Chapter I

Brush and Abacus
Scholars and Merchants Seek Profit and Place

Around 1519, Hua Linxiang 華麟祥 was roaming the marketplace in Jingkou 京口 (Zhenjiang Prefecture). Jingkou, located just north of the Six Prefectures where the Grand Canal intersects the Yangzi River, served as the northeast gateway to the southern capital, Nanjing. The robust market economy had turned this strategic location into a transit center, a commercial link between the Six Prefectures and northern regions.

Employed as a teacher there, Hua Linxiang spent his leisure time not so much studying as mingling with merchants and watching them handle business transactions. Drawn into this world, he was tempted to make some money himself. He noticed that red water chestnuts, a special product of his hometown, Wuxi 無錫 (Changzhou Prefecture), were in demand in Jingkou. It was quite easy for him to bring water chestnuts from Wuxi via the Grand Canal. Selling them yielded a good return, and perhaps more importantly, this venture made him determined to become a full-time merchant. Eager to take on risky but potentially more profitable dealings, Hua then speculated on kapok, or *mumian* 木棉. In spite of its low price, his meager savings were insufficient for him to get started. Aware that a family friend had entrusted 200 silver taels to his father, he stole it to purchase the area's entire stock. When the Zhengde Emperor's expedition to Nanjing in 1520 prompted a sudden demand for kapok, the price soared. Hua sold his stockpiles and earned over a million silver taels, or so it was said.[1]

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1 *Huacun tanwang* 花村談望, ch. 2, pp. 12b–13a. A large quantity of kapok was in urgent demand for the consumption of the expeditionary army and

Subsequent commercial successes brought Hua Linxiang considerable wealth, and wealth, in turn, paved the way for his family's social rise in Wuxi. He patronized talented men of letters and artists, gave money to charity, established marriage ties with prominent official families, and encouraged his sons' studies.[2] His investment in their education paid off: one son earned the *jinshi* degree 進士 (the highest, or metropolitan, degree), the other the *juren* degree 舉人 (the provincial degree).[3] This remarkable rise was due at least initially to Hua's career shift from academic to commercial pursuits. His success reassuringly affirmed trade as a realistic and achievable alternative.

Hua Linxiang's story was part of a trend in the Six Prefectures that was picking up momentum at the time. A growing number of "dropouts," perhaps not as lucky and successful as Hua, turned to trying their luck in the marketplace. Such a move was becoming acceptable as the region's openness to commerce coincided with occupational fluidity and social mobility. Imperceptibly, distinctions among social strata were blurring. In Hua's neighboring prefecture of Suzhou, we find many similar examples. Fang Feng 方鳳, a retired scholar-official residing in Kunshan County 昆山, hired a man to teach in his community school. Although earning a decent income, the man quit the job to take up trade. Fang felt sorry for the children whose education was halted, but he uttered no harsh words about the teacher's decision. This is because giving up study and teaching in favor of trade had become a fact of life in the Six Prefectures.[4] Fang observed that this teacher, "long quiescent, craves action" 久靜思動.[5] The tension between the words "quiescence"

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the imperial retinue, causing the price of this otherwise very cheap commodity to skyrocket.

2 Sun Jigao 孫繼皋, *Zongbo ji* 宗伯集 (repr., Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 1993), 1291/487. Sun, a senior official, kept close ties with several prominent branches of the Hua clan through marriage ties and friendship. Compared with these branches, Hua Linxiang's family was modest until he turned it around.

3 *Huacun tanwang*, ch. 2, p. 13a.

4 Lou Jian 婁堅, *Xuegu xuyan* 學古緒言 (repr., Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 1993), 1295/135.

5 Fang Feng 方鳳, *Gaiting cungao* 改亭存稿, XXSKQS (repr., Shanghai: Guji Chubanshe, 2002), 1338/350. Fang Feng and his elder brother Fang Peng 方鵬, both retired government officials, provided free education for children in their community.

and "action" conveys the impatient yearning that drove educated individuals to go after economic opportunities.

Such career changes and the rising status of merchants, both integrally related, caught the attention of many scholars, among them the preeminent philosopher Wang Yangming 王陽明 (1472–1529). He commented favorably on the phenomenon. Drawing upon the Confucian idea of man's moral potential, he asserted that scholars, farmers, artisans, and merchants, although following different occupations, were equal to one another in their striving for moral attainment.[6] Wang's advocacy of moral equivalence helped greatly to weaken the age-old bias against merchants and lift them to an equal footing with the other three classes.[7]

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6 Wang Shouren 王守仁, *Wang Yangming quanji* 王陽明全集 (repr., Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 1992), p. 941. Wang's remark has been frequently cited by modern scholars as an authoritative affirmation of the social enhancement of merchants. It was drawn from the epitaph Wang wrote in 1525 supposedly for the Fang brothers' father. Actually, Fang Peng was disappointed. According to him, he and his brother Fang Feng had asked Wang Yangming to compose the epitaph for their mother. Wang lost the biographical material they provided and asked a mutual friend to send him another copy. The latter mistakenly gave him the biographical account of Fang's father. Wang ended up writing the epitaph about the father instead of the mother. To make things worse, Wang read too much into the merchant background of the wife's family, assuming that Fang's father, under the pressure of his father-in-law, had abandoned study for trade. Based on this assumption, Wang wrote, "[Mr. Fang] began as a student, thence a merchant, and a prefectural clerk after that." Fang Peng complained, "My late father had never been a merchant, ever!" For him, not only was the epitaph intended for his mother useless, but, more disturbingly, his father's life was misrepresented at the hand of this great scholar. See Fang Peng, *Jiaoting cungao/xugao* 矯亭存稿 / 續稿, SKQSCMCS (repr., Jinan: Qilu Chubanshe, 1997), 62/83–84. Despite the error he made, Wang Yangming's characterization of the social phenomenon remains valid. It should be noted that this essay, included in Wang Yangming's work, was dedicated to Fang's father instead of to his mother and modified the language about the father's career change, quietly fixing the problem.

7 Yu Yingshi 余英時, "Zhongguo jinshi zongjiao lunli yu shangren jingshen 中國近世宗教倫理與商人精神," in *Shi yu Zhongguo wenhua* 士與中國文化 (Shanghai: Renmin Chubanshe, 1987), pp. 525–26. Yu uses Wang Yang-

The social rise of merchants did not occur in a vacuum. It owed its impetus largely to scholars entering the market and merchants infiltrating the literati world, trends that stimulated and reinforced one another, simultaneously invigorating Jiangnan society and disturbing its equilibrium. In the following pages, we shall discuss how these trends started, to what degree their intersection energized as well as complicated the relationship between scholars and merchants, and why scholars came to support their merchant counterparts' ascent up the social ladder.

Commercial Contagion

In the Six Prefectures, commercial agriculture, manufacturing, and trade began to gain momentum during the last three decades of the fifteenth century. Suzhou, the leading production and consumption center, was a city "where the goods of all the provinces converge."[8] According to one late fifteenth-century literati account, Suzhou overshadowed other urban centers in Jiangnan for its economic exuberance and cultural splendor. It offered elegant gardens and mansions in the residential neighborhoods; the busy traffic of horses, vehicles, and sedan chairs in the streets; tourist attractions on the waterfront providing delicacies, wine, music, courtesans, and painted boats; and an abundance of luxury and exotic goods for sale in the shops.[9] As a city of lavish spending, vigorous business, and work opportunities, Suzhou absorbed capital, talent, skill, and labor like a sponge.[10]

ming's essay to explain the rise of merchants, an issue I shall discuss later.

8 Brook, *The Confusions of Pleasure*, p. 197. Also see Marmé, *Suzhou, Where the Goods of All the Provinces Converge*, p. 5.

9 Wang Qi 王錡 (1433–99), a respectable scholar in Suzhou, committed himself to scholarship instead of pursuing an official career. As a curious observer, he recorded the robust commercial life in Suzhou. See his *Yupu zaji* 寓圃雜記 (repr., Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1997), p. 42. Yang Xunji 楊循吉 (1458–1546), Wang's fellow native and a well-known writer, wrote an epitaph for Wang. See his *Songchoutang ji* 松籌堂集, SKQSCMCS (repr., Jinan: Qilu Chubanshe, 1997), 43/261–62.

10 Marmé, *Suzhou, Where the Goods of All the Provinces Converge*, pp. 3 and 234. Also see Kai-wing Chow, *Publishing, Culture, and Power in Early Modern China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), pp. 85–87.