SUMMARY

This dissertation studies the lifestyle of the literati in late Ming China. By the late Ming period, Chinese culture had reached a point where pure enjoyment of the arts and recreational activities could become an end in itself. The investigation aims to offer an interesting introduction to the literati life at the time. It is divided into seven chapters.

Chapter 1 introduces the purposes, the objectives and the significance of the thesis. Discussion is also given to the materials and methodology used.

Chapter 2 gives an overview to the political and economical situation in late Ming China. Late Ming China was less purely agrarian than earlier periods. A money-based economy began to flourish, which in turn fostered urbanization and general prosperity, especially in cities south of the Yangtze River. The bustling economy of those cities attracted nouveau riche as well as educated literati, who were despair of the corrupted bureaucratic government, then turn to seek comfort in their everyday life.

Chapter 3 discusses the philosophical and literary thinking that prevailed the period, and shows how those views formed the basis of the daily activities of the literati. The literati in late Ming championed true self and individualism in opposition to traditional authority in both thought and social life, in order to be the uninhibited self rather than the follower of formal social etiquette.

Chapter 4 explores the mob psychology of the late Ming literati as reflected in their writings. The non-official and non-candidates were a growing majority of the literati class, formatting to be one of the most peculiar phenomena in the late Ming scene. For the literati, the late Ming period was not a time to be active in public service; they turned instead to the pursuit of individual freedom. In their own private realm they devoted themselves to creative daily activities, and therefrom strove to transcend the petty struggles of the mundane world.

Chapter 5 illustrates the literati taking eremitage in sensual pleasures, which includes frivolous recreations and amusements as well as passion. It portrays their want to extricate from social mores and act without restraint. This idea of seeking refuge by immersing themselves in absorbing activities could justify any indulgence.

Chapter 6 depicts the literati’s search for the simple and austere inner life. The late Ming literati withdrew into a life of semi-seclusion, in which contemplative practice, scholarly study, and visits to scenic spots are the main features. These activities reflected their spiritual values as well as the quest for transcendence. It is through the activities that we find the literati celebrating certain individualistic qualities, such as self-consciousness, critical awareness and creative thought, associated with the autonomous mind.

Chapter 7 concludes with reviews on earlier scholars’ discussions on the thoughts and culture of the literati class in late Ming period.