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Symbolic Exchange as Recognition: Tu Long's Social Strategies with Paintings and Calligraphy in Late Ming China

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In the late Ming dynasty, literati gift exchange extended beyond material transaction, becoming a sophisticated medium through which cultural capital was displayed and social recognition was negotiated. This article examines how paintings, calligraphy, and other literary-artistic objects circulated within Tu Long's (1543–1605) networks, arguing that these exchanges operated as acts of mutual recognition grounded in shared cultural and religious values, cultivated dispositions, and elite lifestyles. Through case studies of major works—including the Portrait of Master Tanyang and the Buddha-Mother Painting—alongside landscape paintings, calligraphic pieces, and fans inscribed with poetry, the study demonstrates how Tu Long strategically mobilised cultural objects to navigate overlapping religious and literati circles. Even ostensibly religious artworks were shaped primarily by literati cultural sensibilities and served to reinforce social belonging and to articulate individuality within distinct literati communities. The article further shows how Tu Long converted cultural capital into material support during his post-dismissal crisis, particularly through exchanges with patrons, revealing the entanglement of symbolic value and economic necessity. Ultimately, the circulation of literary-artistic objects emerges as a central mechanism through which late-Ming literati pursued esteem, sustained relationships, and positioned themselves within multiple, intersecting social spheres.

晚明文人的禮物交換，兼具社會功能與象徵意義，文化物品的流通成為爭取承認與地位的關鍵機制。本文以屠隆（1543–1605）為例，探討書畫等水墨藝術品如何超越物質交換，轉化為社會資本與文化資本，並成為一種爭取承認的實踐。此類交換植根於共享的價值觀與生活方式，從文化審美延伸至宗教領域。本文通過分析屠隆的策略性贈禮，揭示水墨藝術品交換如何建立並鞏固文人的關係，如何基於文人的文化品格在文人社群中踐行承認的博弈。

Keywords: social recognition, gift exchange, symbolic capital, artistic objects, late-Ming literati

關鍵詞： 社會承認，禮物交換，象徵資本，水墨藝術，晚明文人

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Introduction

In the late Ming dynasty, the expanding commodity economy reshaped social relations across different status groups, including the literati. Within this environment, literati increasingly established connections through the circulation of material objects—particularly refined cultural items such as paintings, calligraphy, fans inscribed with poetry, ink sticks, inkstones, and antiques. These object-based relationships were conditioned by the distinctive cultural disposition and cultivation of the literati, so that both the objects themselves and the modes of exchange bore the imprint of literati taste, aesthetic values, and shared cultural norms. Gift exchange thus became a means of reinforcing relationships grounded in shared values and norms.

To clarify why gift exchange held such significance for late-Ming literati, it is necessary to consider the deeper dynamics that structured their social interactions. Theories of recognition developed in the Hegelian tradition emphasise that individuals are not only “conditioned by a social context but constituted by and individuated by their social relations”, through which social acknowledgement is generated between subjects in the community, such that an essential human need is to recognise oneself in one’s environment. (Khurana 2021, 553) Recognition involves reciprocal relations in which “I” can not only recognise another person but another person can also recognise “me”, and “We” can recognise each other—what Hegel describes as “the I that is We and the We that is I”. (Hegel 2018, 177) Establishing and maintaining relations within a community grounded in shared values and norms therefore ensured that individuals could recognise one another appropriately.

This perspective helps clarify the function of gift exchange as an act of recognition among late-Ming literati. While Bourdieu’s theory of symbolic exchange illuminates how gifts operate as symbolic capital— “a sort of message or symbol suited to creating a social link”, representing the cultural and social standing of those involved (Bourdieu 1998, 104)—it does not fully explain why literati continued to rely on gift exchange as a significant mode of social interaction in a period when their social status remained relatively stable. Existing scholarship has emphasised the identity crisis produced by the rise of consumer society, as wealthy merchants increasingly shared the same spaces of consumption as the literati. (Chang 1994, 53–63; Zhang 2007, 130–132 and 2008, 125–130) Brook famously observes that “elites and commoners both could afford to buy their way out of simplicity and obscurity into pleasure and notoriety”. (Brook 1999, 151) Yet the implications of this crisis were uneven. Although the literati experienced material competition from wealthy merchants, the hierarchical structure of the imperial social order formally remained intact; the literati continued to occupy the highest position within the four essential occupational classes 四民秩序. At the same time, however, the social landscape was becoming increasingly fluid, as merchants and even certain groups of craftsmen rose in wealth and cultural influence while many peasants

faced downward mobility. These shifts created a sense of instability, even as the ideological hierarchy itself persisted.

For elite literati—those who held relatively high social status, belonged to influential lineages, and enjoyed strong reputations within the literati community due to outstanding talent and achievements—the primary source of anxiety did not arise solely from merchants or other external groups. Rather, it emerged from within the literati community itself. The fluctuation of official careers—often exacerbated by factionalism—, the instability of personal reputation, and the competitive social environment defined by literati values and norms meant that individuals were constantly negotiating how they were perceived, valued, and acknowledged by their peers. In this context, the deeper motivation behind gift exchange was not the pursuit of distinction from other social classes, but the pursuit of recognition within a community that shared the same cultural values and norms.

Honneth's theory of social recognition—particularly his account of esteem grounded in autonomy and individual achievements—offers a productive framework for understanding the deeper motivations behind late-Ming literati gift exchange. In the imperial social order, one's standing in society and one's status as a moral and political agent were traditionally fused within the concept of honour: rights and duties were attached to one's status group or estate, rather than to one's status as an autonomous individual. By contrast, modern theories distinguish "status as a person" from "social standing", generating different modes of recognition—self-respect and self-esteem—based on the equal moral status of autonomous agents and on the value attributed to their particular achievements within a community. (Honneth 1995, p.xiv; 22–23; 121–130; Miller 2016, 98; Iser 2019) Although late-Ming literati operated within a hierarchy grounded in honour (*rong* 榮)—a form of recognition rooted in social standing defined by the Confucian moral order and by the prestige associated with fulfilling literati roles—their interactions within literati circles increasingly reflected dynamics closer to esteem, which in literati discourse often appeared under the term *ming* (名): not mere "reputation" in a superficial sense, but a deeper form of acknowledgment grounded in cultivated achievement and the evaluative judgments of one's peers. Individuals sought acknowledgement not simply of their inherited or institutionally granted status, but of their cultivated virtues, aesthetic discernment, and personal accomplishments. (*TLJ*, 4.463)

Gift exchange thus became a medium through which literati could give and receive such esteem. By circulating cultural objects that embodied their literary, artistic, or religious commitments, they created and sustained reciprocal relations that affirmed their standing within the community. In this sense, gift exchange was not merely a symbolic act in Bourdieu's sense, but a means of securing esteem within a shared cultural world—an intersubjective process that recognition theory helps illuminate with greater precision.

Paintings and calligraphy were especially potent in this regard. Beyond their aesthetic refinement, these works embodied literary, cultural, or religious ideas in both content and

form, distinguishing them from other cultural objects such as fine paper or ink sticks. When exchanged as gifts, their social value was no less than their artistic and economic value; their cultural significance became a crucial component of their social value in maintaining literati relationships. Their circulation within the literati community thus constituted a distinct category of gift exchange, deeply implicated in the literati's pursuit of esteem.

Clunas's study of Wen Zhengming 文徵明 (1470–1559) demonstrates how paintings and calligraphy circulated as social currency within elite networks. (Clunas 2004) In *Superfluous Things*, he had already argued that material culture operated as a medium of distinction, as elite commentators sought to reaffirm their social and cultural status through connoisseurship and discourses on objects when the lower orders were adopting elite forms of cultural consumption. (Clunas 1991, 155; 8) Together, these works illuminate the role of material objects in shaping elite identity in the late Ming. Yet they also reveal the limits of interpreting literati gift exchange solely through the lens of distinction. Wen's exchanges, as Clunas notes, occurred among elite circles where status was already secure, and elite anxieties in cultural consumption concern the boundaries between social classes rather than the dynamics within the literati class itself. For literati, however, the significance of artworks lay neither in their artistic content alone nor in patronage or obligation, (Clunas 2004, 43–48) nor in distinguishing themselves from other classes, but in the capacity of these objects to embody and communicate cultured virtues and values. Their circulation within literati networks served above all to secure esteem and to affirm one's standing within a shared cultural world.

Studies of late-Ming material culture have illuminated how objects contributed to identity formation and anxiety, (Clunas 1991, 150–165; Brook 1999, 173–237; Wu 2008, 65–164) yet they have paid less attention to the interpersonal dynamics of recognition within the literati community. Cultural objects—especially paintings, calligraphy, and fans inscribed with poetry—played a particularly prominent role in literati interactions when exchanged as gifts. These exchanges functioned not primarily to distinguish individuals from other classes but to foster mutual recognition grounded in shared values and norms. Within the literati community, cultural objects also operated as social capital: possession of such items facilitated incorporation into networks of solidarity, in which members recognised one another through shared aesthetic values and moral expectations. Such mutual recognition did not merely affirm one's standing in the eyes of others; it also generated the internal self-relations—self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem—that, in Honneth's terms, arise when individuals see their own worth reflected and validated by their peers. (Honneth 1995, 25; Miller 2016, 98). Gift exchange of cultural objects thus constituted a symbolic act of recognition, reinforcing relationships within the literati community.

This article examines two major paintings—the Portrait of Master Tanyang (*Tanyang dashi xiang* 曇陽大師像) and the Buddha-Mother Painting (*Fomu tu* 佛母圖), mentioned in Tu Long's letters to Shen Maoxue 沈懋學 (1539–1582) and Wang Daokun 汪道昆 (1525–

1593) (*TLJ*, 4.325; 6.345)—together with landscape paintings, calligraphy, and fans inscribed with poetry that circulated among Tu Long's social relations. Tu Long serves as an illuminating example because of his fluctuating official career, his diverse forms of social interaction, and his active participation in Jiangnan 江南 elite cultural communities. His letters record extensive networks of elite literati relations, and, born into a distinguished lineage in Yin County 鄞縣, he also maintained close ties with local elite cultural circles. Combined with his outstanding literary talent and cultural cultivation, his interactions through cultural objects reveal representative patterns of gift exchange among late-Ming literati.

The paintings and artworks exchanged by Tu Long further illuminate how gift exchange operated as an act of recognition across cultural and religious spheres. The two major paintings were closely tied to literati religious practice and cultivation, particularly the Portrait of Master Tanyang, which reflects the literati's engagement with the Unity of the Three Teachings (*sanjiao heyi* 三教合一). At the same time, this painting also signalled Tu Long's pursuit of self-mastery within social spaces shaped by highly individualised forms of religious perception and cultivation, and by the interpersonal interactions that such personalised commitments generated. This analysis further demonstrates how literati maintained status and esteem within various literati communities and how they competed for greater recognition within these overlapping spheres.

Tu Long's Religious Practice and Social Strategies

During the late Ming dynasty, beyond the pursuit of success in the imperial examinations and hierarchical rank in officialdom, literati devoted considerable attention to self-cultivation—not only through daily practices of discipline and self-improvement but also through sustained engagement with religious doctrines, particularly Buddhism and Daoism. Through these practices, they gradually shaped a social sphere oriented by shared literary expertise, cultural disposition, and religious interests. Compared with lower-level literati, elite figures whose social status and reputations extended across local and regional networks found participation in Buddhist and Daoist communities an important arena for articulating how these traditions could be integrated into an elite identity grounded in Confucian learning.

This sphere provided a setting in which individuals cultivated relationships with others who shared similar commitments to self-cultivation and religious engagement. Within such communities, the effort to reconcile the Three Teachings—Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism—functioned not simply as an intellectual synthesis but as a means of establishing shared values and norms that enabled mutual recognition among participants. The flourishing of the Unity of the Three Teachings in the late Ming thus reflected both a pursuit

of self-mastery, which granted the literati autonomy in shaping their own spiritual frameworks, and a collective process through which they articulated a moral and cultural order grounded in their own judgement and needs.

The literati's deep engagement with the Unity of the Three Teachings stimulated significant developments in both its theoretical articulation and its practical cultivation, while also inspiring a wide range of literary and artistic production, especially paintings. Literati expressed their understanding of the Three Teachings not only through essays and treatises but also through visual representations that conveyed their interpretations of the relationships and hierarchies among Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism. As Brook observes, elite Confucian thinkers generally regarded their intellectual tradition as superior: "they were able to accept that Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism were different modes for grasping the same reality. But not all the Three Teachings were equal". (Brook 1993, 169) In their discussions, literati debated the primacy and subordination of the three teachings and how they could function as a unity, as seen in Wang Shouren's 王守仁 (Wang Yangming 王陽明, 1472-1529) School of Mind, Lin Zhao'en's 林兆恩 (1517-1598) Sanyi Teaching 三一教, and Tu Long's own writings. (Tang 2023; *Tu Long Ji*, 9; 10) In painting, these distinctions were often visualised through the spatial arrangement of representative figures—Confucius, Buddha (Sakyamuni), and Laozi—as exemplified by Ding Yungeng's 丁雲鵬 (1547-1628) Painting of the Three Teachings (*Sanjiao tu* 三教圖). (Shao 2022)

Scholarship on the Unity of the Three Teachings has largely focused on discursive treatises, epistolary essays, and literary works; even studies of paintings on this theme tend to concentrate on iconography. (See Langlois & Sun 1983; Berling 1980; Eichman 2014; Wang 2020; Shao 2022) Rarely has this discourse been examined in relation to literati recognition. Yet the elaboration and visualisation of the Three Teachings in late-Ming paintings were not only significant in literary, artistic, religious, and ideological terms; they also functioned as a key mode through which literati sought esteem within their social world. Visual art provided a primary vehicle for asserting one's cultivated religious understanding and for demonstrating participation in a shared value system, thereby enabling literati to secure recognition within a defined social sphere.

Amid this religious fervour, Tu Long—an accomplished and cultured elite literatus—was deeply engaged in religious cultivation and practice, encompassing self-cultivation, social interaction, and connections with Buddhist and Daoist figures and institutions. He achieved notable success in articulating the Unity of the Three Teachings and actively practised both Buddhism and Daoism. His *Hongbao Ji* 鴻苞集 is regarded as a compendium of his thought on the Three Teachings, including essays such as *Luyuan Lun Sanjiao* 鹿園論三教, *Sanjiao Zhichu* 三教至處, and *Sanjiao Yidao* 三教一道. (*TLJ*, 9.745-778) In letters to friends such as Wang Shizhen 王世貞 (1526-1590), Wang Daokun 汪道昆, and Shen Yiguan 沈一貫 (1531-1617)—all prominent figures with high social status and strong reputations within the

literati community—Tu Long frequently referred to his writings on this theme. For example, in a letter to Zou Guangang 鄒觀光 (1556–1604), who held the rank of Vice Minister of the Court of the Imperial Stud in Nanjing, he wrote: “In recent years, having much leisure upon the meditation mat, I have surveyed the eight directions, compared the Three Teachings, and composed them into a single book. ... It is divided into more than twenty volumes, and is entitled *Hongbao* 道民年來以蒲團多暇，流覽八荒，參合三教，著爲一書。..... 分二十餘卷，名爲《鴻苞》”。(TLJ, 6.416).

Tu Long’s achievements in reconciling Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism were remarkable both in his time and in present-day scholarship. Consequently, studies of his engagement with the Three Teachings have focused primarily on his theoretical contributions, rarely addressing the circulation of religious paintings within his social relations or how such exchanges sustained his religiously oriented networks and pursuit of esteem—particularly after his dismissal from office in 1584 (having passed the Palace Examination in 1577), when the loss of official position heightened his reliance on religiously and culturally oriented communities as alternative sources of recognition and social support.

Tu Long’s pursuit of recognition in the religious sphere through the exchange of paintings took multiple forms. Beyond honour derived from hierarchical status as an elite literatus and official, he sought esteem through relationships grounded in individualised values and norms. This dynamic was not unique to Tu Long but reflected a broader trend within the late-Ming literati community, where the pursuit of recognition extended beyond honour to encompass esteem within a wider social environment. Influenced by the School of Mind—especially the concept of innate knowledge (*liangzhi* 良知) (Jiao 2021; Miura 2018; Marchal 2013) and its Left Wing of Wang Yangming Learning 王學左派, (See Ji 1934; Shimada 2005) including followers such as Wang Gen 王艮 (1483–1541) and Li Zhi 李贄 (1527–1602)—literati increasingly recognised themselves as “free legislators” of morality. (Honneth 1995, xiv) Wang Gen’s assertion that “the principles that structure the common people’s daily lives are precisely those upheld by the sages 百姓日用條理處，即是聖人之條理處” (Wang 2001, 29) further legitimised the individual as a moral agent whose everyday practices could generate valid moral principles. This view enabled literati to construct personalised value worlds and to form communities grounded in shared religious and cultural commitments, thereby creating new arenas in which esteem-based recognition could be pursued.

As literati increasingly viewed themselves as autonomous agents, moving beyond hierarchical honour gained through the examination system and officialdom, they sought a more self-mastered form of esteem. This was achieved by constructing a series of “individualised value-ideas” (Honneth 1995, 130) that redefined shared values and norms within their social community. The capacity of the “distinguishable ‘I’” to articulate the shared “We” meant that “We” could differentiate according to individual claims, producing multiple “We”s. (Khurana 2021, 556) Each “We” constituted a social sphere for recognition. Literati

connected by Buddhism and Daoism—or by a more specific concept such as the Unity of the Three Teachings—thus formed communities within the broader literati community. These communities could be organised around religious ideas and cultivation or oriented toward literature, art, and various social activities, including literati societies.

The overlapping nature of these communities meant that the literati's pursuit of recognition unfolded through diverse modes. Their elaboration of the Unity of the Three Teachings and its artistic expression—particularly in paintings—combined religious, artistic, and cultural preferences, creating distinctive connections and relationships within the social sphere. This interplay played a significant role in their pursuit of self-mastered recognition.

Portrait of Master Tanyang: Symbolism and Exchange

The worship of Wang Taozhen 王燾貞 (1558–1579), known as Master Tanyang (Tanyangzi 曇陽子), became a prominent trend within the late-Ming literati community, particularly the Jiangnan literati. Shen Defu 沈德符 (1578–1642) recorded:

Wang Taicang [Wang Xijue 王錫爵 (1534–1614)], having offended Jiangling [Zhang Juzheng 張居正 (1525–1582)] while serving as Vice-Minister, was granted leave to return home. His second daughter, known as Tanyangzi, attained the Way and passed away into immortality. Eminent figures of that time such as the Yanzhou brothers [Wang Shizhen and Wang Shimao 王世懋 (1536–1588)], Academician Shen Maoxue [沈懋學], Magistrate Tu Long of Qingpu, Academician Feng Mengzhen [馮夢禎 (1548–1605)], the Honourable Qu Ruji [瞿汝稷 (1548–1610)], and altogether no fewer than several hundred scholars, all bowed in reverence and styled themselves her disciples. Having already foretold the date of her apotheosis, on that day they assembled beside the tomb of her late husband of the Xu clan, and those who came to see her off thronged from across the southeast.

王太倉以侍郎忤江陵予告歸。其仲女曇陽子者得道化去。一時名士如弇州兄弟、沈太史懋學、屠青浦隆、馮太史夢禎、瞿青君汝稷輩，無慮數百人，皆頂禮稱弟子。先已豫示化期，至日並集於其亡夫徐氏墓次，送者傾東南。
(Shen 2012, 23.497)

This worship was led by Tanyangzi's father, Wang Xijue, and by Wang Shizhen (for detailed discussions of Tanyangzi's apotheosis and the power of her appeal among the literati, see Waltner 1987, Wei & Wang 2022, and Wei 2014). Within this circle, Tu Long ranked as Tanyangzi's follower second only to Wang Shizhen; indeed, Shen Maoxue and Feng Mengzhen joined the worship through Tu Long's introduction. (*TLJ*, 4.321) As the worship expanded, a community gradually formed in which members not only elaborated its doctrine but also competed for authority over its definition. (Xu 2012) This authority included

producing and disseminating materials related to Master Tanyang—such as her portrait, biography, and recorded sayings—and was largely monopolised by Wang Shizhen, who received full authorisation from Tanyangzi to compose her biography and establish a shrine for her worship (Wang 1970, 78.3830–3831). In his journal “Record of Setting Out from Qingxi 發青谿記”, Tu Long wrote: “After the Master’s passing, there were two occasions when her spirit returned; only Taiyuan [Wang Xijue] and Langya [Wang Shizhen] received her radiance, and no others ever heard of it 師化後，嘗神歸者再，獨太原、瑯邪得接光采，他人莫有聞者”. (*TLJ*, 3.283)

Despite Wang Shizhen’s dominance, Tu Long demonstrated ambition in elaborating and disseminating the doctrine of Tanyang worship (for Wang Shizhen’s control over the worship of Tanyangzi and Tu Long’s competition with Wang for power and status in literary and religious circles, see Xu 2012). He was eager to write Tanyangzi’s biography and to circulate her portrait among his friends, but although he composed a biography, he had to submit it to Wang Shizhen for approval multiple times, as detailed in his letters to Wang Shizhen and Shen Maoxue compiled in the *Collected Works of Baiyu* (*Baiyu Ji* 白榆集). (*TLJ*, 4.320, 322, 324, 325) While he secured some authority in narrating Tanyangzi’s ascent into immortality, his efforts remained constrained by Wang Shizhen’s influence within this social circle. The biography is not preserved in Tu Long’s collections, but his *Hongbao Ji* contains an essay titled “The Last Commandments of Master Tan 曇師遺言”. (*TLJ*, 10.1081–1082)

Tu Long’s commitment to Tanyang worship was driven not merely by religious belief but by the opportunity to shape a social sphere grounded in a self-defined value system, thereby satisfying his expectation of mastering relationships and his need for recognition. His struggle for the authority over Tanyangzi’s biography was less a competition for status than an effort to secure esteem rooted in individual autonomy. This contest exemplifies the process whereby the distinguishable “I” articulates the shared “We” through personal claims.

Tu Long’s struggle within the Tanyang worship community was expressed not only in his efforts to gain doctrinal authority but also in his attempts to circulate Tanyangzi’s portrait and the religious concepts embedded in her image. The Portrait of Master Tanyang was painted by You Qiu 尤求 (active 2nd half of 16th century) at Wang Shizhen’s request. You Qiu, who was also from Suzhou 蘇州—the same prefecture as Wang Xijue and Wang Shizhen—specialised in figure painting, particularly portraits of women, such as the depiction of Hongfu 紅拂圖 (1575), now in the Palace Museum. Wang Shizhen, as the principal agent in disseminating Tanyangzi’s image, controlled the portrait’s production, while Tu Long shared only the right to distribute copies. In a letter to Shen Maoxue, Tu Long wrote: “By chance I obtained two copies of the Portrait of Master Tanyang, which have now been mounted. One I have kept in my studio for veneration, and the other I respectfully send to you, knowing that you do not yet possess one 適貌得師真像二幀，裝潢已成。一留齋頭供養，一奉去，知兄處尚少此爾”. (*TLJ*, 4.325) Whether these two portraits were painted by You Qiu

himself or copied by others cannot be verified from existing sources. However, given Wang Shizhen's strict control over the elaboration and dissemination of Tanyangzi's image, the portraits Tu Long acquired were likely consistent with You Qiu's design. For Tu Long and his peers, the painting's significance lay less in its authenticity than in its symbolic function: what the image represented and its role as an object of exchange in their pursuit of recognition. Its social and cultural value outweighed its artistic value.

The Portrait of Master Tanyang, now in the Shanghai Museum, is a hanging scroll. Its inscription records the date—“On an auspicious day in the twelfth month [January 1581 in the Gregorian calendar] of the Gengchen year [mostly 1580] of the Wanli reign-period 萬曆庚辰臘月吉日”—and the artist: “Painted by You Qiu of Changzhou 長州尤求寫”, accompanied by two seals. The composition is divided into two sections: the upper part filled with inscriptions and the lower part featuring Tanyangzi's portrait. The calligraphy includes seven texts—*The Eight Precepts of Master Tanyang* 曇陽儒師八戒, *Triple Admiration* 三嘆, *At the Time of Her Passing* 臨化示, *Admonition to the Disciples* 訓戒弟子, *Farewell Poem* 辭世歌, *Gāthā* 偈, and *Portrait Eulogy* 像贊—all composed by Wang Shizhen and transcribed in small regular script by Zhang Zao 章藻 (1547–?), a disciple of Wang Shimao. The inscription concludes: “Respectfully inscribed by the disciple Zhang Zao in the twelfth month of the Gengchen year 庚辰臘月弟子章藻拜錄”.

Comparison of the portrait (Figure 1) with Wang Shizhen's textual descriptions reveals inconsistencies. For instance, the *Portrait Eulogy* describes Tanyangzi as follows:

She wears upon her head the Hengdou crown and is clothed in the Eight Trigrams robe. With her left hand she makes the Azure Dragon gesture, and with her right she grasps the Demon-Slaying Sword. Her brows rise like three mountain peaks, her eyes gleam like reflecting pearls, and her mouth shows tiger's teeth and square lips.

頭頂橫門冠，身穿八卦袍，左按青龍印，右執斬魔刀。三山眉，影珠目，虎齒方唇。

Yet in the painting, her hair is arranged in a left-side chignon—matching Wang Shizhen's reference in the *Gāthā* to “Tanyangzi of the left chignon 左髻曇陽子”—while the other side falls loosely. The sword appears in her left hand, placed over her right, which is concealed within a sleeve holding a fly whisk rather than making a mystic gesture. These discrepancies suggest that You Qiu's rendering diverged from Wang Shizhen's description. In fact, You Qiu likely based his work on Wang Shizhen's *Biography of Master Tanyang*, which states: “With her left hand making a mystic gesture she holds a sword; with her right she grasps the end of a fly whisk 左手結印執劍，右手握塵尾端”. (Wang 1970, 78.3835) The difference may reflect the simultaneous creation of the portrait and inscriptions, indicating that precise visual fidelity was secondary to the literati's aim of fashioning an image that fulfilled their symbolic and social needs.



Figure 1: You Qiu, Portrait of Master Tanyang, 1581, hanging scroll. The Shanghai Museum, Shanghai
<https://www.shanghaimuseum.net/mu/frontend/pg/article/id/CI00147237>.

The painting was therefore a collaborative creation involving two literati, Wang Shizhen and Zhang Zao, together with the professional painter You Qiu, whose participation reflected the literati's cultural virtues and values. This balance underscores that literati interpretations of Tanyangzi's ascent and their doctrinal elaborations were as significant as the figure herself. Tanyangzi's image was fashioned through their Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist values, serving as a substantial embodiment of the literati's practice of the Unity of the Three Teachings. It indicates the confidence of the literati in their own values and norms, expressed through a self-fashioned religious figure.

In the painting, Tanyangzi appears as a Daoist figure, yet her name derives from Bodhisattva Tanluan 曇鸞. As Wang Shizhen recorded, before her ascent, Tanyangzi declared: "I am the incarnation of the Bodhisattva Tanluan. It is because I wish to deliver and guide certain beings that I have been reborn, nothing more 吾曇鸞菩薩化身也，以欲有所度引，故轉世耳". (Wang 1970, 78.3835) Bodhisattva Tanluan (476–572), an eminent monk of the Northern Wei 北魏 (386–534), laid the doctrinal foundations of the Pure Land school. Yet Wang Shizhen also noted that Tanyangzi was enlightened by the Daoist Queen Mother of the West, from whom she received garments and bracelets, and that the secrets of immortality she transmitted to her followers were learned from this Daoist deity. Additionally, Tanyangzi was honoured as a chaste widow within the Confucian moral framework for preserving her fidelity to her deceased fiancé, Xu Jingshao 徐景韶. Her ascent ritual took place at Xu's tomb, where she had resided in "the offering chamber on the left side of the tomb 墓左享室". (Wang 1970, 78.3825)

Tanyangzi was fashioned into a figure embodying the literati's elaboration of the Three Teachings. In the *Eight Precepts of Master Tanyang*, bestowed upon her followers before her ascent, Confucian ethics—such as reverence for Heaven, Earth, Sovereign, Parents, and Teacher—are interwoven with Buddhist and Daoist principles. For example, the first precept, "to love and respect sovereign and parents 愛敬君親", and the sixth, "to be reverent and cautious in speech, and not speak of others' faults 敬慎言語不談人過", reflect Confucian morality, while the second, "to prohibit sexual misconduct and killing 戒止淫殺", and the fourth, "to soften one's glare and endure humiliation 和光忍辱", derive from Buddhist and Daoist teachings. Similarly, the *Admonition to the Disciples* declares: "loyalty, filial piety, integrity, and righteousness are the very foundations of the Great Way; you must surely uphold them yourselves 夫忠孝節義乃大道基本，汝等固當自持." These texts reveal Confucian norms as dominant in shaping literati conduct, while incorporating Buddhist and Daoist elements to construct a cult centred on a specific figure in the name of the Unity of the Three Teachings. As Tanyangzi herself stated to her brother Wang Heng 王衡 (1561–1609): "Only now do I realise that the Three Teachings are founded upon a single principle: if one seeks Buddhahood, one becomes a Buddha; if one seeks immortality, one becomes an immortal. Extending this further, Confucianism and Daoism too may be harmonised, for

all alike do not go beyond this very way of thinking 吾乃今知三教一理，欲佛則佛，欲仙則仙，推此，則儒道亦可通，俱不外此心耳”。(Wang 1908)

Tanyangzi's concept of the Unity of the Three Teachings largely echoed prevailing literati interpretations. Yet literati reciprocally attributed this idea to Tanyangzi, fashioning her as a transcendent figure to validate their own religious virtues and values. In a letter to his grandnephew Tu Benjun 屠本峻 (1542-1622), Tu Long affirmed his belief in Tanyangzi's synthesis of the Three Teachings: “Master Tanyang united the Daoist ideal of emptiness and stillness with the Buddhists' all-embracing insight, yet devoted her effort to the rigorous realisation of true reality. Her teaching was rooted in human ethics, while her principles embraced both inner nature and vital destiny. Truly she is my teacher 曇陽大師以道家虛靜兼釋氏圓通，而從精嚴實相處著力。教本人倫，理兼性命。真吾師也”。(*TLJ*, 4.324-325) This statement reflects Tu Long's personal understanding of the Unity of the Three Teachings and his aspiration to achieve distinction in reconciling them. In letters to friends such as Shen Yiguan and Wang Shixing 王士性 (1547-1598), Tu Long voiced concern over the fragmentation of the Three Teachings and his eagerness to harmonise them. (*TLJ*, 4.490; 5.244) Tanyangzi's image provided an ideal figure through which he could project these convictions. The fervour surrounding Tanyang worship among the literati also stemmed from her reputed attainment of immortality, (Waltner 1987, 108) fulfilling literati expectations regarding the ultimate goal of religious cultivation, whether Buddhist or Daoist.

Whether through Wang Shizhen's control over the creation of Tanyangzi's biography and portrait or through Tu Long's struggle to secure his rights to compose and disseminate these items, both sought to consolidate status within the community while constructing social relations grounded in religious values and norms. When Tu Long circulated Tanyangzi's portrait or biography among his friends, he did so not merely to reinforce bonds through shared belief but to elevate his standing within a cohesive circle, thereby gaining greater esteem. Waltner characterises this worship as “an elite cult”, within which Tanyangzi remained “a shadowy figure”. (Waltner 1987, 125) This observation highlights the fact that the cult's significance lay less in the deity herself than in the social dynamics among the literati who shaped her image; a community grounded in shared religious ideals and cultural cultivation provided a selective arena in which participants affirmed their belonging and secured esteem from one another.

The fervour for Tanyang worship peaked while Wang Shizhen and Wang Xijue were residing at the Tiandan Temple 恬憺觀 in Taicang 太倉, Suzhou, for Daoist cultivation associated with Tanyangzi's teachings, during which time “those who came to pay respects and receive instruction were as numerous as ever 往參承者多如故”。(*TLJ*, 4.323;325) As these two eminent literati had settled in the temple, it is difficult to determine whether followers sought Tanyangzi herself or the prestige of the two Wangs; more likely, they aimed to affirm their own identity and belonging within this social circle. Tu Long also recorded his

visit to the Tiandan Temple on his way to Beijing to make his annual report (*TLJ*, 3.283–293) while he was serving as magistrate of Qingpu County 青浦縣. However, the fervour gradually subsided once Wang Shizhen and Wang Xijue had returned to office, and Tanyangzi, as a symbolic but shadowy figure, faded from the centre of literati interactions. Although Tanyangzi's image did not undergo the long-term, multi-community reinterpretations which affected the cult of Guandi, (Duara 2008) the literati's construction of her persona similarly involved a layering of symbolic meanings within their cultural network.

The prominence of Wang Shizhen and Wang Xijue at the Tiandan Temple reveals that the cult of Tanyangzi operated not only as a religious practice but also as a socially visible performance of literati culture. As the previous surge in visitors suggests, the appeal of the cult lay as much in the prestige of its leading participants as in devotion to Tanyangzi herself. In this sense, the worship of Tanyangzi functioned as a stage on which prominent literati enacted shared religious values and displayed their cultured identities before a broader audience. Importantly, this audience extended beyond those committed primarily to religious or cultural cultivation to include figures within the official bureaucracy, for whom participation offered a means to display moral refinement and develop connections relevant to their careers. The pursuit of esteem within this community thus intersected with broader ambitions tied to reputation and advancement within official life. This dynamic is reflected in Wang Shizhen's moral discourse in the *Eight Precepts of Master Tanyang* and *Admonition to the Disciples*, in the public visibility of his and Wang Xijue's self-cultivation at the Tiandan Temple, and in the fact that both men returned to office shortly thereafter. Tu Long's own participation while serving as a magistrate further illustrates how engagement in this worship could reinforce one's cultured persona and sustain networks relevant to both cultural standing and official reputation.

Buddha-Mother Painting: Kinship and Recognition

Although the Tanyang cult was short-lived, religious practice and cultivation continued to play an important role in the literati's pursuit of recognition. While Tanyangzi represented a unique synthesis of the Three Teachings, most literati freely blended Buddhist and Daoist ideas, often emphasising their integration with Confucian principles. When these concepts were expressed through paintings and other objects, they became tangible forms of exchange, bearing the literati's cultivated virtues and values and reinforcing social ties in their pursuit of esteem.

Buddhist and Daoist paintings and artefacts were frequently exchanged as gifts among Tu Long and his friends. The most notable example was a Buddha-Mother Painting created by

Ding Yunpeng to celebrate Tu Long's mother's ninetieth birthday. In his letter to Ding, Tu Long conveyed heartfelt gratitude:

You have graciously undertaken to paint an Image of the Buddha-Mother for my aged mother. I and my mother, how could we possibly dare to accept such a blessing? Yet the artistry is of the highest excellence, standing alongside that of Master Longmian [Li Gonglin 李公麟 (1049-1106)] himself—a fact that all can readily discern. I respectfully bow my head and offer my thanks

承爲老母寫《佛母圖》，不慧某凡母子，其何敢當此祝？乃繪事精絕，方駕龍眠生，則人人能鑒定之矣！敬頓首稱謝。(TLJ, 6.344)

This painting had been commissioned by Wang Daokun, Vice-Minister of War and scion of a prominent elite lineage in She County 歙縣, who was also a leading literatus renowned for his leadership of the poetic society the White Elm Society (*Baiyu She* 白榆社) and for his extensive cultural networks. He also composed a prefatory inscription and sent the Tu family “baskets and hampers of fine cloth, and sandalwood of renowned fragrance 筐篚嘉幣、栴檀名香”. As Tu Long noted, the cloth would be used for garments for his mother, and the incense offered to the Buddha. (TLJ, 6.345) In his inscription, Wang Daokun likened Tu Long's mother to Tao Kan's 陶侃 (259-334) mother, one of the Four Exemplary Mothers recorded in the *Gujin Lienü Zhuan* 古今列女傳, celebrated for her strict moral teaching and frugality. (Xie 1778, 2.49b) Wang Daokun extolled her maternal virtue while praising Tu Long's moral character. Tu Long remarked: “I am ashamed that the son does not measure up, yet the mother truly resembles her 媿子不稱，母實似之”. (TLJ, 6.347)

This episode illustrates how literati virtue shaped family conduct, and how familial virtue reciprocally influenced literati social interactions, strengthening relational ties. In religious terms, Tu Long's deep commitment to Buddhism was mirrored by his family. In a letter to Wang Xijue, he wrote:

My elderly mother has been devoted to Buddhism for decades and has long abstained from alcohol and meat. My wife is simple and wears plain cloth, not caring for luxury. Now, my mother and wife spend their days before the Buddha's lotus seat, burning incense and candles, and studying and reciting the *Diamond Sutra* and the *Heart Sutra*, with no other concerns.

老母奉佛數十年，久斷酒肉。荊人蕭然荊布，不愛繁華。今姑婦日向大師蓮座前，焚香燃燭而學誦《金剛》、《心經》，都無所事事。(TLJ, 4.327)

While Buddhist practice among women was not solely the result of literati influence—given its role in female sociability during the era—Tu Long's household, as an elite literati family, was deeply shaped by his religious commitments. In the late Ming, a popular routine of Buddhist cultivation known as “pure lessons” (*qingke* 清課), included fifty practices such as burning incense, brewing tea, cultivating stillness, visiting monks, venerating the Buddha,

performing rites, reciting scriptures, and releasing living creatures, as recorded in Yue Chun's 樂純 (dates unknown) *Xue'an Qingshi* 雪庵清史. (Yue 1614, 3.1-87) Under this influence, Tu Long's mother and wife embraced Buddhist cultivation, making the Buddha-Mother Painting and its inscription a fitting tribute to their virtue and piety. This act of gift exchange thus became a distinctive form of social interaction within Tu Long's relationship with Wang Daokun, a relationship structured by kinship ties through their family members.

The Buddha-Mother Painting embodied shared religious dispositions, while its presentation as a gift expressed the giver's cultivated taste. Together, these qualities transformed the painting into symbolic social capital—an act of recognition grounded in shared religious and cultural values and norms. Moreover, the painting and its associated interactions enabled Tu Long to fashion a virtuous image through the moral conduct of his mother and wife. In another letter to Wang Xijue, he wrote:

As for my poverty like Fan Laiwu's [Fan Ran 范冉 (112-185)], in thirty days we had but nine meals, and even coarse greens and bean-leaves were insufficient. Yet my mother is like Jie's [Jie Zitui 介子推 (7th century BCE)] mother, and my wife is like Lai's [Lao Laizi 老萊子] wife, accepting this willingly, without complaint. Our whole household have become Buddhist, and in this we nearly resemble the family of Layman Pang [Pang Yun 龐蘊 (?-808)]. To spend the rest of our lives in this way, that is enough.

所吾範萊蕪之貧，三旬九食，藜藿不充。介母萊妻，甘心無怨。一家悉知皈依三寶，庶幾類龐居士家，以此畢餘生，足矣。(TLJ, 4.489)

This letter was written after Tu Long's dismissal from office, when his pursuit of honour was abruptly curtailed and he faced a crisis of recognition. In response, he urgently sought to reaffirm his virtue and value within the literati community to preserve his self-respect and esteem. Rather than praising his own qualities, he reflected them through his family's conduct, forging more intimate and personal connections within his friendships. For instance, when Shen Maoxue composed three poems in the name of his wife, née Sun 孫, for Tu Long's wife, Tu Long replied: "Madam Sun's three poems were created by your hand. I read and explained them repeatedly to my wife, and she was visibly delighted 孫夫人三詩，是足下代爲之。.....爲寒荊回環讀而解之，寒荊喜形於色矣". (TLJ, 4.304) Such exchanges between literati families extended the cultural and moral dimensions of literati relationships. These intimate ties, mediated through kinship and gift exchange, significantly aided Tu Long's pursuit of esteem during his crisis of recognition.

From the creation of the Buddha-Mother Painting, we can discern the intricate connections among literati, shaped by diverse virtues and shared experiences. Wang Daokun, the initiator of this painting, was an eminent figure in literary circles and maintained a close relationship with Tu Long. Shortly after Tu Long's dismissal from office, Wang invited Tu to join the

White Elm Society. At that time, Wang had also withdrawn from office (in 1580) following discord with Zhang Juzheng. Their similar trajectories—elite lineage backgrounds, literary prestige, and careers disrupted by political conflict—created a strong basis for mutual sympathy and solidarity. Both men turned toward cultural and religious cultivation as alternative arenas for asserting their values and securing esteem, and their shared participation in the Buddha-Mother Painting reflects this shared orientation.

The painter, Ding Yunpeng, further illustrates the layered nature of these connections. Renowned for religious-themed works, particularly those depicting the Unity of the Three Teachings, Ding was deeply embedded in the same cultural world that shaped Tu and Wang. His oeuvre included ink paintings, illustrations for ink manuals such as *Chengshi Moyuan* 程式墨苑, and prints featuring Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist figures (for a detailed analysis of Ding's artworks related to the Three Teachings, see Shao 2022). Wang Daokun's choice of Ding Yunpeng for this commission was therefore not incidental: it reflected Ding's alignment with the religious and cultural ideals that Tu and Wang themselves cultivated. Through Ding, the painting became a point of convergence for multiple relationships—literary, artistic, religious, and personal—embodying the shared dispositions that bound this circle together.

Within this social circle, members shared a high degree of literary, cultural, and religious cultivation, fostering optimally reflexive self-relations through interaction. Thus, the creation and eventual donation of the Buddha-Mother Painting constituted a complete process of literati social recognition, grounded in mutual relations and shared virtues and lifestyle.

Cultural Capital in Literati Relations

While religiously oriented exchanges held considerable importance in the late-Ming literati community, the exchange of paintings and calligraphy—rooted in literary cultivation and cultural values—remained the dominant form of interaction among them. Literati identity was shaped through relations expressed in shared literary and cultural dispositions, refined taste, and connoisseurship. Consequently, when such cultural items were exchanged, they symbolised mutual acknowledgement of social and cultural value, ensuring that recognition was both conferred and received during the interaction.

Among the cultural objects exchanged between Tu Long and his friends, fans inscribed with poetry were the most notable. This form relied heavily on literary cultivation and the degree of recognition conferred by peers. Tu Long's letters reveal exchanges with seventeen literati, including prominent figures such as Wang Shimao, Wang Zhideng 王穉登 (1535–1614),

Zhang Jiayin 張佳胤 (1527–1588), and Gu Yangqian 顧養謙 (1537–1604). In a letter to Li Yangong 李言恭 (1541–1599), Tu Long described the exchange process:

Yesterday, a government student from our county arrived from Moling [Nanjing], carrying in his hand one letter and two fans from you. Recently I composed several poems, which I have written on the fans, and I also enclose two jade seals and a volume of my works to be sent as well.

昨邑中有一諸生至自秣陵，手持公一書二扇。……近作數章書扇頭，玉印二枚、小集一冊附往。(TLJ, 4.364–365)

Such exchanges were common among literati. Compared to correspondence, fans conveyed literary and cultural preferences in a more personal form because their materiality, portability, and visual presence made them intimate extensions of the bearer and donor's cultivated identity. Inscribed with poetry, calligraphy, or painting, they displayed one's taste, talent, and aesthetic judgement at every moment of social interaction, often expressing appreciation, longing, or the refined sentiments of both the inscriber and the recipient. Because they were handled, opened, and admired in social settings—during gatherings, visits, or leisurely outings—they became immediate marker of one's taste and one's connections. In a letter to Wang Zhideng, Tu Long sent seven poems inscribed on a fan, seeking Wang's critique. (TLJ, 4.342) In another letter to Zhang Jiayin, he noted that the fan carried his sentiments. (TLJ, 5.240) These fans were cherished as objects expressing affection.

Fans inscribed with poetry thus served as adornments that not only enhanced one's appearance but also conferred social capital. Their significance lay in the fact that a fan was a portable, highly visible object carried close to the body, functioning as an extension of the bearer's cultivated identity. To carry a fan inscribed by a renowned literatus was to carry a visible sign of recognition; it demonstrated that one had been acknowledged, esteemed, and included within a particular cultural circle. A telling example appears in a letter from Tu Long to Wang Shimao, in which he enclosed a blank bamboo fan and requested Wang to inscribe several recent compositions so that he might “carry them by my side day by day, and be ever refreshed by the pure breeze 庶幾哉出入懷袖，日披清風”。(TLJ, 2.234) The request reveals how an inscribed fan functioned not merely as an aesthetic object but as a daily, embodied remainder of one's literary affiliations and the esteem conferred by a respected peer.

This social capital was derived from literary cultivation, taste, and connoisseurship among the literati—qualities even more prominently embodied in paintings and calligraphy. Within specific communities, such cultural objects became symbolic capital: their value lay not so much in material worth as in the shared cultural dispositions they expressed. The act of exchange itself constituted a pursuit of recognition, for these objects materialised the values, sentiments, and lifestyles that bound literati together. Through such tangible, aesthetically

charged forms, literati affirmed one another's cultural worth and reinforced the reflexive relations that sustained their social world.

Although paintings and calligraphy were less frequently exchanged in Tu Long's relationships, they nonetheless featured in his gift-exchange practices. In his letters, Tu Long mentioned two landscape paintings: one received from the Daoist priest Wang Haxian 王哈仙, and another by the renowned 12th-century painter Zhao Boju 趙伯駒 (courtesy name Qianli 千里) sent to Qin Kun 秦焜, the scion of an elite family in Beijing. (*TLJ*, 5.308; 6.367) Tu Long also gave two calligraphic works: "four seal-script scrolls by the Princess Consort of Prince Yi 益王妃篆書四幅" sent to Qin Kun and "an autograph scroll by Su Changgong [Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037–1101)] 蘇長公真蹟一卷" presented to Shen Maoxue. (*TLJ*, 6.367; 2.204) These persons represented distinct strategies in Tu Long's pursuit of recognition within the literati community, even though the items were uniformly paintings and calligraphy—a point that becomes clearer when we consider how the artworks circulating in these exchanges embodied different configurations of cultural and social value.

The artworks circulating in these exchanges possessed a convergence of values that made them especially potent within literati circles. Their aesthetic excellence, cultural pedigree, and social exclusivity were mutually reinforcing: works of exceptionally high artistic cultivation and esteemed provenance embodied the highest standards of brushwork, historical lineage, and identity. Because such objects could only be appreciated, authenticated, and circulated among cultivated literati, their cultural and social value was inseparable from the status of the networks through which they moved. At the same time, the very prestige that endowed these works with symbolic power also conferred substantial economic value. Their monetary worth—rooted in their artistic refinement and esteemed provenance—could be mobilised discreetly to secure assistance, reciprocate obligations, or stabilise one's position during the periods when loss of office or financial strain required support. Thus, in Tu Long's exchanges, paintings and calligraphy operated simultaneously as embodiments of elite cultural taste, as markers of social belonging, and as assets whose economic value was activated through the very relationships that conferred their symbolic significance.

This economic dimension becomes especially visible in Tu Long's exchanges with Qin Kun, where artworks and cultural objects were mobilised directly to obtain financial assistance and material support. Cultural items—particularly works by renowned calligraphers or painters—were not always exchanged solely on the basis of shared cultural refinement. Although, as Bourdieu notes, calculating the economic value of gifts functioning as symbolic capital was generally taboo in recognition practices, (Bourdieu 1998, 104) economic considerations could nonetheless enter the exchange process. Tu Long's interaction with Qin Kun exemplified this intersection, as Tu Long exchanged artworks and cultural objects for financial assistance, a practice referred to as "money for buying a mountain 買山錢". In one letter, Tu Long sent Qin a Zhao Boju landscape painting and four seal-script scrolls by the

Consort of Prince Yi, as noted above, along with “a copy of *The Collected Works of Han Changli* [Han Yu 韓愈 (768–824)], a copy of *The Collected Works of Luo Nian'an* [Luo Hongxian 羅洪先 (1504–1564)], a roll of Hu silk, a fan inscribed with poetry, and a tripod from the first year [49 BCE] of the Huanglong period of the Han Dynasty [206 BCE–8 CE] 《韓昌黎集》一部、《羅念菴集》一部、湖羅一端、詩扇一柄、漢黃龍元年鼎一枚”。(TLJ, 6.367) He also requested peonies and herbaceous peonies from Qin to adorn his garden.

Tu Long's motive was pragmatic. Following his dismissal from office, he lacked the funds to resettle. Qin Kun offered farmland and a house in Liangxi 梁谿, near Wuxi 無錫. (TLJ, 4.482) Tu Long described Qin as “born of noble lineage.....Among the people of the world, how many, if any, could be compared with Junyang [Qin Kun] and found to surpass him 身為貴介.....世界中人試等君陽而上勝君陽者，能復有幾”。(TLJ, 4.484) Although their relationship was not purely transactional—Qin admired Tu Long's literary talent and virtue—financial assistance featured prominently. Across these letters, Tu Long repeatedly mentioned his hardship; he also acknowledged Qin's “profound kindness to me 與僕有深恩” in a letter to Wang Zhideng, who also helped arrange a boat for Tu Long's travel. (TLJ, 6.366)

The items Tu Long sent to Qin were not merely tokens of gratitude but responses to Qin's appreciation of his literary talent and cultivated lifestyle. These gifts carried layered meanings: Zhao Boju's painting and the consort of Prince Yi's calligraphy served as elegant decorations affirming Qin's taste; the two literary collections enriched his cultivation; and the antique Han tripod underscored Qin's status while embodying literati values. Tu Long also gave a Han tripod of the same kind to another literatus, Xing Tong 邢侗 (1551–1612), a prominent calligrapher and painter, explicitly stressing its authenticity while simultaneously requesting “money for buying a mountain” —in contrast to Qin's generosity. (TLJ, 4.481–482)

Tu Long maintained a small circle from which to solicit financial assistance, including Qin Kun, Xing Tong, Hu Congzhi 胡從治, and Gu Yangqian, as well as prominent literati such as Wang Shizhen, Zhang Jiayin, and Lü Yinchang 呂胤昌 (1560–?), who came from one of the most renowned families of theatrical connoisseurs in Yuyao 余姚 and helped to publish Tu's *Collected Works from Qizhen Hall* (*Qizhen guan jī* 棲真館集). Others from prominent lineages—including Dong Sicheng 董嗣成 (1560–1595), Zhuo Mingqing 卓明卿 (1538–1597), and Lu Guangzu 陸光祖 (1521–1597), Minister of Personnel—also provided financial support for daily expenses or travel.

Within this network, financial assistance did not always take the form of direct monetary gifts. Tu Long even asked Wang Shizhen to introduce clients for commissioned writings so that he could earn income through his literary labour. (TLJ, 4.486–487) This request reveals another dimension of recognition: Tu's cultural capital—his reputation as a writer—could be activated to generate paid work. Here, too, monetary compensation functioned as a measure

of esteem, commodifying recognition by converting cultural and social capital into economic value.

What unified this circle was not the material value of the objects exchanged but the recognition Tu Long commanded within the literati community. In these interactions, Tu Long exchanged his literary talent and cultural capital for economic assistance. Through these exchanges, gifts functioning as symbolic capital were transformed into social capital, which in turn enabled the acquisition of economic support. Crucially, this economic value did not derive directly from the objects themselves but from the esteem Tu Long enjoyed among his peers. The greater his recognition, the more financial aid he could secure. Money thus became a symbolic marker of literati values and norms: when Tu Long exchanged paintings, calligraphy, and antiques for funds, he effectively monetised his recognition (Greenbaum 2007), translating cultural and social capital into economic capital.

Whereas Tu's exchanges with Qin Kun reveal how cultural objects could be activated for economic support, his interactions with Wang Haxian illustrate a different mode of recognition—one grounded in religious cultivation and shared spiritual pursuits. In a letter to Wang, Tu Long noted that Wang had “entered the capital through Daoist arts, and received the present emperor's recognition and favour 以道術入京，業蒙今上知眷”，but later withdrew to refine elixirs in the mountains. (*TLJ*, 5.307–308) Tu Long added that Wang “showed profound regard for me 深有意乎不佞”，and during his own dismissal from office expressed a strong desire to join Wang in Daoist cultivation. (*TLJ*, 5.308) Wang initiated contact by sending his own landscape painting, prompting Tu Long to respond with a poem. Even in this religiously motivated exchange, literati cultural practices—poetry, painting, and the circulation of refined objects—remained central to the relationship.

Religious cultivation also facilitated further connections among literati. In 1587, Tu Long practised Daoism for a month with his friend Feng Mengzhen under the guidance of the Daoist priest Nie Daoheng 聶道亨 at Tongxuan Temple 通玄觀 in Hangzhou 杭州. (*TLJ*, 5.278; Feng 1616, 47.11b) Tu Long's access to Nie was secured through Long Defu 龍德孚 (1531–1602), as he acknowledged: “By the grace of your favour, I had the fortune to meet Master Nie 某籍先生寵靈，得遇聶師”. (*TLJ*, 5.254) Long Defu's son, Long Ying 龍膺 (1560–1622), a prominent member of the Jiangnan literati community, also invited Tu Long to join the White Elm Society alongside Wang Daokun. Tu Long's religious, literary, and cultural relations were thus deeply intertwined, sustained by shared practices of religious cultivation and the cultured lifestyle that shaped literati sociability.

Tu Long's Daoist engagements thus served as a medium for connecting literati with one another and with Daoist figures. These Daoist ties resembled his other religious affiliations—such as Buddhism and the Unity of the Three Teachings—where cultivation and practice were inseparable from the literary, cultural, and social lifestyles of the literati. Whether religious portraits or landscape paintings, such objects functioned as religious-themed items

facilitating cultural and social connections, or as cultural artefacts enabling religious interaction. Ultimately, they became symbolic items aimed at creating and strengthening relationships among literati, thereby generating recognition within distinct self-fashioned communities.

If Wang Haxian represents the religious dimension of Tu Long's social world, Shen Maoxue—recipient of the Su Shi scroll—exemplifies recognition rooted in literary talent, moral cultivation, and cultural affinity. Shen was the top graduate in the 1577 Palace Examination, the same year as Tu Long became a Metropolitan Graduate (*jīnshì* 進士). Another close friend, Feng Mengzhen, ranked third in the second group of graduates that year. Their enduring friendship originated from a memorial text Tu Long composed for a deceased friend while in Beijing. Shen and Feng admired the piece so deeply that they sought out its author, visiting Tu Long repeatedly. As Tu Long recounted in a letter to Ou Daren 歐大任 (1516–1596), renowned for his excellence in poetic and literary composition:

When my friend Mr. Wu died away from home, I mourned him with a written lament. Gentlemen such as Shen Jundian and Feng Kaizhi, having read it and finding it remarkable, inquired who had composed it. Someone named me, and they arranged to ride together to visit me. Though they came to my gate three times, I still lay obstinately in bed and would not rise. They pushed open the door and sought me out in my chamber; I had no choice but to rise, clutching my quilt, and sit upon the bed to converse with them.The gentlemen proved truly congenial, and from that day I would prepare wine, sweep the couch, and entertain these few friends. As they became more familiar with me, they grew ever more delighted, and not a day passed without their visiting.

會友人伍君客死，僕哀而爲文哭之，爲沈君典、馮開之諸君見而奇之，問爲何人作，或以僕對，相約聯騎過我。三及門，僕猶堅臥不起。諸君排闥尋我臥內，僕不得已，強起擁布被，據匡牀而與之談。……諸君信可人，自是日取酒掃榻而延此二三相知。二三相知稍習不佞，顧益喜，無日不見過。(TLJ, 2.226)

This friendship, rooted in Tu Long's literary talent, illustrates how recognition from high-ranking and equally gifted literati affirmed his cultural and intellectual virtues. Tu Long secured recognition not only through his status as a talented official but also through his personal value and achievements being acknowledged within the literati community.

In the letter to Shen Maoxue accompanying Su Shi's calligraphy, Tu Long urged Shen not to resign from office. Upholding Confucian ideals, Tu Long argued that an official of Shen's calibre—favoured by the court—should strive to render loyal service. After articulating his views on official duty, Tu Long shifted to literary matters, praising Shen's talent and expressing admiration. He enclosed several of his own recent poems, the Su Shi scroll, and

two seals engraved by the renowned Ming dynasty seal engraver Wang Youlang 王幼朗 (studio name Shaowei 少微), whose seals were highly prized among literati (further details on Wang can be found in Zhou 2012, 282). The entire letter reveals the shared values and lifestyle underpinning the literati moral and cultural system, encompassing official virtue, literary refinement, and personal cultivation, sustained and expressed through gift exchange. Objects such as calligraphy by Su Shi and seals carved by Wang Shaowei externalised these shared values, making the act of exchange a mutual recognition of status and personal cultivation.

Taken together, the three cases—Qin Kun, Wang Haxian, and Shen Maoxue—reveal the multiplicity of values embedded in literati gift exchange and the diverse modes of recognition which it enabled. With Qin Kun, cultural objects and literary talent were active as economic resources, demonstrating how symbolic and social capital could be converted into material support. With Wang Haxian, religious cultivation were intertwined with literati cultural practices, producing recognition grounded in shared spiritual and aesthetic pursuits. With Shen Maoxue, literary excellence and cultural affinity formed the basis of esteem among peers of comparable talent and status. These exchanges show that paintings, calligraphy, and other cultural objects were not merely aesthetic artefacts but versatile media through which relationships were forged, values affirmed, and recognition negotiated within the shifting conditions of late-Ming society. Gift exchange thus functioned as a central mechanism through which Tu Long fashioned and maintained recognition across multiple domains of his social world.

Conclusion

Gift exchange within communities grounded in shared values and norms can be understood as a process of recognition, in which the value of the gift is measured not in monetary terms only but through its social and cultural functions in sustaining relationships. In such contexts, the gift operates as symbolic capital, and the act of exchange becomes a symbolic gesture that affirms mutual relations and, in doing so, constitutes an act of recognition.

In the late Ming dynasty, the exchange of cultural objects was a central practice among the literati. Paintings, calligraphy, and other refined artefacts—embodying the literati's cultural disposition and cultivated taste—circulated within networks shaped by shared virtues, aesthetic ideals, and, at times, religious commitments. The exchanges undertaken by the literatus Tu Long reveal the diversity of these relationships and the distinct values they embodied.

The cultural objects associated with Tu Long played a vital role in his interactions across different literati communities, advancing his pursuit of recognition in multiple domains. Even when artworks took religious form, such as the Portrait of Master Tanyang or the Buddha-Mother Painting, their significance remained rooted in the distinctive culture of the literati. Religious imagery served as a vehicle for expressing shared values, while participation in practices such as the cult of Tanyang enabled literati to articulate individuality within collectively fashioned cultural identities.

Other exchanges reveal the strategic dimensions of Tu Long's gift practices. The paintings, calligraphy, and antiques presented to Qin Kun demonstrate how cultural objects could be activated as social and economic resources, enabling Tu Long to secure material support through the esteem he sought within his network. The landscape painting from Wang Haxian illustrates how Daoist cultivation facilitated relationships grounded in shared spiritual values and literati cultural practices. The gift of the Su Shi autograph scroll to Shen Maoxue strengthened bonds between elite literati whose recognition rested on literary talent, moral cultivation, and cultural affinity. Through these exchanges, literati navigated overlapping economic, religious, and cultural spheres, positioning their value through the circulation of artworks and artefacts that signified refined taste and shared norms.

In sum, these cases show that gift exchange among late-Ming literati was a dynamic mechanism for generating and mobilising recognition. Through the symbolic and material circulation of cultural objects, literati affirmed shared values, cultivated relationships, and activated different forms of capital across economic, religious, and cultural domains. Future research might build on this foundation by developing a more precise typology of strategic gift exchange—encompassing practices such as investment, solicitation, alliance-building, and reciprocation—and by reconstructing broader exchange networks centred on figures such as Tu Long. Such work would help to clarify the extent to which these mechanisms operated across late-Ming literati communities and deepen our understanding of the cultural logic that underpinned their social world.

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