

Artful Networking: Art Collecting and Cultural Positioning in

Early Qing China—the case of Gao Shiqi (1645-1704)

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In this paper I analyze Gao Shiqi's 高士奇 (1645-1704) collecting practices in the context of early Qing politics. This paper argues that art collecting was used as an effective networking tool and played an significant part in defining Gao Shiqi's cultural status in the court during the Kangxi reign (r. 1661-1722).

Gao Shiqi rose to prominence as Kangxi Emperor's favorite courtier despite not having a *jinshi* degree. Because of his inferior background, Gao Shiqi was under pressure to assert his status within the circle of cultural elite—art collecting was his solution. Analysis of his private art inventory indicates that Gao had a clear plan of gifting different kinds of objects to different groups of recipients, including the emperor, the heir apparent, high officials, as well as scholars and other non-officials. Gao collected objects of various qualities, including authentic works of different values as well as a wide range of copies and forgeries in preparation to fulfill different social functions.

This paper shows how Gao used art collecting as a networking tool. And I shall argue that Gao Shiqi was emulating the imperial practice of using art collecting to assert cultural legitimacy.

Gao succeeded in strengthening his social and political connections and he established the appropriateness of his status as a courtier, and most importantly, a man of culture.

Keywords: Gao Shiqi, art collection, collecting practice, Kangxi Emperor, early Qing, social hierarchy, court politics