefts and the weaves, along with the different colors, that are transformed into a beautiful design through a very ancient language - the words of knots.

Each knot controls a group of silk threads. The weaver who sits at the top of the machine was in charge of lifting the correct knots while the one who sat in the lower position was in charge of making the design. The vertical thread has to be cut off each time, and a new one picked up; only the horizontal ones remained through the entire piece of textile. By cutting off the vertical threads, complicated patterns could be created in multi-colors. Two skillful crafts workers only produced 4 to 5 cm of this kind of fabric a day, so that one piece of textile needed for a royal robe would take two years to complete. It takes around 13 years of training to become an expert weaver.

Each inch of the textile was worth its weight in gold. Such textiles could only be used for the royal family's official uniforms and sometimes for their everyday wear, for bed covers and accessories in the palace, for high officials' uniforms, and as grant by the emperors. Nanjing was not the only place that produced brocade, but only Nanjing produced the cloud brocade, which gained its name due to its extremely beautiful patterns, unique designs, and colors that resembled the colorful clouds of heaven.

The Qing dynasty inherited the technique of the silk weaving system of the Ming Dynasty but reduced its scale into four institutions in Beijing, Nanjing, Suzhou, and Hangzhou. The latter three are all in the lower Yangtze River region, and the one in Nanjing was named Jiangning and was resumed in 1645, right after the Manchu took over. Very soon, the Qing court discontinued the way of the Ming who used eunuchs to supervise the silk industry and instead sent officials from the court to supervise the weaving business. Since the second year of the Kangxi Emperor, in 1663, Jinangjing Zhizhao, the supervision of the silk weaving of Nanjing was taken over by the royal family's *baoyi*, Cao Xi, who served as Textile Commissioner. The *baoyi* were the bonded slaves of the royal family, and were mixed-ethnic descendants of the Hans and the Manchu clans and were known to be extremely loyal. Cao Xi and his descendants were in control of the silk industry of Jiangning in Nanjing for 57 years, and that was not only the best time of this magical fabric but also the most prosperous period of the Qing.

Cao Xi's great grandson Cao Xueqin became one of the most famous writers of China, and the author of the *Dream of the Red Chamber*, one of the four great Classical novels of China. Cao Xi's wife was also the Kangxi Emperor's milk mother, and Cao Yin, his son, was the emperor's childhood playmate. Therefore, the Kangxi Emperor always trusted the Cao family and let Cao Yin continue in his father's position as Textile Commissioner of Jiangning. Meanwhile, he appointed his brother-in-law, Li Xu, in-charge the silk industry of Suzhou. The southern industries of Nanjing, Suzhou and Hangzhou were treated as one by the emperor and Cao Yin's Jiangning was at the center of it all.

Cao Yin had implemented some changes to improve the weavers' economic situation but the weavers were still paid next to nothing. The pay of the official Cao himself was high but not enough either. He was also in charge of purchasing art works and other crafts for the emperor from the lower Yangtze River region as some of the finest craft work originated from there, producing chariots, bamboo music instruments, rare ceramics, paintings, calligraphies as well as collecting local products as yearly tributes for the emperor.

The Emperor Kangxi had visited the South six times, and during five of these visits he rested at Cao's mansion. Such expenses mounted for Cao. The *Dream of the Red Chamber* provides a clue to the lifestyle and social life of the Cao family. Money and silver flowed like water. The Emperor knew that there was only one way to compensate for these expenses, and that was through the salt industry. In 1703, the Kangxi Emperor ordered Cao Yin and his brother-in-law, Li Xu to take over the salt business of the Huai River region in the lower Yangtze. During the next year, Cao Yin became the royal minister of salt, *xun yan yu shi*, and was stationed at Yangzhou. In fact, Cao Yin's grandfather, Cao Xi's father was taking care of salt in Zhejiang province, next to Yangzhou's region. Just like his father Cao Xi, Cao Yin made friends among the well-heeled cultural men of Southern China, including those who held a grudge against the Manchu. They painted, exchanged poems, edited books, wrote plays and gathered together to enjoy. In 1705, Cao Yin was in charge of editing and printing the complete volumes of the Tang Dynasty's poetry in Yangzhou. Why Yangzhou?

### **Salt Culture of Yangzhou**

Yangzhou is located at the intersection of the Yangtze River and the Great Canal, at the center of the Huai River region and at the mouth of the sea. Its history is long and poetic, but also heroic and dream-like.

It has been described as a city of singing and flute playing for thousands of years, and has attracted a great amount of scholarship. Yangzhou became the center of the salt industry of the Huai River region in the Tang dynasty. During the 17th and the 18th centuries, salt was monopolized by salt dealers who were appointed by the court and responsible to the court directly, and not by local government officials. New laws and the geographical location provided the opportunity for these merchants to gather their wealth in Yangzhou, and it became the most important port along the Yangtze River.

The city of Yangzhou in China during the eighteenth century was rich with gardens and libraries, filled with poets and painters as well as artistic courtesans. The salt merchants who lived there sponsored much of its art and cultural activities. There are many rich cities in Chinese history, and many wealthy merchants who lived among artists. However, Yangzhou is the only city that itself became a legend, through the group of artists later called the *Eight Eccentrics of Yangzhou* (*Yangzhou baguai* 揚州八怪).

Only in Yangzhou did businessmen actually become literati, and literati lived as commercial artists without losing their literati status. The love or admiration of culture transformed many salt merchants into educated men, and due to such a transformation, this particular group of merchants were able to step into not only the cultured world but also socialized with the high officials and court members. Therefore, the court gave more favorable treaties, and more profit was made through the salt trade. Both sides benefited from this. The wealth of the salt merchants impressed the emperors, and their donations helped the court through many crises. The city of Yangzhou was known for its loyalty to the Ming dynasty, and also became a jewel of the Qing court. One more thing this study helped to point out is that the wealth gained from salt also supported the magical textiles cloud brocade yunjin of Nanjing and made the legend possible during the mid Qing dynasty.

### **The socio-cultural connections between Yangzhou and Nanjing.**

While walking in Yangzhou, every corner of this town reminds one of the glories of its once-upon-a-time salt trade. The ancient salt merchants' homes, such as the beautiful Bamboo Garden Ge Yuan, He Yuan, the private dwellings that surrounded the Slander Western Lake, and the magnificent temple of Pingshantang, all tell of an aesthetic beauty that was rooted in culture, and of money made from salt. A tiny yet lovely dwelling known as the house of Lin Ruhai, of the father of the first lady Lin Daiyu in the *Dream of the Red Chamber*, was indeed connected to his work, but actually it was the official hotel of the Salt Department of Yangzhou.

The unique architectural forms of Yangzhou, the spatial use and interior designs, the delicate garden designs and Buddhist practice whose influence reached as far as Japan, tell of a complicated story. This story forms a puzzling road from salt to culture, and culture to royal power; and back into salt through silk and other luxuries. Without royal monopoly, the salt merchants would not have accumulated the amount of wealth they did in Yangzhou, and the cloud brocade yunjin would not have reached its technical pinnacle and its high quality. Meanwhile, without learning Confucian texts and behavior, the merchants in Yangzhou had no way of participating in the social life of the court members, and making friends with people like Cao. With the emperor's approval, Cao started using salt money for the silk weaving since 1708, about 230,000 *liang* silver a year. A peasant at the time needed 18 *liang* to live for a year. During this time, Cao's family mediated between the two worlds of literati and the merchants.

The merchants of ancient China had no social status whatsoever. Even very wealthy merchants were looked down upon in Chinese culture. Historically, most professions were classified as *ji*, which means occupation. For example, all officials belonged to *Guan Ji*, all musicians belonged to *Yue Ji*. Even prostitutes had their *ji* but merchants were considered "outcasts," and did not belong in high society. The Yangzhou salt dealers, however, established their own rank of respectable "merchantry" called *shang ji*.<sup>1</sup>

The merchants gained respectability not only through patronage and social welfare, but also by actually transforming themselves into literati. Many salt merchants educated themselves as scholars and poets, and hired the best teachers for their home schools, so that their sons could become scholar-bureaucrats and eventually join the service of the court. Due to the same reason, the profit gained from Yangzhou could be easily transferred into a different royal industry for the Cloud Brocade in Nanjing. And the Cao's family knew how to communicate with the traditional literati, merchants, managers, workers, and the emperor himself. The two separate cities without any apparent connections were once so tightly intertwined that together they created a legendary textile through a unique Chinese context.

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<sup>1</sup> /商籍 (Libu zeli / 禮部則例, 1784 ed,77. Xuezheng quanshu /學政全書, 1793 d, 64) during the 18th century.

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