



The Literati in Cultural Integration: On the Ma Brothers and Their Cultural Circle in the Qing Dynasty

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How to cite this paper: Jinkun Wang, Ngoi Guat Peng. (2024) The Literati in Cultural Integration: On the Ma Brothers and Their Cultural Circle in the Qing Dynasty. *Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Science*, 8(7), 1580-1585.

DOI: 10.26855/jhass.2024.07.007

Received: May 31, 2024

Accepted: June 30, 2024

Published: July 31, 2024

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Abstract

This paper provides an in-depth examination of the cultural consciousness and practices of Ma Yueguan and Ma Yuelu, who were not only successful merchants but also pivotal figures in the cultural tapestry of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912). Their endeavors in the economic sphere were rivaled by their unwavering commitment to cultural development, which is evident through their extensive collection of books, meticulous engraving of literary works, and the fostering of vibrant poetry societies. The paper explores the intricate relationship between their family's educational legacy and the formation of their cultural consciousness, which in turn influenced their active participation in local cultural construction. It underscores the Ma brothers' role in promoting Yangzhou's cultural growth and their significant contributions to the broader cultural landscape of the Qing era. The analysis of their impact on the cultural development of the Qing Dynasty offers valuable insights into the interplay between economic success and cultural patronage, as well as the implications for modern cultural research and the understanding of the Huizhou merchant community's cultural legacy.

Keywords

Ma Yueguan; Ma Yuelu; Huizhou merchants; Cultural consciousness; Humanistic sentiment

1. Introduction

Huizhou merchants, as a specific concept in Chinese history, have significant economic and cultural characteristics. During the Ming and Qing Dynasties, Huizhou merchants played a special role in the socio-economic field and made important contributions. Studying the development and evolution of Huizhou merchants not only provides insights into the socio-economic operations of the time but also reveals their contributions to the cultural field. Ma Yueguan and Ma Yuelu, as representatives of the Huizhou merchants in Yangzhou during the early Qing Dynasty, achieved significant economic success and made important contributions to cultural construction (Fang Shengliang, 2024). This paper aims to explore the cultural consciousness and cultural practices of Ma Yueguan and Ma Yuelu, revealing their unique roles and historical significance in cultural construction.

1. The Cultural Consciousness of Ma Yueguan and Ma Yuelu

1.1 Family Background and Early Education

The cultural consciousness of Ma Yueguan and Ma Yuelu, Huizhou merchants residing in Yangzhou during the Qing

Dynasty, is closely related to their family background and early education. The Ma family originated from Qimen in Huizhou, with a history tracing back to the Warring States period. The Ma family gradually rose to prominence during the Ming and Qing Dynasties, becoming a leading family among Huizhou merchants (Hang Shijun, 1985). The Ma family valued education, and Ma Yueguan and Ma Yuelu received excellent family education from an early age, fostering their love and pursuit of culture.

The Ma brothers' great-grandfather, Ma Daji, was a scholar, and his son, Ma Chengyun, was the first to arrive in Yangzhou. Ma Chengyun was known for his charitable deeds, as recorded in the "Revised Gazetteer of Yangzhou Prefecture": "Ma Yueguan... his grandfather Chengyun set up a porridge factory to provide relief during the Kangxi period." Ma Chengyun had three children, with Ma Qian being the second. Ma Qian served as a magistrate and married two wives, Hong and Chen. Ma Yueguan and Ma Yuelu were born to Chen. This family background and early education provided the Ma brothers with a deep cultural foundation, laying the groundwork for their later cultural consciousness.

The Ma family not only achieved significant economic success but also made important contributions to the cultural field. The family background and early education of the Ma brothers laid a solid foundation for their cultural consciousness. The Ma family valued education, and Ma Yueguan and Ma Yuelu received excellent family education from an early age, fostering their love and pursuit of culture. The Ma brothers' great-grandfather, Ma Daji, was a scholar, and his son, Ma Chengyun, was the first to arrive in Yangzhou. Ma Chengyun was known for his charitable deeds, as recorded in the "Revised Gazetteer of Yangzhou Prefecture": "Ma Yueguan... his grandfather Chengyun set up a porridge factory to provide relief during the Kangxi period." Ma Chengyun had three children, with Ma Qian being the second. Ma Qian served as a magistrate and married two wives, Hong and Chen. Ma Yueguan and Ma Yuelu were born to Chen. This family background and early education provided the Ma brothers with a deep cultural foundation, laying the groundwork for their later cultural consciousness.

1.2 Formation of Cultural Consciousness

Cultural consciousness refers to the recognition and conscious pursuit of one's own culture by individuals or groups. The cultural consciousness of Ma Yueguan and Ma Yuelu is mainly reflected in their love and pursuit of culture. They not only inherited the cultural traditions of their family but also continuously improved their cultural literacy through practice.

The Ma brothers received an excellent family education from an early age and pursued lifelong cultural learning. This cultural habit and self-awareness led to their academic achievements. Driven by cultural consciousness, the Ma brothers not only achieved significant accomplishments in literature and art but also actively participated in local cultural construction, promoting the development of Yangzhou culture. Their cultural consciousness is reflected not only in their personal cultural pursuits but also in their contributions to social culture.

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2. Cultural Practices of Ma Yueguan and Ma Yuelu

2.1 Book Collection and Engraving Activities

The achievements of Ma Yueguan and Ma Yuelu in book collection and engraving are significant aspects of their cultural practices. The Xiaolinglong Mountain Pavilion was their place for book collection, with a vast and diverse collection, making it an important symbol of Yangzhou culture at the time.

In the early Qing Dynasty, Yangzhou had a large number of private book collections, especially among the Huizhou merchants. For instance, Cheng Jinfang's family collection reached fifty to sixty thousand volumes, making it one of the largest collections of the time. Zheng Xiaru's "Congui Hall" had a very rich collection, and Huang Zongxi, in his later years, often borrowed rare books from there for copying. Jiang Chun's "Suiyue Reading Tower" and Jiang

Fang's "Zilinglong Mountain Pavilion" also housed many ancient books of poetry, literature, and paintings. However, in terms of scale and influence, none could compare to the Ma brothers. The "Draft of the Annals of Anhui" mentions that the Ma family's books were all exquisitely bound, with many people hired to hand-copy books continuously. This shows the Ma brothers' emphasis on book collection and their meticulous binding. Quan Zuwang even stated that the "Congshu Tower" had more than one hundred thousand volumes, and he noted that the famous book collectors of the past hundred years were mainly the Xu family of Kunshan, the Wang family of Xincheng, and the Zhu family of Xiushui. In comparison, the Ma brothers' collection far exceeded theirs.

In addition to collecting books, the Ma brothers also engaged in book engraving. The book engraving industry in Yangzhou during the Qing Dynasty was extraordinarily prosperous. According to Wang Cheng's "Study on Yangzhou Book Engraving," there were nearly nine hundred book engraving houses in Yangzhou, producing more than two thousand types of books, totaling over one hundred thousand volumes, with about 80% of these from the Qing Dynasty (Wang Cheng, 1986). The prosperity of Yangzhou book engraving began in the early Qing Dynasty and can be divided into official and private engravings based on the organizers. The Huizhou merchants, with their substantial capital, played significant roles in both categories. Official engravings were mainly focused on the "Zi" category for imperial use, occasionally including historical and local chronicles, while private engravings by Huizhou merchants covered a wide range of "Jing," "Shi," "Zi," and "Ji" categories. The Ma brothers were particularly prominent among the Huizhou merchants, with their engravings being praised for their precision and known as the "Ma Edition."

Moreover, the Ma brothers also participated directly in editing and proofreading using their engraved editions, demonstrating their profound proofreading skills. For instance, when Li E was compiling the "Records of Song Poetry" in the Xiaolinglong Mountain Pavilion, he often relied on the Ma brothers' verification for difficult issues related to works and editions. Thus, when the "Records of Song Poetry" was published in one hundred volumes in the twelfth year of Qianlong (1747), Li E's inscription of "compiled together with Ma Yueguan" and "compiled together with Ma Yuelu" was absolutely true (Li E, 1982).

2.2 Poetry Societies and Literary Interactions

Ma Yueguan and Ma Yuelu were not only book collectors and engravers in the Yangzhou cultural circle but also organizers of poetry societies and active literati. Centered around the Xiaolinglong Mountain Pavilion, they befriended many scholars and formed a thriving cultural ecosystem.

During the Yongzheng and Qianlong periods, numerous literati frequented the Xiaolinglong Mountain Pavilion, including Li E, Ding Jing, Chen Zhuan, Chen Zhang, Yao Shiyu, Lu Xichou, Lou Qi, Min Hua, Fang Shiju, Zhu Daosun, Quan Zuwang, Hang Shijun, Hu Qiheng, Cheng Mengxing, Fu Zeng, Lu Zhonghui, Zhang Sike, Zhang Shijin, Wang Zao, Fang Shishu, Fang Shi, the "Eight Eccentrics of Yangzhou," Lu Jianzen, and others. Some were impoverished scholars, some were dismissed or retired officials, some were merchant-scholars, some were painters and poets, some were official literati, and some had multiple identities. Many scholars gathered at the Xiaolinglong Mountain Pavilion, traveling to places like Jinshan, Jiaoshan, She Mountain, and Linwu, where they composed poems together, creating a large number of works. The Ma brothers' collection of books and paintings at the Xiaolinglong Mountain Pavilion also provided convenience to their friends. This is reflected in three main aspects:

Firstly, the Ma brothers' collection of precious calligraphy, paintings, and cultural relics inspired the "Eight Eccentrics of Yangzhou" to study and collect high-priced contemporary artworks, stimulating their creative enthusiasm. As mentioned earlier, the Ma brothers loved calligraphy and painting and had a high appreciation ability, which they shared with painters. Their rich collection of calligraphy and paintings provided convenience for painters to study and innovate, offering them rare opportunities to absorb knowledge and create new works. In the early Qing Dynasty, the close combination of scholars and merchants endowed Huizhou merchants with love and participation in cultural arts, guiding their cultural consumption. Inviting famous artists to create paintings and appreciating cultural relics were indispensable parts of Huizhou merchants' cultural consumption. For example, Jin Nong and Gao Xiang often stayed at the Xiaolinglong Mountain Pavilion to create paintings for the Ma family. It can be said that the significant economic investment of Huizhou merchants greatly stimulated the creation of the "Eight Eccentrics of Yangzhou."

Secondly, the Ma brothers provided learning opportunities and venues for official figures. For instance, the Salt Transport Commissioner Lu Jianzen not only used the economic strength of Huizhou merchants to engrave many exquisite secret books but also utilized their book collections for self-study. Lu was particularly grateful to the Ma brothers, mentioning in the "Preface to the Poetry Anthology of the National Dynasty" that the books he borrowed for reading were from Huang Kunpu in the capital and Ma Yueguan and Ma Yuelu in Yangzhou. Lu also

recommended impoverished scholars to use the Ma family's book collection for study, ultimately achieving success. The Imperial Reader Yan Changming, who initially fell into poverty in Yangzhou, was recommended by Lu Jianzen to study and discuss at the Xiaolinglong Mountain Pavilion, eventually becoming successful.

Thirdly, the Ma brothers nurtured common scholars. For instance, the impoverished scholar Li E, who dedicated his life to academic culture, made comprehensive use of the Ma family's book collection. Li E lived in the Xiaolinglong Mountain Pavilion for many years, utilizing the rich collection, especially poetry, sayings, mountain classics, and geographical records, to write works such as "Records of Song Poetry" in 100 volumes, "Records of Southern Song Academy Paintings" in 8 volumes, "Liao History Supplements," "Eastern City Miscellaneous Records," and "Lake Boat Records." These works were the result of utilizing the Xiaolinglong Mountain Pavilion's collection. It can be said that Li E's achievements as a poet and scholar greatly benefited from his continuous reading and utilization of the Ma family's book collection at the Xiaolinglong Mountain Pavilion.

2.3 Contributions to Local Cultural Development

Ma Yueguan and Ma Yuelu not only achieved significant accomplishments in literature and art but also actively participated in local cultural development, promoting the cultural growth of Yangzhou. Their cultural practices are reflected not only in their personal cultural pursuits but also in their contributions to social culture.

The Ma brothers were deeply humanistic, with extensive social connections, forming a vibrant cultural ecosystem centered around the Xiaolinglong Mountain Pavilion. As is well known, humanistic sentiment is a very broad concept. Here, we refer to it as having a certain cultural awareness and cultivation, a benevolent heart, maintaining pure humanity, pursuing an independent personality including cultural character, and having a full understanding and support for cultural phenomena, especially showing sympathy, understanding, and kindness towards scholars and literati. The Ma brothers received a good family education from an early age and were lifelong learners. As the saying goes, "After the rain, the eaves are still rustling, reading books under the lamp is not yet finished. Already resigned to being a dull scholar, let others mock the scholar's hat." This kind of cultural habit and self-awareness led to their academic achievements. The Ma brothers did many good deeds for scholars and literati. For example, Lou Qi from Changzhou was still unmarried at an old age, and the Ma brothers helped him find a spouse to complete his family. Quan Jishi contracted an incurable disease, and the Ma brothers offered a large reward to seek famous doctors. Tang Taishi from Tianmen died in Yangzhou, and the Ma brothers spent money to bury him. Because of these two points, coupled with the Ma brothers' financial strength, the Xiaolinglong Mountain Pavilion was enveloped in their humanistic sentiment, deeply attracting scholars and literati in Yangzhou. The "Yangzhou Painting Boat Record" says: "The poetry and literature gatherings in Yangzhou are most prosperous at the Ma's Xiaolinglong Mountain Pavilion, Cheng's Xiaoyuan, and Zheng's Xiuyuan." It can be said that the Xiaolinglong Mountain Pavilion was at the cultural center of Yangzhou, serving as an important cultural venue for many scholars and literati in Yangzhou. They gathered to sing and harmonize, discuss poetry, inspire each other, support each other, forming a cultural ecosystem with a good operational trend. The existence of this cultural circle also endowed the Xiaolinglong Mountain Pavilion with humanistic significance beyond garden culture.

The Ma brothers' contributions to cultural practice were not limited to literature and art but also included practical actions for local cultural development. They actively participated in local public welfare activities, such as setting up porridge factories to relieve famine victims, building canals to improve sanitation conditions, and establishing academies to cultivate talents. These actions not only reflected their humanistic sentiment but also played a positive role in the cultural development of Yangzhou.

From the above analysis, it can be seen that the cultural practices of Ma Yueguan and Ma Yuelu not only enriched their personal cultural lives but also had a profound impact on the cultural development of Yangzhou and even the entire early Qing Dynasty. They practiced cultural awareness with practical actions, reflecting deep humanistic sentiment and leaving a valuable cultural heritage for future generations.

3. Humanistic Sentiment of Ma Yueguan and Ma Yuelu

3.1 Support for Scholars and Literati

Ma Yueguan and Ma Yuelu not only had deep cultural accumulation but also supported scholars and literati with practical actions, reflecting their profound humanistic sentiment. They provided important help for the growth and development of scholars and literati through offering book resources, financial support, and cultural exchanges.

Firstly, the Xiaolinglong Mountain Pavilion of the Ma brothers had a rich collection of books, providing valuable learning resources for scholars and literati. Scholars such as Li E, Ding Jing, Chen Zhuan, Chen Zhang, and Yao Shiyu borrowed books from the Xiaolinglong Mountain Pavilion for academic research and creation. Li E mentioned in the preface of "Song Poetry Chronicles" that the Ma brothers provided a lot of help during the compilation of "Song Poetry Chronicles," showing their important role in academic research.

Secondly, the Ma brothers generously provided financial support for the lives and creations of scholars and literati. Hang Shijun mentioned in the "Epitaph of Ma Jun, Assistant Minister of the Ministry of Rites" that the Ma brothers were fundamentally about benefiting people and things. They not only set up porridge factories to relieve famine victims but also funded the lives and creations of scholars and literati. Scholars such as Qiantang Fan Zhen, Changzhou Lou Qi, and Li Zhengjun received financial support from the Ma brothers, allowing them to continue their academic research and creation.

Finally, the Ma brothers promoted the growth and development of scholars and literati through cultural exchanges. The Xiaolinglong Mountain Pavilion was not only a place for book collection but also a venue for literati gatherings. The Ma brothers often invited scholars and literati to the Xiaolinglong Mountain Pavilion for cultural exchanges, discussing poetry, inspiring each other, and supporting each other, forming a good cultural ecosystem.

3.2 Humanistic Sentiment in Poetry Creation

Ma Yueguan and Ma Yuelu not only reflected their humanistic sentiment in cultural practice but also expressed their deep feelings for friendship, parting, and classical literature and artifacts in their poetry creation.

Friendship and parting are important themes in the poetry creation of the Ma brothers. The deep friendship between them and the scholars and literati often manifested in their poems. For example, Ma Yueguan wrote in "Sending Wang Meipan to the Capital": "Light rain and slight cold in the wheat autumn, leaving the fishing boat in the river village. Can one rely on others for a long-term strategy, recording the farewell should still remember the old travels." This poem expresses his deep friendship and reluctance to part with his friend Wang Meipan.

The poetry creation of the Ma brothers is also filled with their insights and reflections on classical literature and artifacts. Their appreciation and collection of ancient paintings and calligraphy not only reflect their cultural literacy but also express their deep feelings for historical culture in their poems. For example, Ma Yuelu wrote in "Song of the Bronze Goose Foot Lamp of the Han Dynasty Shoushan Palace": "This scroll of figures has a profound and majestic aura, brilliant and dynamic, truly a divine piece." This poem expresses his appreciation and admiration for ancient artifacts.

4. The Historical Significance of Ma Yueguan and Ma Yuelu's Cultural Practices

4.1 Influence on the Cultural Development of the Qing Dynasty

The cultural practices of Ma Yueguan and Ma Yuelu had a profound impact on the cultural development of the Qing Dynasty. They not only achieved remarkable accomplishments in literature and art but also promoted the cultural development of Yangzhou and the entire early Qing Dynasty through book collection, book engraving, and cultural exchanges.

Firstly, the Xiaolinglong Mountain Pavilion of the Ma brothers became an important symbol of Yangzhou culture in the early Qing Dynasty. Their activities in book collection and engraving not only enriched the cultural resources of Yangzhou but also provided significant support for the academic research and creation of scholars. Literati such as Li E, Ding Jing, and Chen Zhuan conducted academic research and creation at the Xiaolinglong Mountain Pavilion, forming a good cultural ecosystem.

Secondly, the Ma brothers promoted the growth and development of literati through cultural exchanges. They often invited scholars to the Xiaolinglong Mountain Pavilion for cultural exchanges, where they discussed poetry, inspired each other, and supported one another, forming a good cultural ecosystem. The existence of this cultural ecosystem not only enriched the cultural life of Yangzhou but also promoted the development of literature and art in the early Qing Dynasty.

Finally, the cultural practices of the Ma brothers had a profound impact on the cultural development of the early Qing Dynasty. Through book collection, book engraving, and cultural exchanges, they promoted the cultural development of Yangzhou and the entire early Qing Dynasty. Their cultural practices not only enriched their personal cultural lives but also had a profound impact on the cultural development of Yangzhou and the entire early Qing

Dynasty.

4.2 Insights for Modern Cultural Research

The cultural practices of Ma Yueguan and Ma Yuelu not only had a profound impact on the cultural development of the Qing Dynasty but also provide important insights for modern cultural research.

Firstly, the cultural consciousness and cultural practices of the Ma brothers highlight the important role of cultural consciousness in cultural development. Through book collection, book engraving, and cultural exchanges, they promoted the cultural development of Yangzhou and the entire early Qing Dynasty. This spirit of cultural consciousness and cultural practice provides important insights for modern cultural research.

Secondly, the humanistic feelings of the Ma brothers highlight the important role of culture in social development. By supporting scholars and participating in local public welfare activities, they promoted the cultural development of Yangzhou. This spirit of humanistic feelings provides important insights for modern cultural research.

Finally, the cultural practices of the Ma brothers highlight the important role of culture in social development. Through book collection, book engraving, and cultural exchanges, they promoted the cultural development of Yangzhou and the entire early Qing Dynasty. This spirit of cultural practice provides important insights for modern cultural research.

5. Conclusion

As representative figures of Yangzhou Huizhou merchants in the early Qing Dynasty, Ma Yueguan, and Ma Yuelu, through their cultural consciousness and cultural practices, not only achieved remarkable accomplishments in literature and art but also actively participated in local cultural construction, promoting the cultural development of Yangzhou. Their cultural consciousness is reflected not only in their personal cultural pursuits but also in their contributions to social culture. Their cultural practices not only enriched their personal cultural lives but also had a profound impact on the cultural development of Yangzhou and the entire early Qing Dynasty. Through the study of Ma Yueguan and Ma Yuelu, we can gain a more comprehensive understanding of Huizhou merchant culture and its important position in Chinese cultural history.

Funding

This paper is supported by the Anhui Business and Trade Vocational and Technical College 2023 Academic Support Program for Outstanding Talents in "Huizhou Literature and Art" (Project Number: smbrc202303).

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