JIANGNAN WATER SETTLEMENTS
Spatial Integration of the Social Classes
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ABSTRACT

The immense wealth generated by the water regions of Jiangnan suggests a highly organized network of people and activities that operate and determine the welfare and economy of bigger China. This network lays the foundation for a hierarchical social system consisting scholars, peasants, craftsmen and merchants. Commercial activities, at first limited within the walls of major cities like Suzhou and Shaoxing, began to spread throughout the hinterland after mid-Tang Dynasty. Villages at important nodes on the waterways slowly transform into market towns, helping the flow of people, goods, money and ideas, locally, regionally, and nationally.

Water towns thus become a cross-road of different social groups based on their wealth and official status. In the light that the towns were essentially evolved from a rural village, it is faced with the pressure of having to accommodate the consumption patterns of the social groups.

The pleasure seeking literati come to Jiangnan in admiration of its well-known beauty of “small bridges over streaming water”; numerous writers describe the distinct nature of urban experience, noting the commerce and leisure activities that made the water towns a vital source of inspiration. In contrast, water towns are a place where the merchants and peasants trade their products, and to them the efficient flow of goods is very essential. The canal, street, and buildings form multifunctional spaces for daily routines and spontaneous activities of the market town’s residents.

The seemingly small town is now a matrix of people, goods, money and ideas, and its image go far beyond the simple tourists’ photos of boat and bridges.

Based on the different consumption patterns of the social classes, the dissertation hopes to establish a framework for reading the spatial integration of the water towns. It will look at the different spatial meanings and implications to the different social class. It is also essential to ask: Was the town able to encompass both the literati class and the commoner class; the rich and the poor?

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