Collecting as Cultural Technique:
Materialistic Interventions into History in 20th Century China

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Abstract

This dissertation explores the interplay between the collecting of ancient artifacts and intellectual innovations in twentieth century China. It argues that the practice of collecting is an epistemological attempt or a “cultural technique,” as formulated by the German media theorist Bernhard Siegert, to grasp the world in its myriad materiality and historicity. Through experiments on novel ways to reconfigure objects and study them as media on which intangible experiences are recorded, collectors cling to the authenticity of past events, preserve memory through ownership, and forge an intimate relationship with these objects. These aspects are illustrated by the strikingly close symbiosis in 20th-century China between intellectual innovations and collecting activities. It was a period when political turmoil led to mass dispersal of collections, which in turn stimulated the flourishing of (re)collecting. I examine four cases of prominent intellectuals creatively engaging in collecting: 1) oracle bones, 2) ancient inscriptions, 3) handicrafts, and 4) ink paintings. These endeavors fundamentally reshaped archeology, literature, the history of art and design, and aesthetics in China. Therefore, I argue that these collectors’ materialist interventions into history played a crucial but hitherto unrecognized role in creating a new cosmopolitan culture.
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To the memory of my father, Ted Chen Weiguang.
Introduction

Collectors are happy people.

- *a quote attributed to Goethe*

Every beloved object is the center point of a paradise.

- *Novalis*

Possession is always accompanied by loss, and gathering by dispersion. This is but common sense. Someone loses a bow, someone else gets it: is this worth mentioning?

- *Li Qingzhao*

This dissertation originates from an observation: there exists a striking interplay in twentieth-century China between intellectual innovation and the collecting of ancient artifacts. On the one hand, this century is distinguished by the radical efforts to shake up centuries of traditional learning and replace it with brand-new alternatives. On the other hand, this is also a period of mass dispersal and intense (re)collecting activities to a degree rarely seen before, which by nature assume a conservationist, or let us say, conservative, outlook. All the more striking is the fact that the two tendencies often find expression in the same group of people. My argument is that this parallel is by no means accidental. Instead, there is a close symbiosis between the act of collecting and the creation of new literature, the reorganization of existent knowledge and the production of new one, and the development of disciplines and their methodologies. This project

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3 Li Qingzhao, “Postscript to *A Record of Metals and Stones*,” in Zhao Mingcheng: *A Record of Metals and Stones* (Shanghai: Shanghai Shuhua Chubanshe, 1985), 560.
therefore aims at explaining this symbiosis, with focuses on Huang Binhong 黃賓虹 (1865-1955), Luo Zhenyu 羅振玉 (1866-1940), Lu Xun 魯迅 (1881-1936), and Shen Congwen 沈從文 (1902-1988), four representative cultural figures who, through their collecting activities, exerted tremendous influence on archeology, art history, literature, and general intellectual pursuits in twentieth-century China.

The dissertation follows two lines of inquiry. First, what is the nature of the act of collecting? What are the cultural implications of what many perceive to be merely a pastime, an eccentric obsession? And how does it influence knowledge production? Second, what are the specific conditions in twentieth century China that facilitated the booming of collecting activities and intensified their interaction with intellectual innovation? What makes it different from other period in Chinese history, and from other cultures?

1. Collecting and Knowing

To collect objects is a behavior with a long history going back to the beginning of civilizations, and is universal for most cultures. It is firstly an anthropological phenomenon (which is of course not to say it is restricted to human beings), but to thoroughly understand it involves a cross-disciplinary inquiry. A passage that Walter Benjamin quotes in his essay “Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian,” from Honoré de Balzac’s novel Le Cousin Pons, is arguably the most vivid and fascinating description of the collector as a social type,

There one can often meet a very shabbily dressed Pons or an Elie Magus. They seem neither to respect nor to care for anything. They pay attention neither to women nor to window displays. They walk along as in a dream, their pockets are empty, their gaze is aimless and
one wonders what kind of Parisian they really are. These people are millionaires. They are collectors, the most passionate people in the world.\(^4\)

Part of the rhetorical power of this quotation derives from the unexpected shift near the end of the passage - and for this we need to thank Benjamin, who quotes and thus frames it as such. We have been envisioning some bored rag pickers who have run out of both money and interest in life. Then in a shock, we are told that they are the exact opposite. They are collectors who are rich, passionate, and at the same time bored.

This passage not only conveys the curious, funny, and somewhat ridiculous character of the collector; it is a gateway into a set of complex issues induced by both the collector as a social type and the act of collecting. The sharp contradiction between the shabbiness, aimlessness and disinterestedness of the collectors and the passion and wealth they possess (and invest) signals a discrepancy with received value systems. From such contradiction arise problems related to taste, fashion, economics, social relations, to name just a few. Thus the collector constitutes an object that calls for analysis by both sociologists and anthropologists.

The fact that Balzac confines the collector to the male gender certainly betrays a bias. Even though he might have his reasons for so doing because he was describing a specific socio-historical period, it nonetheless reflects a long-held view on collecting as being a predominantly male hobby, despite (and perhaps precisely because of) the relatively rare number of prominent female collectors. This is no surprise, considering the limited social and economical resources that are traditionally allocated to women. But it is still worth pondering in what way, and to what extent, collecting (and the discourse on it) have been gendered.

Other questions arise from the oxymoronic character of these rich and shabby, passionate and bored collectors: what then really interests them? What do they do with their collections? If they are so detached from the world, how do they connect with it through collecting?

One way of mapping the myriad set of issues concerning collecting is to group them in three major set of relationships: 1) the one between objects as shown within a collection, 2) the one between the collection and the world in its materiality and historicity, and 3) the one between objects and persons as shown in the process of collecting.

1.1. The Relationship between Objects within a Collection

Probing the relationship between objects shown in a collection quickly brings the inquiry to the realm of epistemology, where collecting points to something more fundamental to the human mind - and this is what makes collecting a uniquely human endeavor. By simply putting different objects together, the sheer juxtaposition of them already contains the possibility for the viewer to interpret messages by making associations among them, even if they are not intended by the one who puts them together.

In some cases, messages await deciphering even in a collection that is simply a group of objects randomly gathered and then discovered. Examples of such constellations range from Viking hoards in Britain, objects uncovered in Pompeii, to André Breton’s surrealist Un bas déchiré and the objects randomly lying on a table that eventually become Daniel Spoerri’s An Anecdoted Topography of Chance⁵. Heidegger’s reminder about the etymological link between reading and collecting is helpful here:

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Lego, legein, Latin legere, is the same word as our lesen [to collect]: gleaning, collecting wood, harvesting grapes, making a selection, ‘reading [lesen] a book’ is just a variant of ‘gathering’ in the authentic sense [‘ein Buch lesen’ ist nur ein Abort des ‘Lesens’ in eigentlichen Sinne.] This means laying one thing next to another, bringing them together as one [in eines Zusammenbringen] – in short, gathering [Sammeln]; but at the same time, the one is contrasted to the other.”

The etymology of the word “intellect” further illustrates the point: it is made of two elements: inter meaning “between, among” and legō meaning “to read.” In other words, the faculty of abstract reasoning has an intimate connection with the act of bringing different things together (both conceptually and spatially) and constructing meaning out of such a constellation.

So what actually is this message that we gain through juxtaposition of different objects? Admittedly, there is a difficulty of fully encapsulating and explaining with language the “message” conveyed thereby. Or perhaps we should accept that such a juxtaposition resists linguistic intervention. From the standpoint of the viewer (and this often includes the collector, who may be surprised by his or her collection, and would also have to try to understand it), a collection poses a challenge: a constellation, or simply a gathering of objects, can convey multiple, potentially conflicting associative implications that are difficult to translate into language, or to exhaust by description. A collection has a fluid and ambiguous character that defies definition, which inevitably narrows it. A tension exists between language and spatial presentation, which conveys linguistic as well as extra-linguistic messages.

And yet interestingly, although the message cannot be explained with language, it can be displayed through language. The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics identifies three types of “conceit,” among which the third one has a close resemblance to collecting:

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a figure of thought, typical of baroque and metaphysical poetry and prose, which ingeniously compares dissimilar things and ideas, cultivating thereby surprise, followed, ideally, by admiration and insight. [...] [it] ascribes both aesthetic and epistemological value to the conceit. (291)

Samuel Johnson gives a concise and accurate summary of a conceit as being a “combination of dissimilar images or discovery of occult resemblances in things apparently unlike” (292). Supposedly such unexpected combination of unrelated objects would shed light on their connections, and some of their shared qualities hitherto veiled by appearance.

Therefore, apart from poetic novelty, the conceit also has the potential to generate epistemological innovation. It is precisely this point that the surrealists pick up centuries later. In the “Surrealist Manifesto,” André Breton claims that “Surrealism is based on the belief in the superior reality of certain forms of previously neglected associations.”7 He quotes Pierre Reverdy as saying,

[t]he image is a pure creation of the mind.

It cannot be born from a comparison but from a juxtaposition of two more or less distant realities. The more the relationship between the two juxtaposed realities is distant and true, the stronger the image will be - the greater its emotional power and poetic reality...8

Putting together apparently unrelated or dissimilar objects and facts is a gesture that not only sheds new light on hitherto unnoticed connections, but also defies standard taxonomy, which is the basis of a knowledge system. Indeed, our knowledge depends on individual facts as heavily as on how they relate to each other. Taxonomy regulates not just the relation of objects and facts, but the way they are able to make sense to us; it creates a structural and hierarchical relation

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8 Ibid., 20.
among facts and objects. It is the importance of taxonomy that prompted Umberto Eco to write a book about lists, a device which comes to the taxonomist’s aid when taxonomy fails. To put items in a list is to give up on crafting an all-encompassing hierarchy. Dissimilar or unrelated objects can be conveniently lumped together. So says the book’s introductory paragraph,

In the history of Western culture we find lists of saints, ranks of soldiers, catalogues of grotesque creatures or medicinal plants, and hordes of treasure. This infinity of lists is no coincidence: a culture prefers enclosed, stable forms when it is sure of its own identity, while when faced with a jumbled series of ill-defined phenomena, it starts making lists.9

A well-defined taxonomy is a sign of a stable worldview, whereas its absence or failure is the result of a fluid knowledge system in transition. A collection of random or apparently unrelated objects is the realization of a list as such.

One typical example is the Wunderkammer, or the chamber of curiosities, popular in both the Renaissance and Baroque eras. Curiosity implies aberration, something that does not fit in existing categories. A fact or an object that cannot be put into a certain relation to others is a standout, an odd piece. It is unsettling and threatens the validity of the whole knowledge system, which is meant to be universal. The chamber of curiosities conveniently lumps these aberrations together, in the manner of list-making, and avoids creating a system. It amply demonstrates the unstable epistemological landscape of early modern Europe in the Age of Discovery.

In a sense, an encyclopedia is also a long list and thus a rejection of systematic organization: alphabetical order is one of the most random ways to arrange things. Together with the chamber of curiosities, the encyclopedia demonstrates another potential of a collecting, namely to be the fragmented mirror of the external world.

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1.2. The Relationship between the Collection and the World

Thus the complex relationship between objects within a collection thus extends to another realm: it concerns the relationship between collection and the world in and through its materiality and historicity. It is about making sense of objects’ relationship to persons and the world through creation of systems, or through deciphering ready-made constellations. It is also a way to mirror, reproduce, sublimate, interpret, explore and re/define the structure and limit of the external world.

For example, by collecting aberrations, the chamber of curiosities explores the possible boundaries of the world in both its geographical extent and variety. With its ambition to literally encompass all knowledge, the encyclopedia is undiscriminating in its representation of the whole world. As opposed to Noah’s Ark, a sampling of all beings, where the variety of lives is supposed to be already known and thus has a stable limit, the chamber of curiosities and the encyclopedia are subject to potentially infinite growth. This analogy therefore induces a more important question: if a collection is infinite, does it mean the world is equally infinite? In more radical cases, collecting amounts to an act of world making: ancient imperial collections or gardens are essentially reflections of their owner’s imagined sovereignty. Why might ancient emperors have enacted a replication of the world through the medium of collection? Are “collection” and “world” parallel systems? Is one the extension of the other? Where does one end, and the other begin?

A collection’s tendency toward the infinite is discussed in two seminal texts on collecting—Jean Baudrillard’s System of Objects and Susan Stewart’s On Longing. Here, infinity can grow in two directions: either as a seriality that allows endless substitution, making collecting a business of monomania, such as Don Juan’s notorious “collecting” of women—hence Baudrillard’s
remark that collecting entails the “fusion of absolute singularity with infinite seriality”\textsuperscript{10}—or as an open-ended inclusiveness, an unlimited sampling of everything in the world, such as Noah’s Ark. As Stewart puts it, “[w]hen objects are defined in terms of their use value, they serve as extensions of the body into the environment, but when objects are defined by the collection, such an extension is inverted, serving to subsume the environment to a scenario of the personal.”\textsuperscript{11} Consonant with this process of inward subsuming, a collection often manages to formulate its own logic, becoming ostensibly self-sufficient and even generative. In other words, it can organize the world according to its own order, one that defies the world itself.

Another aspect of a collection’s infinity is concretely determined by the actual, physical space where collecting takes place, especially the flea market, the space \textit{par excellence} for the collector. According to Emma Bielecki, Paul de Kock’s \textit{La Grande Ville: Nouveau tableau de Paris} structures its descriptions of social types according to topography, notably the auction house.\textsuperscript{12} Indeed, the physiology of a social type is often best understood when observed in an actual space. And yet despite Walter Benjamin’s fascinating pioneer work on the arcades,\textsuperscript{13} this topographical dimension seems to elude later discussions about the process of collecting, and, more broadly, the question of the overlap or non-coincidence between “collection” and “world,” which I shall focus on here.

In both an allegorical and literal sense, the flea market is the abject materialization of decay, destruction, dispersion and recycling in history. It is the material embodiment of Hegel’s

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\textsuperscript{11} Susan Stewart, \textit{On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection} (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1984), 162.

\textsuperscript{12} Emma Bielecki, \textit{The Collector in Nineteenth-Century French Literature: Representation, Identity, Knowledge} (Oxford; Bern; New York: Peter Lang, 2012), 23.

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principle of the bourgeois thrift of history, which does not discard. Paradoxically, the basic condition for collecting is dispersion, which creates infinite fragments but also, barring limitations imposed by materiality, opens an infinite network of circulation. While collectors for the most part (in theory or affectively-tinged imagination) deliberately seek for a certain kind of object, in practice, they may just ramble along, allowing themselves to chance upon surprising fragments from the past, which they recycle, rearrange, and reinterpret. Unlike the world of museums and auction houses, a known provenance is not a prerequisite in the flea market. Thus, when the original context of the object is missing, the collector is first of all concerned with re-contextualization and re-narrativization. In these fragments the collector finds moments of rupture in history: every one of such discoveries may challenge the originally self-sufficient system, tearing fissures that lead to infinite bifurcations. So the flea market can rightly be deemed a space that re-configures material culture, refreshes buried cultural memory, and opens up history to multiple, mutually-contradicting narratives. As the following pages will show, the flea market as such often aligns two seemingly incompatible types of social actor: the collector with the revolutionary.

There is yet another dimension in the relationship between a collection and the world: historicity. When an object is placed in a museum, it undergoes a process of “musealization,” in which it is stripped of its use value, stops “being itself,” and exists in a vacuous state as an object for study and contemplation. But long before the stage of more public oriented musealization, there is private collecting, which effects more or less the same process. To become a “collectable,” an object might need to meet any number of requirements, among which two are most common: it should maintain a distance from everyday life, and it should be authentic. Such a “distance” can mean different things: either scarcity, preciousness, or religious or political
symbolic value. But it often takes the form of temporal distance: an antique object is almost always a collectable. Since history is an abstract concept, the only way to verify it is to have material evidence. So being real and being old are interconnected in the collectable, and collecting therefore participates in shaping the concept of historic authenticity, making it a symptom of our desperate craving for the transient and intangible past by holding on to its concrete remains. But a series of questions are also generated along the way: how old does an object have to be in order to be considered “real”? To put it in a different way, when we mean “real,” what temporal point of reference are we referring to? Countless cases in heritage preservation illustrate this point.

For example, if one wants to establish a museum commemorating a person, at least one item has to be authentic: either any number of the original objects owned, used or produced by that person, or the original building where the person lived, or even just the original address. For this purpose, an “original” building also has to be presented “as it looked” at the time the famous person lived. So layers of history before and after that period have to be erased or at least minimized. In a room at the Keats House in Hampstead, London, a Grade I listed building, two chairs are meticulously put at angles to faithfully reproduce the ones as they appear on Joseph Severn’s painting, where Keats sits reading in the very same room, on one of the two chairs. A portrait of Shakespeare hangs on the same spot in the room as in the painting. Anything before and after the precise moment the portrait was made does not matter, and has to be removed.

A different approach to preservation of historic sites is called “arrested decay,” in which the building is not renovated to assume the look of a certain period, but is left to deteriorate; only minimal maintenance is performed so that the site does not fall apart. Notable examples include
Edgar Allen Poe’s house in Philadelphia.\textsuperscript{14} Its philosophy represents a different understanding of historic authenticity: to preserve history as an ongoing process rather than a past moment, though this dilutes the presence of its most famous occupant.

In trickier cases, such as the Kafka Museum in Prague, though nothing authentic and significant adorns the institution - not even the address - it can at least claim that it is located in the “authentic” city of Kafka. But then we have to start pondering what such an authenticity means.

However, back in 1935, Walter Benjamin was already exploring the potential of mechanical reproduction of artworks that would destroy its unique and irreplaceable authenticity.\textsuperscript{15} Now in an age of virtual reality where everyone can own a (digital) copy of Shakespeare’s will by downloading it from the website of Britain’s National Archives\textsuperscript{16}, what does it mean to own something authentic? And in the end, what are we really looking for in our quest for the historic, material authenticity? And what can we possibly get? These are questions to which no easy answers can be provided, but we can at least gain some insights through observing those who are obsessed with, and are experts of, authenticity, namely the collectors. And I hope the cases presented in this dissertation will provide some such insights.


1.3. **The Relationship between the Collector and the Collectible**

Rather than being totally autonomous, a collection always involves an agency, namely the collector, and hence the third of the relations in question: one between objects and persons as shown in the process of collecting.

The motivations of collecting vary infinitely, accounting for all kinds of unique, unusual and often eccentric themes. In some cases the motivation can be clearly explained. For example, the Parisian perfume merchant Jacques Guérin, out of love for Marcel Proust’s literary works, collected all the material remains left by the great writer that came his way, as documented in Lorenza Foschini’s *Proust’s Overcoat*.17 There are other cases where the motivations are hidden and even twisted beneath layers of life experiences, waiting for psychoanalysts to excavate. For these collectors, the “collectibles” may be memorabilia substituting something or someone permanently lost. They may be objects of fetishism.

It is safe to say that almost everyone collects one or another kind of object throughout their lives, but that does not automatically make everyone a collector. The collector as an identity is the result of some form of self-fashioning, which eventually develops into an overarching attitude, an outlook, hence the Balzac quote about the eccentric collectors who are passionate about their quests but care nothing about other things commonly considered to be important, attractive or valuable.

Some collected objects may not have much exchange value. The most significant thing about this type of collecting is that, in giving up the valuable in exchange of something that for most others is but trivial, the collector radically subverts a common value system. In this sense, collectors are creators - not just of collections as mini-worlds, but the entire value system that

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governs them. As Benjamin notices, “the true collector detaches the object from its functional
relations. [...] (It would be interesting to study the bibliophile as the only type of collector who
has not completely withdrawn his treasures from their functional context).”

Other collected objects may indeed have great importance, or may be worth a fortune. But
that hardly makes collecting them less radical. Salman Rushdie’s short story “The Prophet’s Hair”
describes how the act of collecting a precious object can become irreverent and even heretic. The
wealthy moneylender Hashim has been leading a secular life characterized by upper-middle-
class comfort, elegance, tolerance and disregard of religion, until one day when he comes across
vial containing a strand of human hair, which turns out to be the holy relic of the Prophet
Muhammad, stolen from a shrine the previous morning. Instead of returning it to the shrine,
Hashim is overcome by a collector’s mania in him:

All around him in his study was the evidence of his collector’s mania: great cases full of
impaled butterflies from Gulmarg, three dozen miniature cannons cast from the melted-down
metal of the great gun Zamzama, innumerable swords, a Naga spear, ninety-four terracotta
camels of the sort sold on railway-station platforms and an infinitude of tiny sandalwood
dolls, which had originally been carved to serve as children’s bathtime toys. ‘And after all,’
Hashim told himself, ‘the Prophet would have disapproved mightily of this relic-worship: he
abhorred the idea of being deified, so by keeping this rotting hair from its mindless devotees,
I perform – do I not? – a finer service than I would by returning it! Naturally, I don’t want it
for its religious value: I’m a man of the world, of this world; I see it purely as a secular object
of great rarity and blinding beauty – in short, it’s the phial I desire, not the hair. There are
American millionaires who buy stolen paintings and hide them away – they would know how
I feel. I must, must have it!’

Here two views on the object are clearly in conflict: for the pious believer, this is no human
hair but a symbol of holiness, which effectively nullifies the hair’s own materiality; in
comparison, the phial is not even worthy of consideration. On the contrary, the collector has a

18 Benjamin, The Arcades Project, 207.

very different idea, and his monologue says it all: “I don’t want it for its religious value: I’m a
man of the world, of this world; I see it purely as a secular object of great rarity and blinding
beauty.”

Hashim and his family eventually suffer dreadful, supernatural retributions from this decision.
Rushdie seems to make the point that the collector’s mania, together with his worldliness, his
disregard for the received religious value system, are to blame for the fatal tragedy that ensues.
Hashim’s brief moment of reflection betrays the collector’s subversive character, which goes far
beyond a disregard of objects’ use values. Even aesthetic considerations cannot fully explain this
subversion. The collector is putting objects inside a virtual system, of which he or she is the sole
creator and master. All original values, relations and associations attached to the objects are
ripped off before they enter the sanctuary of a collection. Here the seemingly conservative
collector shows the true face of a radical.

Apparently, Benjamin was grappling with these intricate aspects of a collection, as is shown
in his repeated attempts to articulate them. The already quoted sentence, “the true collector
detaches the object from its functional relations,” appears slightly altered in another paragraph in
The Arcades Project’s manuscript, which goes as follows,

What is decisive in collecting is that the object is detached from all its original functions in
order to enter into the closest conceivable relation to things of the same kind. This relation is
the diametric opposite of any utility, and falls into the peculiar category of completeness.
What is this “completeness”? It is a grand attempt to overcome the wholly irrational
character of the object’s mere presence at hand through its integration into a new, expressly
devised historical system: the collection. [...] It is the deepest enchantment of the collector to
enclose the particular item within a magic circle, where, as a last shudder runs through it (the
shudder of being acquired), it turns into stone.\(^{20}\)

\(^{20}\) Benjamin, The Arcades Project, 205.
This “deep enchantment,” this “shudder of being acquired,” echoes Hashim’s silent vow, “I must, must have it!” The “wholly irrational character of the object’s mere presence at hand” describes the way a collector sees an object, whose blunt being-there-ness frustrates and fascinates him/her; it exists in a vacuous non-context, almost resembling a thing-in-itself, inviting the collector to re-appropriate it. Therefore, in collecting, the person-object relationship is both intimate and alienated: the collector is drawn increasingly closer to the object in the frenzy of obsessive and purified possession; but in the denial of the object’s functional aspects, he or she is also estranged from the object as defined by its worldly relational usefulness.

The collector as the agency behind the creation of a collection is also intertwined with the problem of infinity in a different way. What is at stake here is the difference between a public and a private collection. Contrary to a public collection, a private collection is ultimately finite not because the system is unable to grow infinitely, but simply because the collection is tied to the collector, who is mortal. Although Baudrillard correctly argues that “the collection’s fundamental function” is “the resolving of real time into a systematic dimension,”21 this does not in any way change the fact that a collection grows in physical time, and stops when the collector dies. Rather than stating the obvious, this represents the poignant clash between two originally parallel spheres: that of temporality, symbolically mastered and transcended in the supposedly self-sufficient collection, and the one physically bound up with human mortality. The mortality of the collector intrudes into the collection, curtailing its structural infinity.

In comparison, a public collection in theory lasts much longer than a collector’s lifetime. While a private collection is more subject to contingencies, and might bear the mark of personal eccentricities of all kinds that mean little or nothing to others, a public collection assumes more coherence and stability. Even when a public collection absorbs a private one, which is often the

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case, it would smooth and rationalize the latter’s eccentricities to conform to its original agenda. In more peculiar cases such as the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston and the Morgan Library and Museum in New York City, the original collector’s intentions and tastes are preserved intact so that the collection continue to maintain the character of its creator. But the dichotomy of this kind of collection is that it either stops growing and becomes “dead” (in the case of the Gardner Museum), or continues growing but ultimately undercuts its original form inherited from the collector’s individual character (in the case of the Morgan Library and Museum).

In their desire to extend their tight grip of their collections beyond death, these collectors are treating them as *embodiments* of themselves. So in a sense, they are writing autobiographies through objects: they are what they collect. The collections first become an indivisible part of their identity; later when they are no longer there, the collections substitute for them.

The collector who pushes this autobiographical approach to collecting to the extreme is the Turkish writer Orhan Pamuk, who not only wrote the novel *Museum of Innocence*\(^2^2\) using collections of everyday objects to document his heroine’s past (and implicitly his own as well), but also built a museum of the same name for these objects. If the novel is a museum in words, then the museum is an autobiographical novel told through objects. He enacts the narrativization of collecting, and then turns collecting back into narrative, further developed in the lavishly illustrated catalogue Pamuk created, *The Innocence of Objects*.\(^2^3\)

Pamuk’s novel-museum-catalog project attracts thousands of visitors to the museum, and that the city of Istanbul has posted signs directing people to it. In a sense, his private museum has become “public.” It illustrates another theme that is important for this dissertation: the continual


and rather entangled negotiation between private and public collections. In this process, the motivations, mentalities, tastes, standards, and organizing principles of both sides interact, and sometimes clash with each other. Behind the public collections’ agendas are the state’s ideology, schemes of nation-building and the logic of cultural politics. Therefore collections become participants in the construction of a national culture, and lose most of the collectors’ individual eccentricities.

2. Twentieth Century China: a Case Study

2.1. From the Beginning to the Nineteenth Century

The practice of collecting in China shares most of these characteristics, but it also has its own peculiarities, which start with the very expression denoting “collecting.” In Chinese, the equivalent to the verb “to collect” is the compound word “shoucang” 收藏, consisting of 收 meaning “to gather,” and 藏 meaning “to hide,” “to hoard” or “to store.” The Chinese equivalent of collector is “shoucang jia” 收藏家, which literally means “gatherer and hoarder.” The character denoting “gathering” directly corresponds to the act of collecting, and thus makes perfect sense. But why “hiding” and “hoarding”? In the Chinese intellectual tradition, setting something aside and storing it has a very specific connotation, defined by a major early source: the great historian Sima Qian, the author of the seminal Records of the Grand Historian. In a letter to a friend, he says the following about his magnum opus: “I verily hope to write this book, store it in famous mountains, and pass it down to the right persons in metropolises, so that my previous humiliating sufferings can be redeemed, and I would not regret even if I were to endure
ten thousand lancinations.” Part of the same expression also appears at the very end of this book, which was intended “to be hidden in famous mountains, with copies in the Capital, awaiting sages and exemplary persons in posterity.”

Sima’s words contain two important messages. First, although he had no doubt about the great value of his work, he predicted that it was not easily accessible for everyone; those who could understand its essence were destined to be few. So rather than proliferating copies, he opted for the esoteric approach of hiding it. Second, storing it and hiding it away was for him a means of extending its influence across space and time. Ultimately, by hiding his book, it will exercise enduring influence, and in turn he, the author, will become immortalized.

Afterwards, the quote “cang zhi mingshan” or “hide in the famous mountains” becomes a set phrase, implying several things. First, it stemmed from the writer/collector’s strong wish to perpetuate his/her influence, and extend the presence of the self beyond temporal and spatial limits. Second, this desire often went hand in hand with the author’s awareness that his or her ideas were totally against the grain of the time, or even something to be forbidden, and would not have any chance of being accepted. So hiding their work or collection away ensured a potential dialogue and understanding in the distant future. The most notable example of this mentality can be found in the rebellious and unyielding Ming intellectual Li Zhi 李贄 (1527 - 1602), who was a fearless and outspoken critic of Confucian ideology. He straightforwardly entitled a work of his on history as Cang Shu 藏書, meaning “a book to be hidden,” and directly references Sima

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Qian’s proud declamation in its preface (Li 1). He even entitled another of his work provocatively as *Fen Shu* 焚書, meaning “a book to be burnt.”

Lastly, behind the act of hiding/storing was also the gatherer and hoarder’s deep-seated concern about the irresistible, destructive force of time that leads to oblivion, the desire to preserve the presence of the self in posterity through the hoarding, and the desperate rebellion against dispersion that is the inevitable destiny of all collections.

Most of the information about collecting at the beginning of Chinese history that comes down to us is about royal or imperial rather than private efforts. For kings and emperors, collecting was essentially an act of nation-building and world-making through registering their possessions: having a real object or a piece of land registered in a catalogue, itself an index of collections, validated the object/land’s very existence and possession. This can be compared to the Latin saying “quod non est in actis, non est in mundo” [what is not in the documents is not in the world]27. Indeed, during the Warring States period, a surrender was performed through presenting the map of the land being ceded. The most illustrative example is the failed assassination of the King Ying Zheng 嬴政 of Qin, the future First Emperor (Shi Huangdi) by Jing Ke 荊軻 from the Kingdom from Yan. In a gesture that symbolized the transference of the sovereignty of territory, Jing Ke presented a rolled-up map to the King, and slowly unrolled it to show him its details; when he fully unrolled the map to its very end, a dagger suddenly appeared. Jing Ke snatched it and tried to kill the King, but tragically missed his target, and was subsequently killed.28

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26 See Li Zhi: *Fen Shu*, in *Li Zhi Quanji Zhu*, vol. 1-3, and *Cang Shu*, in *Li Zhi Quanji Zhu*, vol. 4-8 (Beijing: Shehui Kexue Wenxian Chubanshe, 2010).
Beside this spatial expansion that characterized early attempts to collect, catalogue and own territories and objects, there was also a temporal, historical aspect. As a culture that reveres tradition above everything else, China unsurprisingly has a long history of collecting. The title of the first, self-proclaimed collector should be accorded to Confucius, who famously describes his entire work thus: “I transmit but do not create.”\(^{29}\) One of his major achievements was said to be the gathering and editing poetry from different states in ancient China to form the *Classic of Poetry*, a foundational text in Chinese literature.\(^{30}\) Confucius sets the standard for later generations to diligently learn from the past, in terms of both scholarly endeavors and construction of political systems, and this attitude has come to characterize a major aspect of Chinese culture.\(^{31}\)

This obsession with antiquity naturally had to be based upon collecting the remains from antiquity, in particular books. Two early scholars who made major contributions to the preserving and organizing of ancient classics were Liu Xiang (77 - 6 BC)\(^{32}\) and his son Liu Xin (c. 50 BC - 23 AD)\(^{33}\). Both were bibliographers at the Imperial Library of the Han Dynasty. The preservation of ancient classics was the main concern of the practice of collecting in ancient China. However, one of my fundamental arguments is that collectors detach the collected object


\(^{30}\) The theory that the *Classic of Poetry* was edited by Confucius originates from the 94 BC *Records of the Grand Historian*. Textual evidences have long questioned this theory, and I accept these evidences. The reason I still quote it is because it has come to form a longstanding narrative tradition that exercises real influence on how both Confucius and the *Classic of Poetry* have been viewed. Although the story might be fake, its influence remains real.

\(^{31}\) For an insightful discussion on this topic, see Pierre Ryckmans, “The Chinese Attitude towards the Past,” in *Papers on Far Eastern History*, issue 39 (March 1989), 1-16.

\(^{32}\) For the life of Liu Xiang, see Ban Gu: *History of Han*, vol. 36, no. 6: “Chu Yuan Wang Zhuan.”

\(^{33}\) For the life of Liu Xin, see Ban Gu: *History of Han*, vol. 36, no. 6: “Chu Yuan Wang Zhuan.”
from its use value, whereas these bibliographers, in their efforts to gather and preserve books, maintained their use value.

It is true that, according to Benjamin, bibliophiles are “the only type of collector who has not completely withdrawn his treasures from their functional context,” but what about the collectors who did withdraw, if only partially, their treasures from their functional context? If defined as such, the first “true” and well-documented collectors emerged in Song Dynasty (960-1279). The Song emperors were conscious collectors and connoisseurs of antiquity. The second emperor Taizong 太宗 (939 - 997) collected ancient calligraphic and pictorial masterpieces from across the country, and compiled the Calligraphy Models from Chunhua Pavilion 淳化閣法帖 to canonize a certain kind of calligraphic style. Emperor Huizong 徽宗 (1083 - 1135), a highly talented painter and calligrapher, ordered the compilation of Xuanhe Catalogue of Antiquity 宣和博古图, which registered all the ancient ritual vessels in the royal collection, verified their proper names, drew their images, copied their inscriptions, and included detailed descriptions of their shapes and sizes.

Huizong’s personal interests inspired a general trend in collecting and studying ancient artifacts. But his reign was tragically interrupted by the Jurchen invasion in 1127, and his collections went into dispersion. His successor Gaozong (1107 - 1187) rebuilt the Dynasty in the South, and attempted to reassembled the collections. During this period, a not so famous but very interesting collector emerged: Bi Liangshi 畢良史 (? - 1150). Bi was a successful antique dealer and connoisseur, and provided much help to Gaozong for obtaining and authenticating precious

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34 Benjamin, The Arcades Project, 207.
36 See Zhao Ji 赵佶 (Emperor Song Huizong): Xuanhe Bogu Tu (Taipei: Xinxing Shuju, 1969).
collectables. He had a peculiar interest in collecting burial objects, which he installed in his home, and named it quite bluntly “Studio of Death” 死軒.

A far more famous collector was the great literati Ouyang Xiu (1007 - 1072), who compiled the monumental Ji Gu Lu 集古錄, or Collected Records of the Past, a foundational collection of ancient inscriptions’ rubbings that laid the groundwork of the study of this subject. Ouyang made clear that his obsession as a collector was less out of practical need than fueled by a “special affection” for things ancient:

The things that scholars who are fond of the past collect and preserve do not necessarily serve any use in the world today. It is just that when they come across such fragments that are buried or strewn about the countryside, they view them with special affection and pity. Such is the obsession of fondness for the past!

So in Ouyang’s case the collecting mania was bound with an interest in, and a valorization of, the past. The collection itself is now lost, but the large number of colophons Ouyang wrote to accompany the rubbings are passed down. Ouyang’s preface to the Colophons on Collected Records of the Past is a collector’s statement of purpose, and reveals most of the typical traits that characterize a collector:

As a rule, material things accumulate where they are enjoyed and are likewise possessed where the resources to obtain them are greatest. [...] King Tang’s wash basin, Confucius’ cauldron, the stone drums from Jiyang, the inscribed stones at Mt. Dai, Zhouyi, and Kuaiji; the great steles, sacrificial vessels, bronze inscriptions, poems, prefaces, and dedicatory essays written by sage rulers and worthy officials from the Han and Wei dynasties down to

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38 See Lu You 陆友: Yanbei Zazhi 研北雜志. Published by Shenshi Shangbaizhai, year unknown, no page number.


40 Egan, The Problem of Beauty, 27.
today; and calligraphy by various masters done in archaic, greater seal, lesser seal, bafen, and clerical scripts - all these are priceless treasures from the Three Dynasties and later times, and they are the most bizarre and extraordinary, majestic and striking, skillfully crafted, and delightful of material things. They are not found in remote places and acquiring them does not involve danger or risk. Why is it, then, that exposed to the elements and ravaged by war, they are abandoned and damaged, and lie strewn about amid hillsides and ruins where no one gathers them up? It is because those who enjoy such things are so few. Even if someone does know how to enjoy them, if his resources are inadequate, he will be lucky to obtain one or two of them and will be unable to make them truly accumulate before him.

Some may belittle my efforts, saying that when material things are accumulated in such quantity, it is difficult to keep the collection intact, and that sooner or later it will inevitably be broken up and scattered about. So why am I making such a fuss over these things? I can only say, by way of reply, that doing so supplies me with what I enjoy. What harm is there if I grow old amusing myself with these things? Are not accumulations of ivory, rhinoceros horn, gold, and jade also bound to be scattered about eventually? I simply cannot bring myself to exchange one for the other.\(^{41}\)

First of all, these passages demonstrate Ouyang’s almost hedonistic attitude towards ancient material things that, in so far as their extraordinary qualities were unappreciated by most other people, denies conventional market values customarily attached to objects. A dichotomy exists between the negligence of these objects and Ouyang’s defiant adherence to them as a source of amusement. Secondly, it is heightened by his keen awareness of the prospect of dispersion. The reasons for dispersion can be many, but the ultimate and universal one is simply that all collectors will eventually die. The more ardently they amass their collections, the stronger their desire to forever cling on to them in their entirety, and ironically the more acutely they feel the transience of life, which will always deny them the extended fulfillment of this desire.

However, although the awareness of dispersion and the sense of transience find resonance in these ancient objects’ historicity, in the form of their fragmented, scattered, blemished state, historicity is not necessarily the main drive behind the construction of Ouyang’s collection as a system, because items in Collected Records of the Past were not ordered chronologically, but

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according to the sequence in which they were collected by him. It is true that this later order was also a chronological one, but for the contents this order was random. Why so? My conjecture is that Ouyang’s motivation for collecting was more autobiographical than historical. The ordering of his acquisition of these objects reflected the traces of his own life rather than history itself. It is Jean Baudrillard who accurately captures this very personal configuration of temporality within the collection as a system:

The deep-rooted power of collected objects stems neither from their uniqueness nor from their historical distinctiveness. It is [...] because the organization of the collection itself replaces time. And no doubt this is the collection’s fundamental function: the resolving of real time into a systematic dimension. [...] Indeed, it abolishes time. More precisely, by reducing time to a fixed set of terms navigable in either direction, the collection represents the continual recommencement of a controlled cycle whereby man, at any moment and with complete confidence, starting with any term and sure of returning to it, is able to set his game of life and death in motion.\(^{42}\)

It is precisely these characteristics that distinguish Ouyang from being a chronicler of history, and guarantee his status as a true collector. Ouyang was the more accomplished and influential one among a number of collectors in Song Dynasty, including such towering figures as the poet Su Shi and the calligrapher and painter Mi Fu. Ouyang also inspired the prominent collector-couple Zhao Mingcheng and Li Qingzhao, with Li being the first documented female collector in China. Their story will be discussed in the first chapter of this dissertation. Most importantly, the Song practice, with its emphasis on texts, regardless of their media, throws it into relief: it is the texts that really matter, because they record history; material objects - be they bronze vessels, steles, tombstones or other artifacts - are valuable in so far as they bear inscriptions. A fundamental tension thus exists between the textual and the material. Pierre Ryckmans observes precisely this point:

\(^{42}\) Baudrillard, *System of Objects*, 95.
traditionally, Chinese aesthetes, connoisseurs and collectors were exclusively interested in calligraphy and painting; later on, their interest also extended to bronzes and to a few other categories of antiques. However, we must immediately observe that painting is in fact an extension of calligraphy - or at least, that it had first to adopt the instruments and techniques of calligraphy before it could attract the attention of the aesthetes. As to the bronzes, their value was directly dependent upon whether they carried epigraphs. In conclusion, it would not be an excessive simplification to state that, in China, the taste for antiques has always remained closely - if not exclusively - related to the prestige of the written word.⁴³

In other words, there was a hierarchy of collectables, with the textual element occupying the very top. Behind the text is the uncontestable importance of recording and transmitting history.

Therefore, an acute awareness of historicity not only characterized Chinese collecting practices, but resulted in prioritizing a whole category of *inscribed objects* over the rest. Even the shoucang jia, the “gatherers and hoarders,” attempted to achieve immortality through hiding away their *writings*, not their treasured objects, so as to guarantee perpetual memory. The tension created by this binary opposition will be a key clue that runs through this dissertation.

After the Song, the Ming Dynasty (1368 - 1644) saw another climax of collecting, but with a distinctly different character, a deviation in the appreciation of objects rather than pedantic obsession with words. In comparison with the Song, Ming literati collectors more avowedly and hedonistically pursued the pleasure found in objects, and openly cared amusement over knowledge and morality. The anti-utilitarian and often witty attitude found in Ming collectors is highlighted by Wai-Yee Li, who opens her article “The Collector, the Connoisseur, and Late-Ming Sensibility”⁴⁴ with this quotation from Zhang Yanyuan: “Yet if I do not do that which is

useless, how can I take pleasure in this life which does have a limit?” This unabashed attitude epitomizes the Ming zeitgeist that knew the beauty of objects in themselves.

This appreciation is embodied by numerous collected writings focusing on material culture. They include Cao Zhao’s *Ge Gu Yao Lun* 格古要论, the earliest Ming writing on the authentication and appreciation of cultural objects; Dong Qichang 董其昌’s *Gudong Shisan Shuo* 骨董十三说; Tu Long 屠隆’s *Kao Pan Yushi* 考槃餘事; Wen Zhenheng 文震亨’s *Changwu Zhi* 長物志; Li Yu 李渔’s *Xianqing Ou Ji* 闲情偶寄, to name just a few. If, apart from Ouyang’s self-proclaimed pleasure-seeking approach to ancient objects, the Song interest in material culture still inspired a new tradition of philology and study of history, then the Ming obsession with objects was more purely hedonistic and materialist. A serious, inquiring and evidence-based attitude towards historic authenticity was replaced by a relatively relaxed, imaginative and subjective one that emphasized the connection between the object and the self, rather than the object and history. The overall attitude can be described as an almost decadent aesthetization of everyday life.

Wai-Yee Li’s article indeed emphasizes “taking wanton pleasure in things” as something central to the late Ming sensibility. She traces the history of the hedonistic attachment to things, which includes the tendency of “balance, moderation, and spiritual cultivation [that] recurs in the discourse on objects and possession;” this tendency “signifies an attitude of ‘simultaneous attachment and detachment,’ which provides for intensity of experience while keeping the potential dangers of intensity at bay.” Sayings like “taking pleasure in things undermines the

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47 Ibid., 272.
will” 玩物喪志 and “to use things and not be used as things” 物而不物 testify to it.\(^{48}\) As a warning, it is evidence of how strong the attachment to things - and hence the danger - could be.

This danger was further intensified by the specific historical background of the late Ming Dynasty, a time when national crisis was looming large. The northern Manchu State was constantly threatening the existence of the Ming, while the latter’s internal problems brewed destructive farmer uprisings. When combined, it did not take too much difficulty for the two to bring down the Ming, the last Han-rulled Dynasty. It is a glaringly incompatible juxtaposition: the more serious the danger, the more intense the pleasure-seeking. Collecting and enjoying objects continued to play a negative role that undermined one’s devotion to more serious missions.

Literati in the Qing Dynasty, which replaced the Ming, could not be more aware of the perils of the Ming indulgence. So the general trend in the Qing was a reaction against, and a rectification of, such decadent aesthetization. The first generation of the Qing literati were essentially the survivors from the Ming. Many of them went into passive resistance and constant lament. A notable representative was Zhang Dai 張岱, once a well-to-do but good-for-nothing fop, a dandy, who spent his remaining life after the fall of the Ming writing works such as \textit{Tao’an Mengyi} 陶庵夢憶 and \textit{Xihu Mengxun} 西湖夢尋\(^{49}\), trying to piece back the past through recollections. Although he was attached to objects and the pleasures they entailed, there was a difference in his identity before and after the dynasty’s fall: initially he was a connoisseur who enjoyed the objects in the present, and did not worry about gathering and preserving them. In his “auto-epitaph,” he enumerates his obsessions with delicate architecture, beautiful girls and boys,

\(^{48}\) \textit{Ibid.}, 273-4.

\(^{49}\) See Zhang Dai: \textit{Tao’an Mengyi, Xihu Mengxun} (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 1982).
colorful clothes, gourmet cuisine, handsome horses, bright lamps, fireworks, drama, music, antiques, flowers and birds, but “after half a life, all becomes a dreamlike hallucination.”

After the traumatic loss of this former life, he became a “collector”; he both literally and rhetorically recollected the past, which was now all scattered in fragments both materially and symbolically. The practice of collecting, in his case mostly done through linguistic enactment rather than actual action, was a retrospective and autobiographical gesture. Objects defined his now irrecoverable previous life; recollecting them in words helped to console the damaged present life, and preserve traces that still bore witness to the past.

Precisely because of the lesson learnt from the decadent Ming literati, their Qing successors kept their pleasure-seeking in check. More serious scholarly endeavors resumed to be the main way cultural objects were being engaged, which paved the way for a booming of philology and meticulous textual scholarship that came to characterize Qing culture. Textual collecting served as an important tool, and the inscribed objects again had an upper hand over artifacts unadorned by texts.

2.2. The Twentieth Century: the Odyssey of the Imperial Collections

This very brief survey of the history of collecting in China shows the close relation between accumulation in the process of empire-building and dispersion during wars. Drastic and traumatic social changes have led to dispersion, which ironically always motivated and facilitated intense collecting activities. The history of collecting is an ever-recurring cycle of lost

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51 See Zhang Dai, “Preface to Tao’an Mengyi,” in Tao’an Mengyi, Xihu Mengxun (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 1982), 1.

and found, and of gathering and scattering. Furthermore, the collecting mania has often been
directed towards antiquity, in line with the longstanding tradition of valorizing the past as a
golden age.

On the other hand, although the collection and dispersion of objects are ongoing at all times,
they operate on a relatively inconspicuous scale during stable times. But at times of radical social
change, dispersion is so much more visibly destructive that little seems to remain - unless we
remember that the collector serves as the unaccredited preserver and “recycler” of the past. For
this reason, collectables, however trivial they might be, become *mementi mori* of traumatic
fissures and indicators of radical social change. Therefore, it is only natural that collecting,
spurred by the urgent need to preserve the past, stands out at moments of perceived upheavals.
For instance, Susan A. Crane discusses the sense of responsibility among German intellectuals to
preserve their nation’s cultural heritage in response to the Napoleonic Wars,\(^53\) while Susan
Bielecki regards the French Revolution as an event “without which the modern collector could
not exist.”\(^54\) One can as well say the same for twentieth-century China. Collectors stood at a
historic juncture that specifically called for them to rescue the past from its fragmented state. By
doing so, they became creators of future cultural values.

To varying degrees, the practice of collecting in twentieth-century China inherited the
tradition. But a number of events, both unprecedented and consequential, fundamentally altered
the picture, making this period stand out as a unique epoch for collectors. First, after years of
closure, China again opened its door to foreigners after its defeat in the Opium War by the
British Empire. As a result, there was a strong presence of foreign collectors in China’s


\(^{54}\) Bielecki, *The Collector*, 122.
flourishing international consumer market in the cosmopolitan urban centers. They were not just competing with Chinese collectors, but brought in an entire set of new criteria and practices that powerfully shaped the market. These changes not only forced native collectors to respond by altering their own collecting habits, but also changed many aspects of traditional learning, which had always heavily relied upon collecting. Even more importantly, the possibility - and also the reality - that Chinese treasures ended up in foreign lands incited heated and urgent discussions on topics of nationalism, national essence, and national heritage. These aspects will be treated in detail in the first chapter and the third chapter.

The second new element seems to be a series of independent, accidental events, but they are in effect related to the first one. The early part of the twentieth century has been characterized by many scholars as an epoch of archeological discovery. They have noted that there was an eruption of extremely important findings, which provided new materials for traditional learning, and drastically revised many longstanding ideas about Chinese culture and history. These discoveries include the Shang Dynasty oracle bones and their script, the hitherto earliest known writing in East Asia, the Dunhuang manuscripts documenting cultural and commercial exchange between Central and East Asia, and the Ming and Qing Dynasties imperial archives, among many others. What the scholars did not realize was that, apart from a stroke of good luck, this apparent eruption of new discoveries was in fact the result of a shift in the conceptualization of history in its materiality. These treasures were always lying there, and some had been dug out before, but no one noticed their historic significance. Only when a new paradigm was created and accepted did the scholars all of a sudden realize what invaluable treasures they had long been unconsciously sitting on. And foreign collectors’ new standard regarding what was “collectable” helped shaping this new conceptualization.
Last but not least, the new conceptualization of history in its materiality was also affected by political circumstances. This was the first upheaval of a national scale in three centuries. The wealth of slowly accumulated collections, private and royal alike, was now facing the fate of dispersion, caused by five decades of intermittent but devastating wars, including the brutal Japanese invasion. As if these were not bad enough, they were followed by another decade of chaos caused by the Proletariat Cultural Revolution, dealing another fatal blow to both material and spiritual culture. Countless fragments emerged from this process, awaiting collectors to hunt and creatively reassemble.

Although this dissertation discusses many collections, at the heart of its narrative is one particularly prominent set, which was dramatically affected by these catastrophes: the Qing Emperors’ vast royal collections, the core of which were stored inside the Forbidden City. In the twentieth century, they went through a long and extraordinary process of dispersion, dislocation and (partial) reassembling. These collections have an interesting dual identity: they were originally the emperors’ personal possessions, reflecting their individual tastes; but with their imperial status, they were at the same time a symbol of national cultural identity and ideology. So in the beginning, the line between private and national collections had already been blurred.

During the chaotic and under-regulated transitional period from the Qing Empire to the Republic of China, the abdicated Emperor was allowed to continue residing in the Forbidden City, and it became even more difficult to draw the line between private properties and national treasures. At this time a long process of dispersion started. Eunuchs and court ladies of all ranks had the opportunity to participate in scattering national treasures by smuggling them out of the palace to feed the rapidly growing flea markets in Beijing, the most famous among them being Liu Li
Even the abrogated Emperor Puyi himself, now running out of resources, would from time to time give valuable objects to ministers who loyally continued to serve him. In 1924, Puyi was expelled from the Forbidden City, and the collections, together with the palace complex, theoretically went public in the care of the Palace Museum, under the Republic government. And yet the dispersion continued.

Two striking events form the dramatic climaxes of these collections’s odyssey, amply illustrating their supreme cultural and political significance. When the Japanese army started to pose a serious threat to the old imperial capital Beijing in 1933, the Museum authorities decided to pack the majority of the imperial collections, and transfer them southwards. The difficulty is unimaginable even by today’s standard: it took about half a year for the museum staff to pack the invaluable but extremely delicate treasures into a total of 13,427 cases, which were then transferred by ground transportation to Shanghai and then Nanjing. With Japanese troops moving to the south, the collections were moved westwards to Sichuan, stretching the total itinerary to about twenty thousand miles in fourteen years. Such a daunting and costly task, without any practical meaning during wartime, would not even have been conceivable were it not for its symbolic significance.

The Japanese surrender in 1945 did not mark the end of the collections’ odyssey. Soon afterwards the Chinese civil war broke out, with the Nationalist government eventually retreating to Taiwan and the Communist government gaining control of the whole mainland. Nearly three thousand cases containing the best part of the collections were transferred to Taiwan, while the

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55 For an introduction to Liu Li Chang, see Sun Dianqi 孙殿起, Liu Li Chang Xiaozhi 琉璃厂小志 (Beijing: Beijing Press, 1962).

rest remained in Beijing and Nanjing. For both governments, the collections represented their cultural and political legitimacy.

The remarkable adventure of these collections is only one among countless cases of collecting and dispersion in history. As Benjamin notes,

'[p]erhaps the most deeply hidden motive of the person who collects can be described this way: he takes up the struggle against dispersion. Right from the start, the great collector is struck by the confusion, by the scatter, in which the things of the world are found.'

If the things of the world are always scattered, they have rarely been more so than during this traumatic period of wars and revolutions. This situation affects both the mentalities and the behaviors of the collectors discussed in this dissertation.

Dispersion of collections also has an important effect on the nature of things. Collectors are by definition conservationists, yet they do not - and cannot - preserve the past intact: the seemingly infinite fragments they gather can never be pieced back into the original whole, as if the ruptures had never happened. This is the moment when the collector becomes creative, willful and even revolutionary. New and unusual combinations of old objects, now fragments out of context, shed light on hitherto unheeded links and parallels; conflicting value systems have to be reorganized and reconciled; new ideas are thus generated. In this sense, Benjamin’s interpretation of Paul Klee’s *Angelus Novus* seems more like an allegory of the collector:

'[w]here we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hauls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed... The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward.'

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57 Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 211.

Parallel to the imperial collections’ saga is the fluctuating fortunes of the collector, and the changing nature of collections. By definition, communism is the natural enemy of private collectors. Gradually, whether willingly or by force, countless collectors surrendered their collections to the state, which was now determined to define and build its own “national culture.” With its fervent quest for utopian equalization, the Communist Party unleashed one purge after another of cultural and financial elites, and even turned against its own establishment. Thus the ecology of private collecting was severely damaged. Destruction of a collection can happen as quickly as overnight, but the forming of a collection is a dauntingly slow process, sometimes taking much longer than one generation. Therefore, in ambitious cases, collecting is an exclusive hobby for old money, which no longer existed in a communist country. Private collectors perished along with the elite, while national collections were being created on top of their ashes.

This dissertation focuses on cases in the mainland, where private collecting clashed much more violently with communist, state-sponsored collecting than in Taiwan. From imperial to national, it seems that the nature of these collections went full circle back to the starting point. But in fact it is no longer the same: when both the Communist and Nationalist governments finally settled down, they started to transform the emperors’ personal collections into national treasures. And now the imperial collections have to be reconfigured to assume new roles that meet requirements of new ideologies.

To quote Benjamin yet again, “[t]he phenomenon of collecting loses its meaning as it loses its personal owner.” Indeed, something fundamental is changed once the collector bids farewell to his or her private collection. The fate of the Chinese imperial collections as well as the private

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collectors in twentieth century illustrate the intricate transformation across the fine line that separates the private and the public.

Besides focusing on cultural figures and events, the dissertation also pays attention to one situation resulting from this massive dispersion, namely the flourishing of flea markets in Beijing. The famous Liu Li Chang antique market benefited enormously from the dispersion. It is another clue that connects all the protagonists of this project: they did not just frequent this place hunting for collectables, but allowed it to shape their thoughts and scholarship. The antique objects, almost always with dubious provenances, were fragments of history, indicating its ruptured and forgetful character. But at the same time they incited intense interest from the collectors to recover, preserve and understand them, in the hope of piecing them back into a coherent narrative (and sometime did manage to do so). The presence of foreign collectors, with their own aesthetic and intellectual standards, mentalities and practices, further complicated the picture, and directly influenced Chinese collectors/scholars’ understanding of their own cultural heritage. As a result, an object was assessed according to Chinese as well as foreign standards, and according to scholarly as well as market values, which were often in conflict with each other. This continual process of clash and negotiation exercised a strong influence on the development of intellectual history in modern China.

The competition between Chinese and foreign collectors is also reflected in the duality of the two metropolises in China: the centuries-old political and cultural center Beijing, and the newly flourishing, semi-colonized and international metropolis Shanghai. As a supplement to Beijing, this dissertation also contains an analysis of Shanghai as a peculiar and alternative space for collecting.
2.3. Four Collectors, Four Approaches

In different ways, all the collectors/scholars in this dissertation were intimately engaged with this unprecedented process of dispersal and (re)collecting. At the critical juncture when the Chinese New Culture Movement tried to override tradition, these collectors’ materialist interventions into history played a crucial but hitherto unrecognized role in redefining Chinese culture, at the center of which is literariness (“wen”), as represented by the supreme status of the inscribed objects. And their unrecognized role is the gap that my research fills. Through collecting, they exposed the ongoing tension and age-old connection between materiality and literariness.

In accordance with the spirit of the baroque idea of the conceit, four prominent but dissimilar and seemingly unrelated cultural figures are brought together in this dissertation to form a collection. On the surface, there is little that connects Huang Binhong, Luo Zhenyu, Lu Xun, and Shen Congwen. Huang Binhong became famous late in life for his accomplishment as a landscape painter with bold and infinitely varied styles, but assumed a conservative outlook as he stuck to traditional ink painting rather than embracing the “new” Western techniques. Luo Zhenyu was a scholar famous for deciphering the oracle bone script, but also a staunch monarchist and a notorious collaborator with the Japanese occupation in Manchuria. The prominent writer Lu Xun, on the contrary, was an avowed anti-monarchist and a fierce proponent of revolution, modernization and leftism. Last but not least, Shen Congwen, a brilliant writer of gentle character, held mild political views, working hard to separate literature from politics.

The true collector believes that any unusual and unexpected combination of objects can shed surprising light on the familiar, and open up new vistas of knowledge. This quartet of cultural figures testifies to such a belief. All four of them were avid collectors of ancient artifacts, which
strongly influenced their individual intellectual pursuits. Moreover, each in his own way, they all had a close contact with the dispersion and re-assembling of the Qing imperial collections. In their varied capacities, and according to their individual cultural ideals, they also exercised their own influence on these collections. Lastly, through collecting, they powerfully reshaped archeology, literature, the history of art and design, and aesthetics in modern China, in ways that drastically deviated from the mainstream narrative of reform and revolution.

Although all four are towering figures in their own fields, and have received considerable critical attention, this dissertation is the first project to bring them together according to their hitherto unnoted common identity as collectors, and to seriously engage the intellectual significance of their collecting activities, which have generally been neglected as secondary hobbies compared to their major achievements. They shared the same awareness that they were faced with the chaotic aftermath of a now defunct attempt of world-making and world-defining through collecting. Their tasks could therefore be understood as rescuing the collapsed system and rebuilding the structure within it.

The first chapter, entitled “Collecting the Oracle Bones: How Chinese Antiquarianism becomes Antiquated,” situates the groundbreaking recovery from the Beijing flea markets of the 3000 BCE oracle bones script, the earliest known Chinese script. Through his materialist approach to these bones, Luo Zhenyu liberated the artifacts from the intense scrutiny of philology, repositioning the footing of from text to materiality. He then broadened the scope of his collecting activities by including all kinds of ancient cultural objects. Most notable among them were the hitherto neglected Ming and Qing Dynasty Imperial archive collections, with which Luo introduced a surprisingly modern historiographical basis that finds resonance in Leopold von Ranke, Jacques Derrida and Michel de Certeau. Luo’s broad interests in collecting
all categories of ancient artifacts reflected a strong sense of mission to rescue an endangered culture through preservation of its material basis for posterity. As a private collector, he virtually took up the task that should belong to the state. In this sense he finds a kindred spirit in the German art historian and cultural theorist Aby Warburg, another towering figure engaged in preserving material culture of the past.

However, Luo’s native approach was confronted by the Harvard-trained scholar Li Ji’s modern and Western methods of archeology. Their contestation was further complicated by the tension between Luo’s conservative values and Li’s vision of modernity, thus politicizing the study of antiquity. On the surface, this contestation was just another, now almost hackneyed cultural clash between Chinese/pre-modern and Western/modern concepts. But I counter this impression by asking a retrospective question: how—and why—did the study of antiquity in Europe become modern? In response, I historicize Western archeology by tracing its complicated relation to its predecessor, antiquarianism, and argue that collecting as a discursive methodology is essential for antiquarianism’s preference of aberrations over artificially constructed norms, thus constituting a powerful challenge to the teleological orientation of a modern conception of history.

The second chapter, “The Infinite Collection and the Mortal Collector: Lu Xun, Flea Market Revolutionary,” focuses on the foremost modern Chinese writer Lu Xun’s collecting activities, the importance of which has long been ignored and downplayed by scholars. Besides being a successful fiction writer and essayist, Lu Xun was a devoted scholar in philology and paleography. My research probes the implications of his anachronistic obsession with collecting antique objects and inscriptions on the Beijing flea markets, and his role as a government official in sorting out the imperial archive; these activities form a stark contrast to his image as a
“progressive” revolutionary. I argue that his experiences in these fields allowed him a glimpse into history in the form of a fabricated collection of texts. His efforts of tracing lost, suppressed and censored texts brewed his distrust of standard historical narratives, which in turn formed the basis of his major fictional output. His career represented the tension between the collector and the storyteller in their competition for a legitimate interpretation of history: on the one hand, he created his fictional works as an allegorical system to expose the lies of history; on the other hand, through the act of collecting “fugitive” texts left out of the canon, Lu Xun recognized the unfathomability of a unified narrative, which led to the complete breakdown of his allegorical system.

The third chapter, entitled “Huang Binhong: Authenticity, Connoisseurship and Cosmopolitanism,” turns to the realm of fine arts, and probes the connection between conservatism and cosmopolitanism made possible through the intervention of collecting. I investigate Huang’s activities as a collector, art dealer and publisher, and his work in authenticating the vast painting collections in the Imperial Palace. His tactile engagements with ancient artworks equipped him with a connoisseurship that relied solely on aesthetic judgment, and was the very opposite of scientific methods of authentication. I argue that these activities had a definitive influence on his bold synthesis of the whole spectrum of diverse and complex historic styles in his later period. Through this late style Huang answered a pressing question for most intellectuals of his generation: how could China participate in world culture?

Huang’s answer was the very opposite of the typical approach that labeled Chinese art as a precursor to minimalism, which was actually how it was presented to the world, and how it came to influence various trends of modernism in the West. One proof of the power of Huang’s historicized and complicated style is that it attracted the European-minded Fu Lei, thus forming a
rather surprising symbiosis between local traditionalism and cosmopolitan modernism. The eminent art critic Fu Lei, an admirer of European modernism, had been looking hard for a new model of Chinese art that was both rooted in local tradition and able to powerfully respond to modernity. His search had been a frustrating one until he came across Huang, in whom he recognized the potential of true cosmopolitanism. Art collecting as a method not only played a pivotal role in the formation of Huang’s style, but was crucial for the intellectual basis of the friendship between Huang and Fu, which continues to have repercussions on twenty-first century Chinese aesthetics.

The fourth and last chapter, “Shen Congwen: Aestheticizing the Handicraft,” provides an interpretation of Shen Congwen’s dramatic transformation from an eminent novelist into a curator of the old imperial collection under conditions of political oppression, and analyzes this change’s relation to his research on material culture, in particular the monumental A Study of Ancient Chinese Clothing. This shift, I argue, reveals an intimate connection and continuation between narrating and collecting: when conveying a message through literature became too explicit to be possible, collecting is able to assume the role as an ingenious critique of the cruel politicization of culture. With a materialist approach to history focusing on the quotidian life of common people, Shen dismantled the power structure of the traditional aesthetics. At the same time he demonstrated a collector’s sensitivity in negotiating with, and ultimately refuting, a dogmatic, self-proclaimed materialist ideology. Most importantly, Shen broadened the scope of aesthetics from fine art to everyday objects, which for him constituted a more authentic history without words.

I then push this argument a step further by pointing out a striking parallel between Europe and China in their changing configurations of the aesthetic object, and its relation to design and
applied arts. I contrast eighteenth-century philosophy’s “narrowing” and “purification” of the concept of the aesthetic object with the nineteenth- and twentieth-century counter-efforts to broaden it, especially William Morris’s Arts and Crafts Movement. Particular attention is also given to the influence of political ideologies, such as socialism and communism, on the conceptualization of art.

One question is unavoidable for all those who study Shen’s life and work: what is the relationship between Shen Congwen the collector and Shen Congwen the writer? I answer this question through an inquiry into his conceptualizations of two opposites: reality and fiction. His very specific understanding of reality was conditioned by his immersion in ancient cultural objects, which provided him a concrete and historicized basis to grasp reality. In the first half of his life, he recreated this reality through language; in the second half, he did it through collecting.

This dissertation spans the period from the final years of the Qing Dynasty in the early 1900s to the 1980s when Shen Congwen died. By then the devastating Proletariat Cultural Revolution had dealt a fatal blow to private collectors and their collections, and served as a closure to the chaos that had dominated most of the twentieth century. But collecting is an always ongoing process. The Cultural Revolution was only a closure in so far as the previous cycle of accumulation and dispersion is concerned; it also ushered in a new cycle of accumulation and dispersion, in the middle of which we are now living. This dissertation stops at the end of the previous cycle, but I hope that it will provide some insights for us to understand the present cycle, which supplies us with the same variety of eccentric collectors, the same new money that will hopefully grow old, and probably some different kinds of intellectual breakthroughs that are facilitated by the very curious hobby of collecting.
Chapter One

Luo Zhenyu and the Oracle Bones:
How Chinese Antiquarianism became Antiquated

Prologue: An Epoch of Historical Discoveries?

In the last year of the nineteenth century, a discovery in a small village of northern China shook the scholarly community in Beijing. However, its extraordinary and epoch-making significance, would have to be recognized and understood slowly through many years.

Strictly speaking, the discovery was not first made in 1899 (or as other sources suggest, at the end of 1898). For decades, farmers in the Xiaotun 小屯 village in Henan Province had been stumbling upon turtle shells and animal bones with mysterious inscriptions. Unable to recognize their importance, farmers used these priceless treasures for practical purposes, such as filling dried wells. Another popular usagewas for medicine: they were sold in northern China through pharmacies for curing malaria and wounds. And it was through this channel that what would later be known as the “oracle bones” came to the attention of Wang Yirong 王懿荣, the then Director of the Imperial Academy. A philologist and a connoisseur of antiques, Wang Yirong had a feeling that the inscriptions were of very ancient origin, even though their identities were not yet clear to him. And he immediately started to purchase them in large quantity.

Unfortunately, Wang Yirong’s engagement with the oracle bones was tragically cut short by war. In 1900, when the Eight-Nation Alliance (Austria-Hungary, the British Empire, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia, and the United States) attacked Beijing, Wang Yirong was

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60 For details about the oracle bones’ discovery, see Chen Mengjia 陳夢家, *Yinxu Buci Zongshu* 殷墟卜辭綜述 (Beijing: Chung Hwa Book Company, 1988), 3.
charged with defending the capital. When he found himself unable to stop the army occupying the Forbidden City, in a gesture of defiance, Wang Yirong threw himself into a dried well, ending his life in the same kind of resting place as the oracle bones.

However, his oracle bones collection already aroused great interest among scholars in Beijing. Luckily it was sold by Wang’s son to the scholar and writer Liu E 劉鶚, who had since started to collect such bones. Liu shared his findings with another scholar, Luo Zhenyu 羅振玉 (1866-1940), who encouraged the former to publish rubbings of selected items as *Tie Yun Cang Gui* (“Turtle Bones collected by Tieyun”). After carefully studying the bones, Luo realized that these were the script of the Shang Dynasty (c. 1600 - 1046 BC), and the earliest known Chinese writing. He went on to conduct excavations directly on site instead of purchasing oracle bones from dealers. Soon they became recognized as the most important archeological discovery of twentieth century in China.

The discovery happened during the final stage of China’s last dynasty, which ended with the abdication of the last Emperor Puyi 溥儀 in 1912. Along with the oracle bones, several other groundbreaking archeological and archival discoveries were made. Each of them was to substantially reshape Chinese and/or Central Asian history. The fact that they were discovered within such a short span of time is astonishing. According to Luo Zhenyu, who played arguably the most important role in saving and studying them,

although my life is filled with poverty, my luck with historic treasures is far greater than scholars from the Qian-Jia period. From 1899 to 1911, ancient texts and artifacts have been frequently discovered, such as the oracle bones, texts from the western frontier, and burial

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61 Liu E’s style name is Tieyun 鐵雲.
objects from central China, all of which were never seen by scholars from previous generations.62

This statement is confirmed by Luo’s life-long friend and collaborator, the historian and literary critic Wang Guowei 王國維 (1877-1927), who also made groundbreaking contributions to their study. In “Newly discovered scholarly materials in China in the recent two to three decades,” he listed the discoveries as follows. Although there are minor variations of choices, the sense of wonder is the same: 1) Oracle bones, 2) Han and Jin Dynasties bamboo and wooden slips from western frontiers of China, 3) Six Dynasties and Tang manuscripts in the Thousand Buddha Grottoes from Dunhuang, and 4) Yuan, Ming and Qing Dynasties Imperial Archives found in the Forbidden City Storage. On top of them, Wang added one that was not mentioned by Luo: 5) texts by ancient non-Chinese peoples discovered on Chinese territory. Because of all these historical treasures, Wang stated that “the present time can be called an unprecedented ‘epoch of discovery.’ No time in the past can be compared with it.”63

The repercussions of these discoveries both within and beyond the scholarly realm are multifaceted, with complicated implications that require for careful unpacking. They can be put in three categories: 1) new materials such as the bamboo and wooden slips and Dunhuang manuscripts that would contribute to existent scholarship but would not challenge received modes of thinking; 2) new materials, the proper study of which would call for new modes of thinking; 3) known materials that had not been regarded as having scholarly interest according to the old value system.

62 Luo Zhenyu, Luo Zhenyu Xueshu Lunzhu Ji 羅振玉學術論著集 (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 2010), vol. 11, 61.

While fully acknowledging the importance of the first category, this chapter focuses only on the second and third, because the very fact that they came to be regarded as of scholarly interest betrays a significant shift in modes of thinking and cultural values that was taking place at the time. Hence the question “an epoch of historical discoveries?” that heads this section, and indeed the whole chapter: what is the true nature of this “discovery”? Did an unprecedentedly large quantity of new materials suddenly appear which allowed scholars to pursue a new path, or did scholars acquire a new vision, which enabled them to recognized the new significance in \textit{known} materials?

The following analysis points to two conclusions: 1) in this case, the second and third categories are essentially the same; 2) the paradigm shift happened in both ways: on the surface, it seems that “new” materials forced scholars to create new methodologies; but in essence, it is more accurate to say that known antique objects became interesting and valuable for the first time, thanks to a few scholars who had an eye for them.

To further complicate the picture, this shift was affected by the introduction - or intrusion - of modern, scientific concepts from the West. These materials soon became an arena where forces both within and outside the scholarly community competed. Fierce were the competitions between Chinese and foreign scholars, and between their respective methodologies. A major conflict surrounding them is between traditional, private collectors-antiquarians and modern, state-sponsored and Western-influenced archeologists, and accordingly between the concepts and modes of thinking behind them. In other words, the home-grown antiquarianism now clashed with the imported, scientific archeology. This transformation of collecting practices and of historiography reflects the changing conceptualizations of historic materials during the East-West encounter.
On the surface, it is another classic example of cultural clash, or a case of colonialism manifested in scholarly fields. And here are the main issues of this chapter tackles: first, what is at stake is apparently a conflict between East/pre-modern and West/modern, scientific concepts; but in the West the scientific concepts did not come into being out of nothing. They equally went through a transition from antiquarianism to modern archeology. The only difference is that it was accomplished mostly following its internal logic, and was spared external pressures such as colonialism.

This leads to the second issue: what if the home-grown method in China - and by the way, this question applies equally to traditional antiquarianism in the West - were allowed to fully develop? While acknowledging the indisputable merits of modern archeology, I wonder if the old antiquarian method had something interesting and even unique to say, that was overshadowed and eventually overwritten by archeology.

So the problem at hand is not just about - or I should say, very little about - (cultural) colonialism, but rather about how and why antiquarianism, both in the West and the East, was replaced by archeology.

Recent years have seen a resurgence of interest in antiquarianism in the field of history in Western academia. This chapter hopes to achieve two goals: first, to contribute to the still ongoing discourse by bringing into it the Chinese perspective, through an investigation of a specific and representative historic moment. Second, with antiquarianism still a loosely defined scholarly approach, this paper argues that at the heart of antiquarianism is the spirit of collecting. Once we get through the superficial attributions of antiquarianism, we would see that its method is in essence what defines a collector. Intricate categorizing work is always a
crucial part of collecting. In the end, collecting plays a part in defining antiquarianism, as well as much of the pre-modern thinking both in the West and in China.

The founding and development of these new research fields were inextricably bound with the scholarly orientations, and even temperaments, of a small group of individuals who first studied them. A notable fact is that the more “personal” scholarship created by old-fashioned collector-scholars formed a striking contrast with the supposedly objective and much more institutionalized work by the archeologists. These scholars were living during a turbulent time of Chinese history when all traditional values were subject to fierce questioning, while their private lives also had their own stories to tell, which powerfully shaped the way these materials were (and still are) understood. So what follows is both a chapter on scholarly history and a series of accounts of intensely personal experiences. It shows that the study of antiquity was far from being a purely objective pursuit, but had been dyed with subjective colors from the very beginning.

1. Grappling with the Oracle Bones: Script versus Object

The oracle bone script, along with the Jinwen (bronze vessel script) from the same period, is now recognized as the earliest known script in the history of Chinese writing. In Qiwen juli (Examples of the Oracle Bone Script), a pioneering study published in 1904 attempting to decipher the script, the prominent philologist Sun Yirang 孫詒讓 (1848-1908) states the following,

I have studied the Guwen script and the Dazhuan 大篆 script for forty years, and have seen over two thousand ritual vessel inscriptions. Most of them were made since Zhou Dynasty. When the connoisseurs declare something to be Shang objects, they are telling unverifiable fantasies. I often regret not having the opportunity to see real Shang script. Now suddenly I acquired this collection. I did not expect to be able to behold such wonderful traces at my
advanced age. I loved it so much that I could not put it down, and immediately spent two months to collate the characters.\textsuperscript{64}

Upon seeing these scripts, Luo remarked that “the characters in these inscriptions might differ from the ancient ones passed down to us, thus philologists since Han Dynasty like Zhang (Chang), Du (Lin), Yang (Xiong), Xu (Shen).”

From these early comments, it is clear that up to this point the study of these bones was still confined to a very traditional, paleographical and philological framework. Liu E published his collection in the form of rubbing images of the script, so the reader was given only a two-dimensional sample of the bones. The focus was placed on the script that could well be detached from the materiality of the medium. And perhaps rightly so, because no one was supposed to care about these animal remains.

But soon these bones led scholarly attention to go beyond philological and paleographical inquiry. For quite a while, the original location of these bones was still a mystery (in accordance with a common trick in the collecting community, the dealers kept the location secret, and claimed that they were from Tangyin rather than Xiaotun). Likewise, even approximate dating could not be achieved. It was Luo Zhenyu who took the crucial step to ascertain both questions. The publication in 1910 of his \textit{Yin Shang Zhenbu Wenzi Kaoshi (A Philological Explanation of Yin Shang Oracle Script)} represents the first significant step in the right direction toward solving the mysteries. In the preface, he describes the process of discovery:

\begin{quote}
In 1900, I heard that in Tangyin of Henan Province, ancient turtle shells and animal bones with inscriptions were discovered... (Now) I inquired from the dealers of the original location, [and was informed that] it was actually from Xiaotun Village, five miles west of
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{64} Sun Yirang, \textit{Sun Shi Qiwen juli} 孫氏契文舉例, (Qiu yin yin lu 秋蟫隱廬, 1927), 2.
Anyang County, rather than Tangyin. The location was King Wuyi’s ruin. Further I recognized more than ten names of Shang kings. So I finally realized these inscriptions were in fact relics of the Shang Dynasty’s Royal House.65

Luo subsequently got around the dealers, and sent people to directly undertake excavations. But after the basic questions were answered, further ones arose. As divination objects, these bones bear carved phrases concerning almost the entire spectrum of daily activities, such as rituals, seasonal changes and agriculture, wars, political events, the life and wellbeing of the royal family, etc. It is not difficult to imagine what a treasure trove this is for historians. For centuries the knowledge of Shang had been based on historical writings appearing at least a millennium after its fall, aided by very limited evidence found in bronze vessel inscriptions. Therefore, these rich and extraordinarily detailed oracle texts are unprecedented firsthand materials for reconstructing the political and religious systems of the Shang Dynasty, and for tracking climate and environmental changes across centuries. They also provide the missing link to understanding - or questioning - the Zhou Dynasty’s supposedly revolutionary (re)building of political order after it defeated Shang around 1046 BC. Because a significant branch of Chinese history and philosophy has been concerned with interpretations of Zhou culture, Zhou’s relationship with its predecessor and foe Shang is of crucial importance for a proper understanding of the entire Chinese history.

Only at this juncture did the revolutionary quality of these objects become fully apparent. Since they were found in large amount in a single location that also fitted historic records’ reference to a Shang capital, it was no longer enough to treat them as accidental discoveries and occasional offers on the antique market. A systematic excavation with careful registering of subterranean layers and dating work was urgently required. A holistic inspection of the

65 Luo, Lunzhu Ji, vol. 1, 3-4
location’s geography also had to be carried out to establish its possible link to historic records of Shang capitals. In other words, the old-fashioned collecting and antiquarian practice that relied solely on antique dealers had to be replaced by scientific archeology.

Considering all these issues, it became obvious that the bones themselves needed a different methodology. Two-dimensional rubbing of the surface could not encompass all aspects of the object; likewise, an exclusive focus on philology and paleography was far from enough. A shift toward a comprehensive investigation of the bones’ material aspects was required. The aforementioned publication by Luo shows that, inspired by these Shang relics, he was starting to heed these issues and look for ways to properly address them.

The book consists of four sections: “history,” “philology,” “method of divination,” and “supplementary remarks,” the first two of which, in terms of their methods, are still within the realm of the traditional scholarly paradigm. The last two sections, however, show a departure from text-based scholarship toward a decidedly object-based one.

The “method of divination” section explains six terms related to the process of divination. In each one, Luo demonstrates his erudition by quoting all key interpretations throughout history, but sets them against the actual objects at hand for verification and correction. Questions like carving methods, direction of writing and reading, burning, interpretation of the cracks, repeated use of the material, and whether ink was used, were all eloquently answered using his collection as indisputable evidence. In other words, his examination was focusing on the bones and shells as objects in themselves, rather than just on the inscriptions.

Here the tension between two opposing concepts is thrown into relief: are the oracle bones merely an abstract medium on which inscriptions were carved? Or should the scholarly attention be placed on its materiality? In other words, the script or the object? This question
reveals a long-lasting Chinese bias: the scholarship on material culture has long been
dominated by a philological scrutiny that seeks inscriptions as its primary target. The major
discipline in history studies that dealt with material remains was jin shi xue, or the study of
metals and stones, which was essentially the study of the inscriptions rather than their physical
medium. Ancient artifacts such as steles, tomb stones, ritual vessels and bells were considered
to have research value only when they had inscriptions.

For example, in An Outline of Chinese Jin shi xue, Ma Heng 馬衡, the antiquarian and
influential director of the Forbidden City Museum wrote that

The view toward the *qi* (bronze ritual vessels) during the Shang and Zhou Dynasties was
that they were [symbolically] crucial for maintaining political power. That’s why
Confucius said that “names and ritual vessels are the only things that shouldn’t be
borrowed.” The reason that words were inscribed on them to propagate the greatness of the
ancestor and pass it down to later times is because this could in turn reinforce the
importance of names and ritual vessels. So originally inscriptions were made to reinforce
the [power of] vessels; but later vessels were made to pass down inscriptions to posterity.
Therefore not all vessels have inscriptions. Since the decline of the Zhou House and the
rise of the feudal lords, names and ritual vessels gradually became less highly regarded,
and utilitarian values were emphasized instead. Therefore inscribed vessels were
considered unnecessary luxury, and stele inscriptions became popular. So in the case of
stele inscriptions, the stele was made to bear the inscriptions, unlike the case of vessel
inscriptions, where the inscriptions were made to reinforce [the power of] the vessel.  

Despite the somewhat opaque language, Ma raises a fundamental issue that is probably a
uniquely Chinese one, namely the tension between the inscription and the object, or the textual
and the material. Originally, the inscription was only a means to strengthen the ritual vessels’
symbolic political power, but gradually the vessels became the medium of the inscription,
which now took the limelight. So in a certain sense, the textual had become the dominant and
defining factor, whereas these vessels’ materiality was suppressed and imprisoned in a

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symbolic system. Now thanks to Luo’s work, the materiality of these ancient relics was foregrounded. But a question remains to be answered: what inspired Luo to establish the importance of materiality before, or at least alongside, the study of the script? This question cannot be properly answered without full consideration of the broader cultural and political background of China at the turn of nineteenth and twentieth century.

2. A Competition between Two Modes of Thinking

2.1. The Luo-Wang Perspective

After bringing the study of the oracle bones onto the right track, Luo Zhenyu collaborated with his one-time protégé and now colleague Wang Guowei, and continued to make amazing contributions. But from this point forward, a narrative that focuses solely on the development of the oracle bone scholarship is no longer adequate. As has already been argued, this scholarship was inextricably bound with the personal experiences of its early exponents and with that particularly turbulent period. The political and cultural orientations of these people played a defining role in molding the scholarship. For the discussion to proceed, a few paragraphs about the lives of Luo Zhenyu and Wang Guowei are indispensable.

Born in 1866 and 1877 respectively, Luo and Wang received systematic classical education in the culturally flourishing provinces of Jiangsu and Zhejiang. They were both steeped in traditional learning, especially the Qing school of philology, and would likely have become old-fashioned scholars like their predecessors. But in 1894, the First Sino-Japanese War broke out, and ended with Japan’s elimination of the entire Chinese navy. The disastrous defeat dealt a big blow to China’s national pride, and had a deep impact on Chinese intellectuals. As a
result, they were even more eager to look to the West for practical technology and political theories in the hope of rescuing the now sinking empire.

Luo and Wang were naturally among those shocked by China’s defeat and the overwhelming power of the Western civilization. Wang recounted that for the first time, he realized that beside China’s classical learning, there was also a whole parallel system in Europe.\(^67\) It was this learning that supposedly turned Japan into a powerful modern state. Under such an influence, in 1898, the year when the oracle bones were first discovered, the twenty-two-year-old Wang Guowei moved to cosmopolitan Shanghai to become an assistant editor for the famous pro-reform newspaper *Chinese Progress* (Shiwu bao 時務報).

Incidentally, in that same year Luo established the Japanese Academy (Dongwen Xueshe 東文學社) at his own expense to teach Western sciences and educate translators who would be able to introduce them via Japanese to China. When the Academy was established, Wang seized the opportunity to enroll in it, beginning his study of Western learning and initiating his lifelong friendship with Luo Zhenyu. Luo, eleven years Wang Guowei’s senior, was already an established scholar, and financially better off than Wang. He instantly recognized the latter’s talent, and took him as his protégé. But this quickly turned into a friendship of mutual respect and fruitful symbiosis. Their friendship lasted until Wang’s death, and had a profound influence on each other.

In this period, Luo was working on the oracle bones, but his efforts did not seem to arouse too much interest in his friend. Wang was busy studying mathematics and English first in Shanghai, and then in Japan for a short stint. Although he began with a desire to master Western technologies, Wang’s interest was quickly drawn to Europe’s philosophy instead.

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\(^67\) Wang, *Quanji*, vol. 8, 119.
Through his Japanese instructor Mr. Taoka Sayoji, he first came into contact with Immanuel Kant, and later Arthur Schopenhauer. In his Autobiography, Wang mentions that “one day I saw in Mr. Taoka’s writings that he quoted Kant’s and Schopenhauer’s philosophies, and I liked them very much.” He worked hard on English, and was eventually able to read Kant, Schiller and Schopenhauer in both Japanese and English translations. Very quickly, Wang shifted from Kant to Schopenhauer, becoming a devout follower of the latter. From Wang’s writings in this period, it is immediately apparent that Schopenhauer’s pessimistic philosophy and aesthetics stroke a deep chord in his soul.

The subsequent years between 1903 to 1910 were a period of intense productivity for Wang, which saw the publication of all his works on literature and philosophy that established him as one of the most influential literary critics of twentieth-century China. A major contribution he made to Chinese literary criticism is the brilliant and, even by today’s standard, still mostly convincing fusion of the Schopenhauerian worldview and traditional Chinese poetics in “A Study of The Dream of the Red Chamber.”

At the same time, Luo was busy collecting and studying the oracle bones. Their scholarly endeavors continued to flourish, until a far weightier event intervened. About a year after the publication of Luo’s A Philological Explanation of Yin Shang Oracle Script, on October 10, 1911, the Xinhai Revolution broke out, which led to the founding of the Republic of China in Nanjing; on February 12, 1912, the last Qing emperor Puyi abdicated, calling an end to the over two-millennia-old monarchy.

Already in October 1911, Luo and Wang decided to go into exile in Japan, bringing their families and Luo’s tremendous collection of books and antique objects. An apparently political gesture, the exile lasted for five years. But the underlying cultural motivation was perhaps

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68 Wang, Quanji, vol. vol.8 119.
more fundamental. The fall of the monarchy and the traditional culture attached to it seemed to deal a traumatic blow to the two scholars, and especially to Wang, who was of a far more sensitive and vulnerable temperament. While Luo had already abandoned Western learning and became a conservative during his first visit to Japan, Wang was, up to that point, still an admirer of European philosophy, and actively working to blend it with Chinese literature.

However, after the change of regimes and his move to Japan, Wang underwent a drastic change in his scholarly focus and worldview. Starting from this period, contrary to his previous habit of detailing every step of his intellectual development, he became very reticent about his own intellectual development. The only firsthand material recording this drastic change was a 1927 account by Luo,

(Now that the Qing Dynasty has fallen), I urged Mr. Wang to focus on classical Chinese learning, starting with philology as foundation. I also discussed the merits and shortcomings of scholarship with him, saying that (the essence of) Confucius’s scholarship lies in believing in antiquity, whereas contemporaries believed in modernity but doubted antiquity; [...] what the scholars of our Dynasty doubted was not inappropriate; but when Cui Shu wrote Kao Xin Lu, he was doubting what should not be doubted. In recent times, it gets even worse, to the point of regarding all classics as fake. Western philosophy, on the other hand, holds views not unlike philosophers of the Zhou and Qin periods; Nietzsche’s teachings, for example, dismiss kindness, justice, restraint and modesty, wanting to replace old culture with new one, thus creating many problems. Today the discussion gets even more confused. The (Chinese) teaching of three thousand years hangs only by a thread, and without serious rectification the classical tradition could not be resumed. Living at such a time, there is nothing we intellectuals can do except rescuing (tradition) from falling and returning to the classics and believing in the ancients. You are still young, and I’m not yet old and feeble. I hope that we can encourage each other in keeping tradition and passing it on to posterity. Upon hearing this, Mr. Wang was profoundly shocked and moved, feeling regretful of himself. Realizing that his previous scholarship was immature, he picked up the more than a hundred copies of Collected Works of Jing’an (one of Wang’s courtesy names) and burnt them all. And he wanted to become my disciple. I respectfully turned this request down, citing the example of Dongyuan [Dai Zhen] and Maotang [Duan Yucai]. Such was Mr. Wang’s courage to change himself to follow the righteous! Living in Japan, Mr. Wang abandoned all his previous scholarship, and turned instead to study the classical philosophers’ works I gave him in the past. I then further shared with him all the five hundred thousand volumes from my own Dayun Library, thousands of rubbings of inscriptions on ancient objects, and more than a thousand ancient ritual vessels and other
antique objects for Mr. Wang to study. And we went on to correspond with scholars around the world on scholarly issues.  

It was in such a context that Wang Guowei and Luo Zhenyu devoted themselves wholeheartedly to the study of the oracle bones and other traditional learning. Compared with Luo’s relatively consistent interests and intellectual orientation, Wang’s shift of interest was drastic and resolute. He not only burnt his old collected works, which were extremely mature and elaborate accomplishments, but completely abandoned literature together with the study of Western philosophy.

The pair’s turn to ancient Chinese history had clear political motivations. By leaving the newly founded Republic and going into self-imposed exile, and giving up Western learning for Chinese classics, Wang and Luo posed themselves in the unmistakable position of cultural and political conservatism. The ensuing scholarly works they produced, including those on the oracle bones, no matter how objective they were, could not be grasped without a full consideration of this political and to a large extent emotional context.

Above all, there was a sense of urgency to preserve something that was likely to soon be permanently lost. Even before the fall of the Dynasty, in a postscript to the *A Philological Explanation of Yin Shang Oracle Script*, Luo’s following account betrayed his anxiety:

My study of the oracle script started in February of this year [1910]. Quotidian matters forced me to engage it only on and off. I said to myself: these ancient objects did not appear earlier or later, but precisely during my lifetime. They have been buried for three thousand years, and even in my suitcase they have been stored for a decade. Each time when I take them out to observe, there was some damage. After a few decades, I’m afraid not one out of thousands would remain. Thinking of this, I felt profoundly alarmed, and encouraged myself [to resume working on them]. For the long summer I resolutely disregarded all quotidian matters, and closed my door for over a month. Once the draft was

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finished, I could not wait to revise it, and rushed to send it to print, for there were things to be feared in this matter...  

What is more, Luo had an awareness that the now endangered culture had to be preserved not selectively, but in its entirety. If it was falling apart, then even the fragments had to be preserved. This sense of comprehensive preservation was apparent in Luo’s many engagements. For example, when he was an adviser to the Imperial Academy, he made the following proposal:

Each province should establish a center for national learning, with three divisions: library, museum and research institute. Learning requires extensive reading, while studying antiquity requires extensive exposure to antique objects. Nowadays antique objects frequently appear, and all enter the market, so are urgently needed to be purchase for the purpose of research.

Wang Cheng-Hwa points out that Luo’s pioneering and conscious efforts to preserve tradition in its material form were most likely influenced by Japan, which he visited for the first time in 1901. According to Wang,

Luo was very possibly the sole collector who fulfilled these measures [of preserving the past]—that ideally were the tasks of the government in power, if there was an effective government in China at all—and who went through the entire procedure of preserving antiquities without the help of any governmental institutions.

In the light of this observation, two other significant achievements on the long list of Luo Zhenyu’s pioneering scholarship need to be mentioned. The first one is his collecting and

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70 Luo, Lunzhu Ji, vol. 1, 67.
71 Ibid., vol. 11, 50.
studying of burial objects (Mingqi), which is consistent with his broader awareness of the urgency to preserve the culture in its material form. In his own words,

In the winter of 1907, I acquired two ancient clay figures from the antique market. The dealers said they were from ancient tombs in central China, and so must be quite old. All dealers priced other treasures but discarded these figures, so they were brought back merely as bonus, and no one thought they were worth a penny. I then told the dealers that all objects from ancient tombs were valuable for the study of antiquity, and instructed them that if they discovered anything other than clay figures, they should keep them for me. The dealers asked for a catalogue; and I happened to have a copy of Tang Hui Yao (Institutional History of Tang Dynasty) on my desk, so I showed it to them, and they then went away nodding. In the spring they returned with several kinds of burial objects: apart from clay figures, there were clay musicians, farmhouses, carts and horses, wells, mortars and pestles, and cattle - almost everything was there. I paid generously to thank them, and this was how burial objects started to be noticed. At that time no lover of antiquity at home and abroad yet knew about them. But since the dealers were paid nicely, they started to aggressively seek them in the countryside. Consequently these objects filled the markets in the capital. But the local scholars didn’t heed them, while foreigners were keen on purchasing them. Dealers from other provinces also brought in objects found there. At first I tried to purchase all those that came my way; later I bought the exquisite or rare ones. In barely a year’s time my desks and tables, and even the corners of my rooms were filled by them.73

Therefore, Luo Zhenyu’s studio must have resembled Sigmund Freud’s consulting room. He subsequently named his studio “Yong lu,” meaning “the house of clay figures.” But the fact that he resolutely dismiss these objects’ presumably unlucky associations also demonstrates a collector’s disenchanted eye, and a potentially revolutionary worldview. On the surface, the collector and the revolutionary are an unlikely pair. As the conservative preservationist on the one hand, and the radical destroyer on the other, they occupy two opposites. But because the collector is unafraid of taking the object out of its original value system, he or she is actually not far away from the revolutionary. This is actually how Giorgio Agamben sees their relationship:

Precisely because he makes alienation from the past into a value, the figure of the collector is in some way related to that of the revolutionary, for whom the new can appear only through the destruction of the old. And it is certainly not an accident that the great collector figures flourish precisely in times of break from tradition and exaltation of renewal.\footnote{Giorgio Agamben, \textit{The Man without Content} (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 105.}

However, I argue that the similarity goes even deeper: through the act of destruction, the revolutionary cleans up layers of corruption in order to return to the (oftentimes imagined) pure state of beginning, the extraordinary moment of void when all values are yet to be defined. This is precisely where the revolutionary’s connection with the collector lies: by lifting a variety of fragments out of their original contexts and putting them into the virtual, egalitarian space of a collection, the collector creates exactly the same moment of void. It is the moment when history gets disrupted, or even starts all over again, just like the moment of revolution. Intriguingly, such revolutionary insights in scholarship coexisted with an almost extreme political conservatism in Luo Zhenyu.

What is more, the presence of foreign buyers on the scene gives a hint of the larger picture of a clash between Eastern and Western modes of thinking. At that time, competition between Chinese and foreign scholars in finding new historical materials was intense. Most of the already mentioned major findings were made by foreigners. For example, the Han-Jin bamboo and wooden slips were first discovered by the Hungarian Sir Aurel Stein during his expedition in Central Asia commissioned by the Britain Indian Government. The texts by ancient non-Chinese peoples in the Xinjiang area were found by a group of British, French, German and Russian explorers. Similarly, the majority of the Dunhuang manuscripts were found and brought away by Stein and the French orientalist Paul Pelliot in 1908, during an expedition supported by the French government. Along with all kinds of other objects, foreign scholars...
and collectors also laid hands on the oracle bones. The most notable among them is the Canadian missionary James Mellon Menzies, who considered himself “the first foreign or Chinese archeologist to visit the Waste of Yin with a purely scientific interest in these objects”\(^{75}\) (italics mine). Thus these discoveries bear a mark of colonialism, and form part of an orientalist project on a global scale. The fact that these priceless finds were transported to Europe dealt a blow to the Chinese national pride at a critical moment when the nation’s very existence was under threat.

The fact that foreign collectors brought away objects that their Chinese counterparts were not interested in was certainly alarming for Luo Zhenyu. But nationalist sentiment is only part of the issue. Far more important is the new methods and standards that scholars from a different cultural tradition brought into the Chinese context, which powerfully subverted the native scholarly tradition. This issue will be discussed in detail, within the context of modern archeology, in the next section.

Luo’s other major contribution was the preservation of the Imperial Archives. They were brought to light by him not long before the fall of the monarchy: in preparation for the coronation of Puyi, the would-be last emperor of China, ministers needed to consult old documents for correct models of ritual. As a result, the Archives came to the government’s attention. Some officials deemed them useless, and had already decided to destroy them. It was Luo Zhenyu who, recognizing their extraordinary historical significance, fought hard to overturn the decision and save them. After the Republic took over, another attempt was made to destroy them because of their perceived archaic irrelevance. And it was again Luo who saved them. These archives thus held both symbolic and actual significances at a time when the

Republic of China just narrowly succeeded in replacing the Qing Dynasty in the political sphere, but not yet quite thoroughly in the cultural sphere.

Now if we take another look at the last few lines of Luo’s already-quoted recount of Wang’s conversion, we can see that it contains an important message: “I then went on to share with him all the five hundred thousand volumes from my own Dayun Library, thousands of rubbings of inscriptions on ancient objects, and more than a thousand ancient ritual vessels and other antique objects for Mr. Wang to study.” They show that Luo was a great collector not just of books, but of everything antique. He was a visionary with a universal interest and unique insight, which enabled him to recognize and appreciate the values of objects previously unheeded by his predecessors. Together with Wang, he continued his research on his collection of oracle bones. Behind these endeavors was their political and cultural conservatism, and a strong desire to preserve a culture that was now in unstoppable decay.

2.2. The Challenge of Modern Archeology

It was quite astonishing that as a private collector, Luo managed to recognize and save virtually all the major archeological discoveries during this extraordinary epoch. Understandably, the study and excavation of the antique objects, especially the oracle bones, could not be monopolized by Luo for too long. The major competitor was modern Western archeology that was just being introduced to China.

Luo and Wang were living at a moment in history that was characterized by East-West confrontation in all aspects. The large-scale discoveries of ancient objects only intensified the confrontation, a core issue of which was epitomized by a particular occasion: in the autumn of 1926, the Swedish Crown Prince Gustaf Adolf (future Gustaf VI Adolf of Sweden) visited

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China in his capacity as President of the International Archeological Society. At the reception, the prominent scholar Liang Qichao 梁啟超 gave a welcome speech entitled “The Past and Future of Chinese Archeology.” In the face of Western archeology, the primary question Liang’s speech addresses is: what can be considered Western archeology’s Chinese counterpart? For Liang, and indeed for most historians, the only field of study that could best match Western archeology was “Jin shi xue.” Literally meaning “the study of metals and stones,” it is nonetheless a misnomer; what it really means is “the study of inscriptions on metals and stones,” with philology (and to a lesser extent paleography) being the overwhelmingly dominant focus at the expense of the medium’s materiality.

Liang Qichao was one of the scholars who, during the first decades of twentieth century, compared Jin shi xue with archeology. Another notable example is A History of Chinese Archeology by Wei Juxian 卫聚贤, who was a student of Wang Guowei at Tsinghua University’s Academy of Advanced Learning. These works have a common feature: they were both written with Western archeology as a point of reference and comparison. And for them Jin shi xue was a more or less legitimate counterpart of Western archeology. But such comparison does not stand strict scrutiny.

For example, Liang lays out a detailed taxonomy of this study according to its materials: stone, metal, pottery, and bones. But his attention is rather given to the inscriptions on them; in other words, these materials are treated as abstract media rather than real objects of study in themselves. As a book-length study, Wei Juxian’s has a broader scope that risks generalization,

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but he also applies the word “archeology” to Jin shi xue without proper distinction.\textsuperscript{80} If we refer to another important text, “Jin shi xue of Song Dynasty” (1926), by none other than Wang Guowei himself, we find that he summarizes its purpose as 1) establishing proper meanings of ancient scripts; 2) understanding ancient ritual institutions; 3) authenticating historical facts. Wang did not make the comparison between Jin shi xue and Western archeology, and rightly so.\textsuperscript{81}

In such a formulation, Jin shi xue is essentially philology plus paleography. This is no different from the statement of purpose laid out in one of Jin shi xue’s foundational texts, Zhao Mingcheng’s \textit{Jin shi lu} (A Record of Metals and Stones), written about a thousand years ago (around 1129):

Since the creation of the \textit{Classic of Poetry} and the \textit{Classic of History}, the activities of kings and ministers have been recorded in history. I personally think that although facts and assessments are affected by the writers’ personal opinions, and the authenticity is sometimes compromised, but the major moral conclusions and principles are undisputable, and have been handed down through a long time, so they should serve as the basis (of our work). As to issues such as dating, geography, official positions, peerage, and order of succession, when historic (written) documents are scrutinized with inscriptions on jin (stone) and shi (stone), three or four out of ten do not match. Since historic documents are written by posterity, errors are unavoidable, whereas inscriptions were made at the original moment in history, so they should be trusted. So I compare the differences (between written and inscribed records) and reference other sources to complete this \textit{Jin shi lu} in thirty volumes.\textsuperscript{82}

Therefore, in its goal Jin shi xue has always been mostly equivalent to philology; through studying texts on a more durable and supposedly more reliable medium, it aims at authenticating and correcting textual errors in the classics that holds supreme political and

\textsuperscript{80} Wei, \textit{A History}, 67-82.


\textsuperscript{82} Zhao Mingcheng, \textit{Jin shi lu} (Shanghai: Shanghai Shuhua Chubanshe, 1985), 1.
philosophical authority. In this sense, Jin shi xue, just like philology in the West, is the handmaid of the classics and philosophy, which carry with it very strong ideologies. But there is no doubt that philology and paleography do not equal archeology. So by enumerating a Chinese field of study to match a Western one, a crack in categorization has been created.

This brings us back to the aforementioned quote by Ma Heng, where the tension between the textual and the material is indicated. But it is unfair to say that the materiality of these objects has never received scholarly attention. For example, Wu Dacheng 吳大澂 and Ye Changchi 葉昌熾 are two notable predecessors who cared about the materiality of the object. But this aspect of antiquity never received the status of a field of study. If we look at what Chen Jieqi 陳介祺, another prominent Jin shi xue scholar, says about this subject, we would see that there is no place for the object itself:

In Qing Dynasty, there are two schools of scholars engaging in Jin shi xue: one is the Qinxi school, which excels in purchasing the earliest rubbings, and focuses on brushwork; they are connoisseurs [...] The other is Lanquan school, which looks for unusual sources and excels in its broad scope; they are philologists [...] Both are highly esteemed in the scholarly community. But philologists focus upon philology, geography and administration, official posts, family lineage and historical facts. The greater findings can correct errors in classics and histories, the lesser ones can broaden scholars’ scope of knowledge; they quote from all sources and make many connections, not caring about opinions. So [this school] seems to be more practically valuable than the one that focuses on calligraphy. 83

Clearly the attention is given to either aesthetics (calligraphy) or philology, whereas the space for a more broadly defined materiality has been lacking in the tiny disciplinary cracks. 84

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84 For a discussion of Jin shi xue’s relationship to archeology, see Xu Qing, “Three Interpretive Positions concerning ‘Jin shi xue’ during Late Qing and Republic eras” (清末民國時期關於“金石學”概念的三種詮釋立場). Meishu Guancha (November 2013), 103-7.
In comparison, the development of Luo’s engagement with the oracle bones takes on a new significance. The previous section already demonstrates that his attention was departing from philology to consider the bones in their three-dimensional entirety. His publication represents a step further away from writing, and a step closer to the object itself. As early as 1916, this mentality was shown in the title of Luo’s publication, *Images of the Waste of Yin Antique Artifacts*. Indeed, the scope of Luo’s collection is vast, and goes beyond the traditional realm defined/confined by philology. The priority traditionally given to writing is now replaced by a larger concern for the materiality of the past, of which inscriptions are only a part. And perhaps not incidentally, it is again Luo Zhenyu who now acted to fill the gap.

In Wang’s letter to Luo on February 23, 1916, he mentions three categories that were to be included in the Shanghai-based journal *Yishu congkan* (the *Arts Journal*): jin shi, calligraphy and painting, antique objects. The concepts corresponding to them are philology, aesthetics, and a broader configuration of material culture that is tied to historicity. This testifies to the then ongoing discussion between Luo and Wang about how to formally accommodate this emerging but hitherto undefined new field of study in their minds.

Soon Luo came up with a more formal articulation of his ideas. Around 1920, he published “A Proposal for the Study of Ancient Vessels and Objects,” allegedly responding to an invitation from Cai Yuanpei 蔡元培, then President of the National Peking University, to teach

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87 Luo Zhenyu, *Gu Qiwuxue Yanjiu Yi* 古器物學研究議 (Tianjin, self publication, 1920), 1.
at its new Archeology Department. Here Luo explicitly delineates artifacts from philology and fine arts:

those who work on this study (collecting and studying ancient artifacts) all treat it as a supplement to Jin shi xue. So the name of this study is yet to be correctly established. Now I define it as Gu qiwu xue (the study of ancient artifacts). Gu qiwu xue encompasses Jin shi xue (philology), but Jin shi xue does not encompass Gu qiwu xue.

There is no indication that Luo was making this proposal directly in response to Western archeology, but we can reasonably infer that it was the result of both his own thinking and extrinsic pressures. On the one hand, the new categorization was a serious attempt to rise to the challenge posted by the recently available historic materials. On the other hand, foreign influences obviously played a role, at least in the form of Japanese practices that Luo observed, while foreign collectors’ activities rang an alarming bell. But perhaps the deepest motivation came from the fall of Qing Dynasty and the traditional culture that it embodied. All these were traumatic enough to spur in Luo (and Wang) a desire to preserve the past, now only to be found in its fragmented material remains.

During this period, Luo himself went on to write and compile several books and catalogues of his own collections, with the term “Gu qiwu” (ancient artifacts) figuring prominently in the titles: besides the aforementioned “Proposal” and Images of Yin Shang Ancient Artifacts (written in 1916, published in 1920), there are also Images of Ancient Artifacts Models 古器物範圖錄 (1916), Catalogue of Ancient Artifacts Collected by Xuetang 雪堂所藏古器物圖錄

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89 According to Wang Cheng-hwa, Luo Zhenyu might be the first to suggest the formal establishment of “antique artifacts” (gu qiwu) as a field of study. See Wang: “Luo Zhenyu.”
(1916) and A Small Catalogue of Ancient Artifacts 古器物圖錄小識90 (1924). In these works, he noted several key problems in the field. For example, he argued for the great importance of recording the location where objects were discovered; there was an impressive broadening in the scope of artifacts being discovered.91 Luo Zhenyu’s vast collection, which was the subject of his proposed new study, was eclectic and egalitarian in its standard; it included almost everything antique, from cooking and dining wares, cart parts, weights, weapons, deeds for the underworld to traditionally prized objects such as ritual vessels that were imbued with symbolic political power and artifacts with remarkable inscriptions. What is more, he recognized that it was problematic for Qing Dynasty scholarship to focus exclusively on inscriptions and ignore the artifacts themselves:

Our Dynasty had enjoyed three centuries of stability, so the study of names and artifacts transcended previous generations. But the Qian-Jia period scholars mostly focused upon texts, paying little attention to ancient artifacts that had no inscriptions. I always feel that this is a pity. When serving the government in the Capital, I often roamed the markets; whenever I saw uninscribed ancient artifacts that no one noticed, such as artifacts for carts and horses, I instantly purchased them, then used my leisure time to study and record them...92

In tandem with his aforementioned interest in the hitherto unnoticed (or deliberately avoided) burial objects, Luo’s collecting activity now betrayed an important sign: he was unworking, knowingly or otherwise, the traditional power structure that governed the order of things. Within this power system, texts were important first of all because they could contribute to the understanding of Confucian classics. But inscribing texts on an artifact had another layer of significance: it directly conferred power onto the material, turning something

90 See Luo Zhenyu, Lunzhu Ji, vol. 4.
91 Ibid., vol. 7, 3-4.
92 Ibid., vol. 3, 351 and vol. 7, 3.
with practical functions into a symbolically invested ritual vessel. Traditional collectors’ standard was a reflection of this power system. By collecting in an almost indiscriminative manner, and also by showing the seemingly trivial objects’ importance, Luo was dismantling not just the traditional standard of collecting, but also the power structure behind it. The irony was that, this possibly unintended effect had the potential to go directly against his purpose of saving a dwindling political and cultural system.

Close attention was also paid by Luo to all kinds of minute details, both textual and material. The visual experience was important for him. To actually see and touch the object made a great deal of difference compared to just seeing rubbings or transcriptions. Hence in his *A Study of the Oracle Inscriptions of the Waste of Yin*, the phrase “mu yan” 目验 (examined by eyes) repeatedly comes up to stress the indisputable authority of the conclusion. In the *Clay Figure Studio Diary*, he noted that two vessels had a pair of inscriptions with identical texts, but one was inscribed in reversal, with the odd exception of three characters. The next entry recorded another vessel where the inscription’s lines read in reversed orders. Such peculiar phenomena were duly noted by Luo, though he was unable to explain them. For him, objectively describing everything he saw was of utmost importance, even if he could not understand the logic behind the sheer material presence: at the end of the entry he said, “this vessel was unrecorded by scholars of the past. Now I record its formula for lovers of antiquity.”93 He also often used the phrase “kept for [future] reference” (bei kao).

Such a careful practice demonstrates Luo’s exceptional open-mindedness and unhindered curiosity, and an awareness of the need for a shared scholarly “database.” He knew the limit of his knowledge, and did not want this narrow perspective (in his own standard, of course) to

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define the vast scope of artifacts being discovered. In other words, he did not impose his interests or standards to objects, but let the latter define the former. But more than showing the limit of his knowledge, it conveys his strong sense of crisis: he feared that, if not recorded instantly upon seeing, certain ancient artifacts would vanish from history forever, and the loss could never be recovered. If we consider the accidental nature of the discovery of the oracle bones, we would perfectly understand his acute sense of insecurity.

Now the question about the oracle bones’ revolutionary nature should be rephrased thus: is the new material forcing the scholars to adopt a new paradigm, or are a handful of scholars’ new concepts making the recognition (rather than a passive “discovery”) of the new material possible? In Luo, Wang and many contemporary scholars’ accounts, it has been repeatedly stressed that this was an unprecedented epoch of discovery. But common sense tells that at most times in history, the chance of discovering ancient artifacts should be statistically the same, and there is no reason to believe that Luo and Wang’s time was a particularly lucky one. Indeed, burial objects had always been known to everyone, about which there was absolutely nothing new. Likewise, the Imperial Archives were simply a known existence. Strictly speaking, even the oracle bones were not “new.”

In Anyang, a seminal work on the archeological excavation of the Shang relics, Li Chi (whose work will be discussed in detail below) has an insightful observation on the intellectual preparation for the seemingly accidental discovery, which perfectly captures the intricate, dialectic relationship between the “new” material and the eyes that recognized its newness:

There is evidence indicating that when the Sui [Dynasty, 581-618] people dug holes in this place (Anyang) for burying their dead, they frequently found inscribed oracle bones hidden underneath. If at that time some scholars, as cultivated as the paleographers of the nineteenth century, had come upon this hidden treasure, oracle bone inscriptions might have been known to Chinese scholars thirteen centuries earlier! This assumption is based
on the fact that modern excavations of Sui tombs have uncovered more than once, in the stratum overlying these tombs, many fragments of inscribed oracle bones. I mention this interesting underground stratification to show only one fundamental point: that is, in intellectual development there are definite stages which follow each other in a certain order. That the oracle bone inscriptions were recognized at the end of the nineteenth century as a significant discovery which academicians continue to cultivate was not merely accidental. There was a long intellectual history preparatory for what took place in 1899 (1898?). It is important to take into consideration the intellectual history of the Manchu (Ch’ing) [Qing] dynasty, which provided and nourished scholars to a mature stage ready to appreciate and acknowledge the importance of oracle bone inscriptions.94

In other words, it is not simply a stroke of luck. Without the long intellectual preparations, Luo and his circle of friends would ignore the bones right in front of their eyes, exactly like their Sui Dynasty predecessors. Without Luo’s intellectually prepared eye, all the other important historic materials would have gone unnoticed like before. But what Li Chi misses in this quote is that, on the one hand, the new philology since Qing Dynasty is what prepared Luo and others to recognize the script, but on the other hand, philology as a paradigm prevented earlier scholars to go beyond the script. The dialectic relationship between these new discoveries and Luo Zhenyu’s individual insights is most accurately summarized by Wang Guowei: “the material needs the [right] person, and the person needs the [right] material.”95

Considering the fact that the “Proposal” was addressed by an influential scholar and famous collector to the President of Peking University, we might legitimately expect that a new field of study was about to be born. But it was not. A team of archeologists headed by an ambitious Harvard graduate arrived on the scene, and overtook the legitimacy Luo Zhenyu and his followers thought they had. In this situation, the multi-faceted challenge of Western archeology was unleashed, and the complexity of its difference from native scholarship fully exposed.

2.3. The Academia Sinica Perspective

During their exile in Japan, both Luo and Wang greatly advanced their research in antiquity. Luo published another important work on the oracle bones, *A Study of the Oracle Inscriptions of the Waste of Yin* 殷墟書契考釋, which benefited from his daily conversations with Wang. Since Wang’s abandonment of Western learning and “conversion” back to Chinese classical scholarship in 1911, he published a large number of articles, which were collected into a total of twenty volumes for publication in 1923. Dealing with issues in antiquity, many of these articles utilize the oracle bone inscriptions and other antique objects to solve important problems that had puzzled generations of scholars. The most notable among them are *A Study of the Dukes and Kings as seen in the Yin Oracle Inscriptions* 殷卜辭中所見先公先王考 and the *On the Political Systems of Yin and Zhou* 殷周制度論. They established his indisputable authority in this field.

In 1916, Wang returned to China from Japan, and Luo followed suit in 1919. Upon returning, they were instantly sought after by the top universities including Beijing and Tsinghua. But both made it very clear that they were still loyal to the emperor by keeping their queue hairstyle. And they firmly refused to serve in any state-sanctioned institutions or projects. It was known that President Cai Yuanpei invited Luo Zhenyu to teach there, but Luo only discreetly agreed to serve as a corresponding mentor, as did Wang Guowei. It is well documented that from 1917 to 1924, Wang Guowei was invited for at least three times by Cai, through Ma Heng, to teach at Beijing, but he turned down all of them, because he saw teaching at the state-founded university as compromising his loyalty to the emperor.96

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In 1923, Wang Guowei was summoned to Beijing to serve as a tutor of the now disposed emperor Puyi (under the Republic’s law, he was treated according to the standard of a foreign head of state). For Wang this was a great honor. During this time, he was again repeatedly approached by Tsinghua University, with high-profile interventions by the University’s President Cao Yunxiang 曹雲祥 and the prominent scholar Hu Shih 胡適. After being assured that the Tsinghua professorship would impose no restriction on his political orientation, and even under the formal order of the emperor, Wang Guowei finally agreed in 1925 to become one of the five highly respected mentors of the elite Tsinghua Academy of Advanced Learning.

Modern Chinese history is characterized by constant juxtapositions of extremely incompatible elements. One example is the faculty of the Tsinghua Academy of Advanced Learning. Among its five mentors were the incurably loyal monarchist Wang Guowei and the once monarchist, now devoted Reformist leader Liang Qichao; the other three mentors, with little if any sympathy toward the monarchy, were scholars of the new generation: Chen Yinke 陳寅恪, Yuen Ren Chao 趙元任 and Li Chi (Li Ji) all studied at Harvard University, while Chao later taught at Harvard and served as a president of the Linguistic Society of America. There is little doubt that these scholars’ political views did not match easily with each other; but it was a consensus that they represented the highest scholarly achievements of the time.

Then twenty years old, Li Chi was the youngest among them. After studying at Tsinghua and Clark Universities, he enrolled in the Anthropology Department of Harvard University in 1920, studying with Professors Roland Dixon and Earnest Hooton. Having obtained systematic trainings in biological anthropology, he returned to teach at various universities in China before being appointed as the youngest mentor at his alma mater’s newly established Academy.

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97 Wang Deyi, Nianpu, 326.
becoming a colleague of the older Wang Guowei. This was a great honor for the young man, as all the other mentors were already towering figures of the time.

The difference between Li and Wang, despite their respect toward each other, is not just in terms of age, but also worldviews. This was reflected in a fascinating detail concerning the establishment of the Archeology Department of the state-sponsored Academia Sinica, the top research institution of the Republic of China.

In 1927, under the leadership of historian Fu Sinian 傅斯年 (1896-1950), Academia Sinica’s newly established Institute of History and Philology planned to build its own Archeology Department, and set the excavation of the oracle bones sites as its first important task. Both Ma Heng and Li Chi were considered to become its leader. Finally Li Chi was selected. Working with the Academia’s archives, Du Zhengsheng 杜正勝 shows that Ma Heng afterwards twice requested to participate in the excavation, yet Fu Sinian and Li Chi politely but resolutely declined the request. From now on, the antique dealers, local ad hoc farmer diggers, and indeed Luo Zhenyu himself, were replaced by the Academia Sinica team of professional archeologists, who would go on to do fruitful work on the oracle bones and other Shang relics.

This detail is important because Ma Heng, a respected scholar who maintained reasonably good relationship with Fu and Li, was vetoed on the ground that he was a Jin shi xue scholar and belonged to Luo Zhenyu’s old school. At the time, there was widespread antipathy and even hostility between Jin shi xue scholars and “new school” archeologists. According to Li

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Chi’s son Li Guangmo, the former’s archeology and anthropology courses at the Tsinghua Academy were rather unpopular. “Those who were interested in traditional philology had an instinctive dislike of them. At that time the Academy’s teaching assistant Zhang Zhaohuang even refused to copy notes for Li Chi [...]”

On the other hand, Li Chi’s mastery of what was considered the cutting-edged scientific methods gave him precisely the required credit to lead Academia Sinica’s innovative team. Most importantly, Li’s scholarship fitted perfectly into the vision of Fu Sinian, the mastermind of the Institute. Receiving his academic training at University College London (1920-1923) and Berlin University (1923-1926), Fu Sinian was considered the Chinese disciple of Leopold von Ranke for the former’s emphasis on studying the archive and applying strictly scientific methods to history. He argued that “the progress of historiography lies in its shift from a subject in the humanities toward [a scientific] one like biology and geology.”

Notably, Fu called for a radical broadening of materials for historians to study, which is indeed reminiscent of Ranke’s method. In “Principles of the Institute of History and Philology’s Work,” a foundational document of the organization, he argued that “a study always progresses if it is able to expand its research materials; if unable to do so, it degenerates.” His most famous slogan for the Institute was that “we do not read books, but exhaust heaven and the underworld, move our hands and feet to search for objects (for the study of history).” This is an explicit attack on the hierarchy in traditional scholarship, which focused on Confucian classics and canonical literary texts. For Fu literally any object can

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100 Li Guangmo, Qinghuayuan, 128.

101 However, Wang Fansen argues that the influence was a weak one, as there is no evidence that Fu systematically studied Ranke’s works. See Wang Fansen: Fu Ssu-nien: A Life in Chinese History and Politics, (Beijing: Sanlian Press, 2012).

102 Fu Sinian, Shixue Fangfa Daolun (Beijing: Renmin University Press, 2004), 2.
contribute to the study of history, but it is preferably something lying outside the traditionally defined realm. This proposal has a distinctively egalitarian character, wiping out the power structure that places the Confucian canon’s political, literary and philosophical texts as the absolute top and the sole focus of scholarly pursuit, while elevating artifacts and texts that were considered low, trivial and unworthy of study. It also cites Western scholarship as its model: “When doing research, Westerners do not read books, but use their hands and feet to look for new materials from everywhere, and are ready to expand the old scope at any time. That is how scholarship can develop in all directions and reach new heights.”103

To fulfill this ambitious manifesto, one of the very first tasks the Institute’s leaders took up was the hard-won purchase of the Imperial Archives. Indeed, nothing would fit Fu’s vision better than the Archives, a messy mass of everything that is full of surprising discoveries and unexpected connections.

Just when we are ready to accept a neatly articulated division between the old and the new, the conservative and the progressive, the East and the West that is supposed to be represented by Luo Zhenyu-Wang Guowei and Fu Sinian-Li Chi, history, with its inexhaustible stock of intriguing entanglements, is also ready to subvert such a division. This is the right moment to remember that this very Archive was saved by none other than Luo Zhenyu, who was struggling against universal antipathy toward these rotten papers, disrespectfully nicknamed “eight thousand gunnysacks.” This stubbornly conservative and, for many people of the time, ridiculously anachronistic Yilao104, had insights that prefigured Michel de Certeau, Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, who advocate for the power of the Archive. If Fu Sinian’s

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104 “The leftover old people,” a term denoting those who stuck to monarchy and refused to accept the Republic.
understanding of the Archives’ importance can be attributed to his training in Western historiography, Luo’s intuitive awareness, coming from nowhere (if we talk about influence study), is almost unexplainable. Or, I argue, it originated precisely from the collector’s vision and the connoisseur’s sensitivity.

3. The Collector and the Archeologist

The paradigm competition can be summarized as follows: Luo Zhenyu’s study of ancient artifacts (gu qiwu xue) grew out of Jin shi xue (which was itself a branch of philology exclusively serving classics), partly addressing the latter’s inadequacies, partly responding to the challenge of Western archeology, and partly stimulated by the social and political events of the time. But under the powerful intervention of Academia Sinica, lead by Fu Sinian and Li Chi, this new scholarly field was a stillborn child. The oracle bones study was taken over by Academia Sincia’s state-sanctioned excavations in Anyang, and Western archeology as a method and a discipline was now slowly but steadily replacing the antiquated practice of Jin shi xue, let alone Luo proposed study of ancient artifacts.

Up to this point, my analysis of the difference between Jin shi xue, study of ancient artifacts and Western archeology has been focusing on the scopes of their respective objects of study. But their difference goes well beyond the expansion of the research materials and the dismantling of the text-dominated hierarchy by the “ancient artifacts” concept or archeology. In fact, within the Jin shi xue camp, attempts had been made to broaden the scope, at least in definition. And this is mostly thanks to Luo Zhenyu’s advocate. Ma Heng, the future director of Palace Museum (Forbidden City), who was under the influences of both Luo and Wang,
begins his *An Outline of Chinese Jin shi xue* with the following generalized and inclusive definition of “Jin shi,” which is essential a replicate of Luo’s proposed “ancient artifacts”:

What is called “jin shi” (metal and stone) is ancient people’s texts and all the conscious works that have passed down to today using metal, stone or other materials as their media. The objective study based on such objects that contributes to history is called Jin shi xue. Among them, all those related to Chinese history constitute Chinese Jin shi xue.

Oracle bones inscriptions, ritual vessels inscriptions, stele inscriptions and all metal, stone, bamboo, bricks and tiles with inscriptions are texts. Those without texts but have a vivid impression on us, such as painted, sculpted or carved images, burial figure clays and other artifacts, are all conscious works.\(^{105}\)

However, despite this radical broadening of scope, the traditional school did not win the approval of the new camp. To further our understand the situation, it is also necessary to consider the following questions: 1) what are the old school’s core methodology? 2) What are the essential characteristics of archeology that distinguish itself from the old school?

I argue that the answer to the first question lies in the nature of the collector. Before being a historian, Luo Zhenyu was first of all a *collector*. He collected diligently, eclectically and consciously. By the time he moved to Japan in 1912, he had amassed tens of thousands of books and objects. And his selecting principle - or let’s say, his taste - had a significance influence on Japanese scholars.\(^{106}\) His acute observations and hands-on approach to these objects benefited from the fact that he was able to possess them. A large amount of his scholarly work was devoted to the documentation, cataloguing and publication of his vast collections. His documentation of the objects was meticulous down to the smallest, seemingly irrelevant details. But he was not bothered by the irrelevance; as is already discussed, for him it

\(^{105}\) Ma, *Fanjiangzai*, 1.

was far more important to preserve any facts in case they would suddenly become relevant at some point in the future, than judging them immediately with current knowledge. His collection, eclectic and inclusive as it was, seemed to lack a system. His taxonomy seemed at times archaic, at times arbitrary; this is partly because he did not consciously apply a unifying or scientific standard, but it also betrayed a mismatching between name and object, or an open, truncated order of things: his collection contained many objects, the names, use and other contextual information of which were conspicuously lacking. Therefore, Luo Zhenyu’s scholarship on antiquity was based upon, and conditioned by, the logic of collecting. And it was precisely in such a logic that the new camp of archeologists found the defect of traditional scholarship.

The defect of the old method is indisputable, and so is the superiority of the new method. But is the collector of no use at all? Or is it possible that a comparison between the collector and the archeologist somehow problematic because they aim at different goals, and tell different stories? This leads us to the second question: What are the essential characters of archeology that distinguish it from the old method? It cannot be fully answered within the scope of this chapter. But the published transcript of a lecture given by Li Chi in 1948 provides a shortcut. Entitled “New Foundation for the Study of Ancient Artifacts in China,” this lecture can be regarded as a response to Luo Zhenyu’s proposal, with its unmistakable borrowing of a phrase coined by Luo, but it was also an archeologist’s manifesto. Incidentally, this lecture was given in memory of Cai Yuanpei, who was the addressee of Luo’s proposal.

In the lecture, Li attributes the backward state of the study of ancient artifacts in China to the absence of natural science: “The reason that for eight hundred years the study of ancient artifacts did not make any progress is because it did not take the path of (natural sciences’
pure reason. Accompanied by a semi-artistic attitude, ‘ancient artifact’ becomes ‘Gu wan,’ casual notes replaces serious research, ‘appreciation’ glosses over ‘understanding’.” Here the keyword is one that has no English equivalent: “Gu wan” is a compound of two words, meaning “ancient” and “to play” respectively. Together it means ancient objects to be appreciated and played with, and to be touched and caressed by the hand.

In response, Li proposes several key points for the new foundation of studying antiquity. First, fieldwork aided by knowledge in geology, paleontology, and other branches of biology is of crucial importance (it should be remembered that Li himself was a trained biological anthropologist). Li stresses that this is a highly specialized discipline that no amateur can come even close to practicing. Second, objects need to be scientifically excavated by professional archeologists, who are able to comprehensively document them in accordance with strictly scientific standard. Here Li seizes the chance to fiercely attack antique dealers, who destroy more ancient treasures than they preserve, because they first of all look for “inscribed” objects, then for those in good shape and beautiful decoration. But to be fair to the dealers, they are simply acting as liaison for the traditional scholars who are desperately look for inscriptions. The dealers also represent the first layer of aesthetic and connoisseur filter, treating artifacts as artwork and objects of appreciation; this goes directly against the scientific spirit of archeology, which treats artifacts as research data. Li also emphasizes the importance of location and dating in connection with problems of style in art history, functionality, and ethnography.

According to today’s standard, these principles seem very logical and even commonsensical for the study of antiquity, especially in comparison with dated practices. For

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108 Li, Anyang, 319.
109 Li, “Zhongguo,” 322.
Li Chi the binary opposition was between Western archeology, which is of universal and scientific validity, and old fashion, largely flawed practices in China. However, if we replace “Chinese” with the term “antiquarian,” it is obvious that the same opposition also existed in the West, albeit diachronically. “Antiquarianism” is neither descriptive nor qualitative in itself. It is a fluid term, with a spectrum of meanings including its relatively recent, pejorative sense that reflects developments in European intellectual history in general and historiography in particular. This means that it still requires a definition, or at least some defining characteristics. And I argue that antiquarianism is in essence the scholarly (by)product of the collector.

In Europe, antiquarianism predated scientific archeology; in the term’s history, it was once a neutral description of scholars devoted to the study of the past. But later it started to be - and still is - considered unscientific and amateurish, and more or less rightly so. Once a pejorative perception of antiquarianism was in currency, suggestions were made to improve or replace it, thus initiating the shift to a better alternative of studying history, which turns out to be modern, scientific archeology. But the shift was not an abrupt one with a clearly defined separating line, but rather a long and entangled process involving generations of scholars. It is not my intention to dispute the indisputable superiority of scientific archeology over the work of the antiquarian-collector. But a comparison of them, I argue, shows some significant differences in cultural values that cannot be sweepingly explained in simple terms of progress versus backwardness, or West versus East. Furthermore, recent years have seen a revival of interest in European antiquarianism, represented by Arnaldo Momigliano and more recently Peter N. Miller.¹¹⁰ I

believe the debate in China in the first half of twentieth century contributes an important angle to the still ongoing discussion.

Overall, three aspects characterize antiquarianism as a methodology: 1) an uncritical accumulation of raw data, without no or little regard for their connections or a larger narrative; 2) the so-called “armchair archeology” that lacks a direct, fieldwork-based contact with ancient remains and an awareness of their Gestalt; 3) the absence of scientific methods including geology, biological anthropology and paleontology, etc.

One of the early articulations about antiquarianism’s backwardness can be found in the seventeenth century in Francis Bacon’s *The Advancement of Learning*, where he focuses on the first aspect by distinguishes between three kinds of history:

So of histories we may find three kinds, Memorials, Perfect Histories, and Antiquities; for Memorials are history unfinished, or the first or rough draughts of history, and Antiquities are history defaced, or some remnants of history which have casually escaped the shipwreck of time.

Memorials, or Preparatory History, are of two sorts; whereof the one may be termed Commentaries, and the other Registers. Commentaries are they which set down a continuance of the naked events and actions, without the motives or designs, the counsels, the speeches, the pretexts, the occasions, and other passages of action: for this is the true nature of a Commentary; though Cæsar, in modesty mixed with greatness, did for his pleasure apply the name of a Commentary to the best history of the world. Registers are collections of public acts, as decrees of council, judicial proceedings, declarations and letters of estate, orations, and the like, without a perfect continuance or contexture of the thread of the narration.

Antiquities or Remnants of History are, as was said, *tanquam tabula naufragii*, when industrious persons by an exact and scrupulous diligence and observation, out of monuments, names, words, proverbs, traditions, private records and evidences, fragments of stories, passages of books that concern not story, and the like, do save and recover somewhat from the deluge of time.\[^11\]

In these configurations, although “Antiquities or Remnants of History” is the direct equivalent of antiquarianism, “Memorials” should also be counted towards this category in the more general sense. Obviously antiquarianism possesses an inclusive and egalitarian, archival character, where fragments of history, be it figurative or actual, are collected in an indiscriminating manner. After three centuries, Arnaldo Momigliano still describes antiquarianism in a very similar way:

[The antiquarian is] the type of man who is interested in historical facts without being interested in history. [...] As soon as the antiquarian leaves his shabby palace which preserves something of the eighteenth century and enters modern life, he becomes the great collector, he is bound to specialise, and he may well end up as the founder of an institute of fine arts or of comparative anthropology. The time-honoured antiquarian has fallen victim to an age of specialisation.

The antiquarians loved disparate and obscure facts. But behind the individual, seemingly unrelated items there was Antiquity, mysterious and august. Implicitly every antiquarian knew that he was supposed to add to the picture of Antiquity. In practice that meant that the individual facts were collected and set aside with a view to a future general survey of those institutions, customs, cults, for which coins and inscriptions were regarded as the most important evidence. The antiquarian’s mind truly wandered to and fro between single facts and general surveys. (Emphasis mine.)112

Momigliano’s contrast between “historical facts” and “history” echoes Bacon’s between “Remnants of History” and “Perfect History.” This description of the antiquarian also mirrors Luo Zhenyu’s meticulous documentation and cataloguing of his findings on the antique market that does not easily fit into a historical structure. To sum it up, for Momigliano, antiquarian study is “descriptive in a systematic, not explanatory in a chronological order.”113

Elsewhere Momigliano also comments that “historians write in a chronological order; antiquaries write in a systematic order.” So beside the obvious disadvantage of the antiquarian’s lack of chronological order, its working method is also positivist in its focus on objects; it does not aim at narrating a succession of events and speculating the cause behind them; juxtaposition of objects and facts in the virtual system of the antiquarian’s notebook redefines, defies and disrupts the chronological line of actual history. Behind this intervention is the collector at work: a “spatialization” in the form of a collection, either actual or virtual, is introduced into the relationship among objects and facts, thus replacing the temporal structure of history.

Also, the antiquarian-collector’s care for disparate and obscure facts (the raw data) and the “setting aside for (possible) future use” attitude remind us of Luo’s untiring registering of unknown objects and facts. Such inclusive and seemingly uncritical accumulation actually has its unexpected advantage. This is not really pedantry, but a method that could potentially lead to a radical disruption of received narratives. The focus on collecting raw data, the disregard for connections between facts and for a larger, evolutionary structure precisely undercut the often neat and conveniently reductionist narrative framework of the “Perfect History.”

At this point we can take another look at Bacon’s statement that “some remnants of history [...] have casually escaped the shipwreck of time”: it can be read from a different angle: instead of “casually,” the shipwreck of time might deliberately sink some remnants of history, which are then buried deep down in the sea, until the antiquarian-collector unwittingly excavates and

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pieces them back together.\textsuperscript{115} So these remnants might initially seem disparate, obscure and irrelevant, but such irrelevance could be the result of deliberate destruction.

The contribution made by Luo and Wang’s research on the oracle bones illustrates precisely this scenario. After the pair successfully deciphered a significant number of oracle bone characters, Wang went on to pen the groundbreaking “On the Political Systems of Yin and Zhou,” basing his arguments on careful reading of the oracle bone inscriptions alongside canonical texts. His conclusion powerfully challenges the traditional narrative that had held sway for over two millennia. Contrary to the traditional claim that Yin (Shang) Dynasty was replaced by Zhou Dynasty within the framework of a single nation state, Wang proved that it was a war between two states and two peoples, which originated from and occupied different geographical locations. A conclusion of great importance from this study is that the origin of Chinese civilization was plural rather than singular, which in turn exposes traditional narrative’s attempt to hegemonize a diversity of elements into the dominant and at times oppressive conceptual umbrella of “China.” This sensational publication had a profound influence on the work of none other than the new camp’s leader Fu Sinian\textsuperscript{116} who, despite his resolute opposition to traditional Chinese scholarship, remained an admirer of Wang Guowei.

The second characteristic of antiquarianism, the so-called “armchair archeology” that lacks a direct, fieldwork-based contact with the \textit{Gestalt} of ancient remains, actually aids the de-contextualization of the antiquarian-collector, who rejoices in finding and even making surprising, at times outlandish connections, aided by a collection’s virtual spatialization of

\textsuperscript{115} Bacon, \textit{Advancement}, 82.

\textsuperscript{116} See Wang Fansen 王汎森, \textit{Genealogy of Modern Chinese Thought and Scholarship} 中国近代思想与学术的系谱 (Shijiazhuang: Hebei Jiaoyu Chubanshe, 2001), 263-282.
history. A passage of Proust’s, quoted by Walter Benjamin to illustrate the collector’s
connection-making and its resemblance to the Proustian involuntary memory, comes to mind:

A sort of productive disorder is the canon of the mémoire involuntaire, as it is the canon of
the collector. “And I had already lived long enough so that, for more than once of the
human beings with whom I had come in contact, I found in antipodal regions of my past
memories another being to complete the picture... In much the same way, when an art lover
is shown a panel of an altar screen, he remembers in what church, museum, and private
collection the other panels are dispersed (likewise, he finally succeeds, by following the
catalogues of art sales or frequenting antique shops, in finding the mate to the object he
possesses and thereby completing the pair, and so can reconstruct in his mind the predella
and the entire altar).” The mémoire involuntaire, on the other hand, is a registry providing
the object with a classificatory number behind which it disappears.\footnote{117}

But this is also why modern and professional archeologists so detest amateurish, armchair
antiquarian-collectors. The fact that the natural habitat for the collector is the antique market,
not the archeological field, tells much about the collector’s mentality. The collector happily
accepts and even appreciates the fragmentary nature of the object, and the space of imagination
provided by such fragmentariness, whereas the archeologist, in their scientifically oriented
mentality, is more concerned about putting the fragment back to its original context.

However, Luo Zhenyu was not a simplistic character that can be conveniently pigeonholed
in a single category. According to his autobiography,

The oracle bones were first brought to the capital by Shandong dealers, and acquired by
Wang Yirong. Not long afterwards he sacrificed himself for the nation. My now deceased
friend Liu Tieyun acquired Wang’s collection, and further added new items to it. I edited
and published them in Shanghai. Based on this edition Mr. Sun Zhongrong wrote Examples
of Oracle Bone Script. But we were not yet able to find a proper method for its study. What
is more, dealers didn’t want to reveal their location of origin, and lied about it being from
Weihui City. When I started to serve as a government official in the capital, the oracle
bones were excavated in massive amount, but no one in the capital knew its value. I tried
my best to purchase them, and suspected they were not from Weihui. After persistent

\footnote{117} Benjamin, The Arcades Project, 211.
inquiry, I learnt that it was actually from Xiaotun in Anyang, so I sent people to Xiaotun to purchase them.\textsuperscript{118} (Luo 42)

This brief recount reveals a small but significant step in the transition from antiquarian collecting to archeology: here Luo showed attention to the objects’ place of origin, and an awareness, albeit still a vague one, of the necessity to study the site’s \textit{Gestalt}. It means he was no longer content, as collectors usually are, with the antique market, and had taken a half step towards archeology.

Ironically, with a long and mostly uninterrupted history, as well as a rich and revered tradition of historical writing, China did not developed any archeological practice that focused on a vertical intervention into geological layers. Many of the collectors-antiquarians had been content with gathering relics above ground rather than digging those from underground. Even though they knew the importance of objects buried underneath, they were mostly happy with what antique dealers had to offer.

The liaison between the antiquarian-collector and the material remains of history are tomb robbers and antique dealers. Surely, these professions carry an unmistakably negative connotation, but the role they played (and to a certain extent still play) in the study of antiquity cannot be ignored. We may recall how Luo interrogated these people, who always lied about the antiques’ place of origin so as to protect their exclusive access to them. Luo even educated these people, as has been quoted, so that they could work more efficiently to find objects he wanted. But the dominance of these professions also gave rise to another problem, namely that of authenticity and connoisseurship. It was a common practice for dealers to fake ancient objects, so it became part of a antiquarian-collector’s required training to acquire the insight of a connoisseur. This brings us to the last of the three aforementioned characteristics of

\textsuperscript{118} Luo Zhenyu, \textit{Lunzhuji}, vol. 5, 42.
antiquarianism, namely the absence of scientific methods that would allow reliable
authentication. In absence of these techniques, the antiquarian-collector had to develop an
unerring intuition, based on hands-on, sensory experiences, to determine the objects’
authenticity. As the great nineteenth century antiquarian Chen Jieqi 陳介祺 observes, “Even
illiterate bronze vendors, after seeing enough number of excavated artifacts, are able to tell the
authentic from the fake. How come scholars cannot tell?”119 This remark suggests an intriguing
twist: the lack of knowledge does not impair, and is not tied to an intimate and tactile
engagement of material remains of the past, and leads antiquarianism in the direction of
connoisseurship, aesthetics and art history rather than objective science. We may recall that Li
Chi opposed the treatment of archeological objects as “Gu wan,” the antique object to be
played with, which points precisely in this direction. The nineteenth century book collector,
philologist and publisher Wu Changshuo 吳昌碩, when expressing his frustration with scholars
too caught up with lofty matters, was in favor of a pleasure-seeking attitude that best captures
the spirit of “Gu wan”:

In recent times, there is no short supply of jin shi xue scholars. But I think that they are too
much obsessed with historicity. They so often make lofty claims about proving the classics
and complementing history, but in fact this is but picking the tiny leftovers. How much can
they gain? Why not just talk about the beauty of the writing, the refinement of the
calligraphy, and the delicacy of the painting? This is more genuine. After all, this is but our
obsessions. Specializing in an obsession and turning it into scholarship gives us more yan
fu (visual pleasure) than the ancients.120

In this sense, materialist remains from the past are conceptualized differently from
archeology. For the antiquarian-collector, they are objects of appreciation, each possessing

119 Chen Jieqi, Fuzhai Shouzha 襄齋手札, in Lu Mingjun, Fuzhai Yanjiu 襄齋研究 (Beijing: Rongbaozhi
Chubanshe, 2004), 63.

120 See Gu Xieguang 顧燮光, Mengbiyi Shiyian 梦碧簃石言 (Shenyang: Liaoning Jiaoyu Chubanshe, 2001), 2.
individuality and uniqueness, sometimes also deeply personal connections. But for the
archeologist, these objects are scientific data that have a statistical - and hence replaceable -
rather than individual value.\textsuperscript{121}

The above comparisons of antiquarian-collectors and archeologists show that the disparity
between them is more than a simple case of amateurish backwardness versus professional
sciences. Instead of pursuing the same goal with different methods, the two are asking different
questions, behind which are two ways of conceptualizing history. Archeology, both in its
method and intention, aims at reconstructing history in its full and realistic temporal-
geographical dimensions. Antiquarianism, on the other hand, envisions history in its holistic
chaos, resigning to, or perhaps even embracing, its undifferentiated state. Or to quote
Momigliano again, “behind the individual, seemingly unrelated items there was Antiquity,
mysterious and august.”\textsuperscript{122} Through a collection’s virtual spatialization, antiquarianism
manages to establish a history in simultaneity, while at the same time allowing space for
personal interventions. Within this space, the collected objects of the past connect and
configure history in the framework of contingency that is both personal and material.
Accidents, discontinuities, oddities permeate a formless, open-ended collection.

4. Politicizing Antiquarianism

Ultimately, the key difference between antiquarian-collectors and archeologists lies in
precisely such a personal intervention or the lack thereof. Apart from the strictly scientific
attitude, the archeologists also discipline themselves with a sever and selfless spirit, which Li

\textsuperscript{121} Li, Anyang, 322.

\textsuperscript{122} Momigliano, The Classical Foundations, 58.
Chi articulated in a principle he established upon the founding of the Archeology Department: all excavated objects are state property; the Departmental colleagues should never participate in buying, selling or collecting any of them.\textsuperscript{123}

It is easy to understand the logic behind Li Chi’s principle. But its counterpart’s logic is much more complicated. It is certainly incorrect to assume that the antiquarian-collectors are greedily concerned with economic profits. Serious collecting, being an obsession, is no business. The collector’s clinging to his/her objects goes far beyond monetary interest: in fact, they are always ready to give up money in exchange for their beloved objects. Therefore, while collecting and playing with objects seem to be anything but serious, there is in essence a tension between relaxed playfulness and intense obsession. As Balzac insightfully observes, the shabby-looking collector is “the most passionate people in the world.”\textsuperscript{124} Collecting gives rise to such a propelling obsession which, at its extreme form, align the collection with the life of the collector. And this is why the discourse of collecting is constantly infused with a sense of liminality and death. But in the Chinese context, this obsession has an added layer of ideological commitment. A prime example of the entangled relationship between ideology, liminality and collecting is embodied in the tragic lives of the Song Dynasty antiquarian Zhao Mingcheng (1081-1129) and his wife, the great poet and the first documented female collector in Chinese history, Li Qingzhao 李清照 (1084-1155).

Earlier in this chapter, I quote one of the foundational texts of Jin shi xue, \textit{A Record of Metals and Stones}, compiled by Zhao at the twilight years of Northern Song Dynasty, when the Han Chinese regime was seriously threatened by the violent northern Jurchen State of Jin. During the last days of the Northern Song, two emperors were kidnapped by Jin, and their

\textsuperscript{123} Li Guangmo, \textit{Qinghuayuan}, 250.

\textsuperscript{124} Balzac, \textit{Le Cousin Pons}, 162.
successor was forced to move the capital to south of Yangtze River. The family of Zhao Mingcheng and Li Qingzhao followed southward, fleeing the onslaught of the brutal Jin troops. In 1129, Zhao was charged with defending Huzhou city, but he died of illness on his way to the post. The unfinished manuscript of *A Record of Metals and Stones* was taken up by Li Qingzhao, and finished a few years afterwards. She attached a poignant postscript to her husband’s last book.

Now writing in the Southern Song Dynasty, Li Qingzhao gave a detailed and touching account of how the couple spent most of their lives carefully collecting and documenting ancient steles, books, paintings and ritual vessels. This was the greatest joy of their lives:

> I have good memory. So after meals we often made tea in the Hall of Return 归来堂, then randomly pointed to piles of books and histories, recalling in which book, which volume and on which page was a certain event recorded; the winner could enjoy tea first. When guessing correctly, we would hold up cups and laugh loudly until tea poured into the chest [...] I would rather grow old like this! So although our lives were filled with care and poverty, our spirit and ideal were not compromised.125

But soon this blissful pastime turned Zhao Mingcheng into an obsessive and even aggressive collector, with an unpleasant attachment to objects:

> Once the collecting process was finished, a library was established in the Hall of Return, where books were carefully arranged and catalogued. When certain titles were needed, he fetched the key and registered check-outs. If the books were smudged, I would be reprimanded and ordered to fix the damage, and so vanished the carefree feeling we once had. Thus we pursued a sense of leisure, but ended up being anxious.126

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125 Li Qingzhao: “Postscript to *A Record of Metals and Stones*,” in Zhao Mingcheng: *A Record of Metals and Stones* (Shanghai: Shanghai Shuhua Chubanshe, 1985), 561.

Here we already sense a worrying sign of collecting turning into possession which, when pushed forward to extremes, could take priority over the life of the collector. The postscript’s narrative soon arrives at a moment of intense pathos, when Zhao bid farewell to his wife:

In May [1129], when we arrived [by boat] in Chiyang, [Zhao Mingcheng] was summoned to serve as governor of Huzhou before reporting to the emperor at his palace. So the family stopped in Chiyang, and he alone left for his new post. On June 13th, he disembarked with his luggage. Sitting on the bank, he was very well dressed and as spirited as a tiger, his eyes beaming with sharp light. He looked to the boat to bid farewell. I felt very bad, and exclaimed, “what if there is news of emergency from the city?” Zhao replied from afar, “Follow the crowd. If necessary, discard the heavy luggage first, then clothing and bedding, then books, then ancient artifacts; only the ritual vessels honoring ancestors should always accompany you; they should exist or perish along with your own life. Do not forget!”

His directive at such a critical moment betrays an objectification of the female gender while elevating his collection to an existential level, to be on a par with the life of his wife. For him the ritual vessels were so important and so inseparable from himself that it should perish with Li Qingzhao, who in that social context was also considered his possession. Here a value system built upon economic considerations was completely incompatible with the collector’s zealous desire to preserve the collection, which had now become an extension of his own self.

At the critical moment of life and death, the most useful objects (luggage, clothing, etc.) would be the first to be discarded, while the least useful (ritual vessels) became more important than life. But the hierarchy of objects implied in this passage is even more worthy of close scrutiny: the last three items, all of which are collector’s favorites, represent three categories: texts (books), objects (ancient artifacts) and a combination of both (ritual vessels). So why ritual vessels? We may recall the aforementioned quote by Ma Heng, where he describes the tension

\[127\] \textit{Ibid.}, 562.
between textual and material. In Chinese history, writing has a highly symbolic power that reaches all the way back to the myth of its creation: when the legendary, four-eye scribe Cang Jie allegedly created Chinese writing, “heaven rains down millet, and ghosts cry at night.”

This points to the opposition between the textual and the material that runs through this chapter: the act of inscribing texts onto objects defines a critical moment, a turning point when meaning is being created, value is being defined, and power is being established. Therefore the root of the longstanding obsession with texts and the ensuing overlook of materiality can be traced to this tradition of power production through writing’s symbolic dematerialization of artifacts.

At its extreme form of expression, this obsession made ritual vessels honoring ancestors the most important thing that Zhao wanted to cling to in both life and death. Perhaps for Zhao, what was at stake was not his or/and his wife’s life, but the very existence of his nation, race and culture. Zhao’s ordering of these collectors’ items reflects the hierarchical structure where the material is entirely subsumed by the symbolic political power, represented by the textual, in the form of inscriptions that elevated the material existence of ritual vessels onto the highest plane.

It might seem far-fetching to discuss in such detail an event of a thousand years ago in a chapter that focuses on the twentieth century. But history often lets one event respond to another across a wide temporal gap, as if to answer its own questions raised earlier.

Luo Zhenyu and Wang Guowei’s epoch-making collective intellectual odyssey came to an abrupt and tragic halt on June 2nd, 1927. In the afternoon of that day, after patiently taking care

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128 Ma, Fanjiangzhai, 65.


130 For a recent discussion of political and cultural implications of written Chinese, see Andrea Bachner, Beyond Sinology: Chinese Writing and the Scripts of Culture (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).
of teaching responsibilities, Wang left his office at Tsinghua University and went to the nearby Summer Palace, a former grandios garden residence of the Qing emperors, where he drowned himself in the vast Kunming Lake. A testament was discovered in his pocket, but the cause of his suicide was mentioned only in an abstract sentence: “At the age of fifty, the only thing I owe is death. After going through this tremendous change of the world, righteousness should not be abused a second time.”

Wang’s suicide took everyone by surprise, as he had appeared calm, and handled teaching and research with his usual seriousness and commitment. There was no apparent personal or social causes. Thus all kinds of gossips and speculations abound, reflecting people’s apparent frustration and desperation in grappling with this tragedy. Connections were made, for example, between Wang’s own choice and the pessimistic suicide theory by his early favorite Schopenhauer, which he discusses in his brilliant Schopenhauerian essay “Commentary on Dream of the Red Chamber.” But in the end all theories were proved to be mere speculations. The only explanation that stands is an appropriately philosophical one by the prominent historian, Wang’s Tsinghua colleague and close friend Chen Yinke, who says the following:

Someone asks the reason of Mr. Wang’s death. My response: in recent times, there is the argument for [the division] of Eastern and Western cultures; it is not necessary to dispute whether the division of geographical zones is appropriate; even the theories on commonalities and differences, merits and shortcomings, can be put aside for now. But one point is certain: whenever a culture is in decline, the people nurtured by this culture always feel a profound pain; the greater they represent this culture, the stronger the pain. When it

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131 See Wang Deyi, Nianpu, 397.

132 In 1924, the disposed emperor Puyi was evicted from the Forbidden Palace, and went into exile in Tianjin. Wang Guowei took any offence against the emperor very seriously, and for a few times expressed his wish to die for his sovereign’s honor. In 1927, right before Wang’s suicide, the Northern Expedition lead by the Nationalist Party (Kuomintang) was gaining momentum and steadily moving north toward Beijing. These events have been speculated to be the cause of Wang’s suicide, but none of them had any immediate effect that would fully justify his action.
reaches the deepest degree, none other than suicide can allow one to attain peace at heart and fulfill the sense of righteousness. [...] The essence of our Chinese culture is embodied in the ethical codes of *Baihu Tong*; its meaning is the highest state of abstract ideals [...] Moral codes are abstract matters, but they have to have a realistic form so as to manifest themselves concretely; the form it relies upon to manifest itself is actually the concrete social system, of which economic system is the most important [element].

I agree with everything Chen says, except his last point regarding the concrete form that abstract cultural ideals depend upon to manifest themselves. Apart from social and economic systems, I argue that ideals are also embedded in the most physical, material remains of history. When a culture is in decline, its material existence decays, but it persists in the form of fragments, which are to be collected by the antiquarian-collectors and archeologists. The latter could take a scientific position to distance themselves from the culture and politics while carefully examining the relics, but the former often live within, and closely identify with the culture these objects once formed. They neither distinguish nor distance; they are still immerse in the values of the past, being part of the once alive organism; if they assimilate the values deep enough, they are likely to be crushed by their unbearable weight. These values have many incarnations, but for the antiquarian-collector in the Chinese context, they appear especially in the objects empowered by texts, such as the ritual vessels Zhao Mingcheng was willing to die with, or let his wife do so. Likewise for Wang Guowei, when the cultural and political systems as well as their material incarnations were all gone, there was no reason for him to remain. In practice, Wang Guowei was less a collector than his loyal friend Luo Zhenyu; but in death, he showed himself to be a supreme representation of a collector’s resolute identification with a culture.

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Therefore Wang’s death was an echo of Zhao Mingcheng’s order to his wife. In both cases, the antiquarian became, or was ready to become, the martyr of a dying civilization. But there is also an irony here: while Zhao was defending the Han Chinese state against the Jurchen Jin, the Qing Royal House, which Wang regarded as the supreme embodiment of Han Chinese Civilization, was itself not Han, but the one-time enemy Manchurian. After barely three centuries of Manchurian reign, many Han Chinese still remembered the former’s bloody conquest in seventeenth century, during which Wang’s native Zhejiang Province suffered especially terribly. In this sense, Wang the politically conservative turned out to be culturally much more cosmopolitan than the “progressive” revolutionaries of the Republic, which was expressly racist during its early days.

However, Wang’s death, itself saturated with political implications, gave rise to controversies that would not stop at Chen Yinke’s philosophical reflections; it actually further politicized the discourse over antiquarianism. The controversies were typical of twentieth century China, where virtually everyone was forced to take an either-or position, and everything had to be defined as either black or white. First it was the binary opposition between conservative monarchy and revolutionary republic, then it was between capitalist and communist systems. Even antiquarianism could not be immune from this divisive mentality.¹³⁴

Wang died a widely respected figure in both the new and old camps of the intellectual community. On the contrary, his friend Luo Zhenyu was much despised for his deep political involvement and overt loyalty to the old regime, his somewhat business-oriented mode of collecting, and particularly his close ties to the Japanese. When Luo obtained a posthumous honorary title for Wang from the emperor, now in exile in Tianjin (Wang would certainly have

¹³⁴ For contemporary reactions to Wang’s death, see Chen Pingyuan and Wang Feng, eds., Zhuiyi Wang Guowei 追憶王國維 (Beijing: China Broadcast and Television Press, 1997).
been deeply flattered), it was to the fury of Wang’s many devout followers, who thought this tainted Wang’s reputation. Being a senior figure, Luo had considerable influence both politically and intellectually on Wang. Therefore many of Wang’s new camp disciples were willing to downplay their mentor’s conservative leaning by attributing it to Luo’s “corruption,” as if Wang was so politically naive that he was not able to form his own political views independently. These scholars included some of the most prominent historians such as Fu Sinian and Gu Jiegang 顧頡剛. For example, upon Wang’s death, Gu accused Luo as someone “emotionally pretentious and intellectually fake,” who “deceives the world and steals his reputation,” and was responsible for leading Wang astray and ultimately contributing to his suicide.\footnote{135 Gu Jiegang, “Dao Wang Jing’an Xiansheng” 悼王靜安先生, in Chen and Wang, Zhuiyi, 128-36.}

On the other hand, though a serious scholar and person, Fu was willing to accept the unsubstantiated claim that Wang ghostwrote the important \textit{A Philological Explanation of Yin Shang Oracle Script} for Luo.\footnote{136 Fu, \textit{Shixue}, 4.} This was proved to be false when the oracle bone script expert and poet Chen Mengjia purchased the manuscript from Luo Zhenyu’s grandson in Beijing, which showed indisputably that the book was by Luo’s own hand, but with Wang’s comments and suggestions.\footnote{137 With dual identities as a modernist poet and an antiquarian-philologist, Chen Mengjia also made important contribution to the study of oracle bones. Inhumanly persecuted, he committed suicide during the early days of Cultural Revolution. His tragic life forms a major part in Peter Hessler’s \textit{Oracle Bones: A Journey through Time in China}.} Other widely circulated slanders include the theory that Wang was forced to commit suicide because he could not pay off debts to Luo, which was also proved false when the pair’s letters were edited and published by their families.\footnote{138 The two family had close ties; Wang’s son married Luo’s daughter. See \textit{Letters of Luo Zhenyu and Wang Guowei}, Beijing: Dongfang Press, 2000.}
These unsubstantiated claims would not have had a place in this chapter, were it not for the fact that they show how deeply biased and politicized the reception of Luo’s and Wang’s scholarship was. Luo’s reputation sank to the lowest point when he accompanied the emperor up north and became a minister in the Japanese-sanctioned puppet state Manchukuo. For many he was a shameless traitor and collaborator. His reputation is not recovered even today; when the scholarship on oracle bone script was mentioned, Wang Guowei is still honored as the truly great representative, while Luo Zhenyu fades into the background. Recent efforts to revive scholarly interest in Luo Zhenyu—at least in the English speaking world—are represented by the somewhat singular publication of the already quoted collection of essays entitled Lost Generation: Luo Zhenyu, Qing Loyalists and the Formation of Modern Chinese Culture. But Luo still does not have the attention and recognition he deserves.

The controversial politicization of antiquarianism continued well beyond the lives of Luo and Wang. The new camp scholars had barely succeeded in defeating the loyalists when they immediately sank into internal fights. This time it was between the Marxist, “materialist” view of history and its supposedly capitalist counterpart. The Academia Sinica had assembled the best scholars of the time, including Chen Yinke, Fu Sinian, Guo Moruo, Gu Jiegang, Hu Shih and Li Chi, among others. But in 1949, it was these one-time colleagues and friends’ turn to take sides: either to remain in the communist mainland China or flee to the capitalist Taiwan, where the Republic of China was to be based. About half remained, and the rest gone. They were all indebted to Luo Zhenyu and Wang Guowei, who were mentors or at least personal acquaintance of them. But now they had to rethink these connections in strictly and narrowly defined political terms.
An iconoclastic historian, the aforementioned Gu Jiegang (1893-1980) was famous for spearheading what can be called the modern Chinese equivalent of historic Pyrrhonism, according to which every word in the classics should be doubted and critically examined, and history should be viewed as an accumulation of layers of artificial construction. Gu wrote a lengthy and passionate obituary for Wang Guowei, praising the latter’s work as a major inspiration for his own dismantling of ancient historic discourses. Remaining on the mainland, Gu was severely criticized and persecuted during the Cultural Revolution.

Once a close friend of Gu, Fu Sinian expressly disdained the communists throughout his life, and chose the opposite path in 1949 to become President of National Taiwan University, taking with him parts of the invaluable Imperial Archives that Luo Zhenyu fought hard to save and eventually sold to Academia Sinica. Besides, Wang Guowei was a major influence on Fu’s work on Yin and Zhou histories.\(^{139}\)

Holding the same political view, Li Chi moved to Taiwan to lead National Taiwan University’s Departments of Archeology and Anthropology, while his son Li Guangmo was left on the mainland, and went on to become a translator of Marxist texts. Many of Li Chi’s colleagues and students also remained and became leaders of Chinese archeology. Attempts were made to lure Li back to China, but he resolutely turned it down. One episode before the country split in two is very telling of the deep-seated rift between two highly politicized intellectual camps. Once Li Chi caught the young archeologist Yin Da 尹達 reading a so-called “progressive” book, a popular history of social development with communist orientation. Li admonished Yin: “We scholars of scientific archeology should not wear colored glasses!”\(^{140}\) It


\(^{140}\) Li Guangmo, \textit{Qinghuayuan}, 197.
was no surprise that Yin Da remained on the mainland and became one of the so-called Marxist historians, who were forced in 1959 to fiercely attack their former mentor Li Chi in absentia for holding the wrong political view.

Guo Moruo (1892-1978), another historian who made important contributions to oracle bone studies, was an opportunistic Marxist and well-known for introducing historic materialism into the narrative of Chinese history. He later became head of China’s Academy of Science, made after the Soviet model. In an essay entitled “Lu Xun and Wang Guowei,” he acknowledged that “among scholars of recent times, Lu Xun and Wang Guowei are the ones I admire the most.”\(^{141}\) He was deeply influenced by Wang’s work on history. But Guo also propagated the Marxist view that “[t]he development of Chinese society went through [the stages of] primitive commune, slavery and feudalism, which completely matches Marxist periodization of social development. This has become common knowledge.”\(^{142}\) Such a schematic interpretation is precisely what Li Chi opposed. Writing in 1950 right after the communist takeover, Guo Moruo defended his theory that Shang Dynasty was a slavery society, which formed a stage in China’s historic development:

Most of the fieldwork-based archeologists of the past lack knowledge of social development history. Some people do not believe at all in the periodization of social development history, so they ignore the historic materials [that prove the existence of slavery]. They only pedantically focus on measuring the dimensions and weights of ancient artifacts, or reconstructing the Yin calendar according to later calendars. They can be said to be holding a golden bowl to beg for food.\(^{143}\)

\(^{141}\) Guo Moruo, “Lu Xun and Wang Guowei,” in Chen and Wang, Zhuiyi, 166-78.


\(^{143}\) Guo Moruo, “Xiyi de Canmeng” 蜥蜴的残梦, in Quanji, vol. 3, 75.
The phrase “Pedantically focus on measuring the dimensions and weights of ancient artifacts” unmistakably refers to the positivist method of the archeologists. The mean metaphor of begging with a gold bowl is a criticism of their not willing to take a step from factual, material-based descriptions toward more daring and assertive conclusions, which would ultimately fit into politicized schemas. Guo’s approach was to become the overwhelmingly dominant one that imprisoned scholars in mainland China for most of the late twentieth century.

According to the reductionistically polarized logic of twentieth century Chinese politics, all these scholars had to make a choice between two opposite options. They either remained or they left; they were either on the right or on the left; they were either communist or capitalist, etc. But their intellectual genealogy completely overturns this binary opposition. In one way or another, they lived under the influences of Luo Zhenyu and Wang Guowei.

At hindsight, Luo and Wang’s scholarship represents an aborted effort to push traditional Chinese scholarship forward to answer the challenge of modern, Western archeology. They inherited traditional Jing shi xue, or the study of metals and stones, which subsumed the material side of history under the oppressive, ideology-saturated canon that gave almost exclusive attention to the text, whereas the tangible but elusive medium that bore the inscriptions was suppressed. In China, history had indeed been carefully studied over and over, but this was mostly restricted to the written part; antique objects aroused interest mostly in so far as they bore inscriptions. Writing was considered the most authoritative, orthodox and legitimate medium for history. The script carries a political power that can be traced back to the moment of mythmaking. But the exercise of this power requires a physical medium. This is the juncture when the object, the artifact, the very materiality itself, becomes politicized and
embedded into a tightly-knotted power structure, hence the tension between the textual and the material.

Luo and Wang attempted to recover this subaltern dimension through their successful practices, and especially Luo’s proposal to establish “the study of ancient artifacts.” But this effort did not yield substantial fruits at a time when China was heading toward political and cultural westernization in its multiple variations. It was first cut short by the institutionalization of modern archeology, and its more intimate approach to materiality was replaced by the impersonal character of scientific spirit. Then came the heavily dogmatized Marxist historic materialism, which in the name of “materialism” eliminated the last trace of materialist objectivity.

In 1940, the seventy-four-year-old Luo Zhenyu died in Lüshun, Manchukuo. He left his vast and invaluable collections of rare ancient books and artifacts, all gathered in the Dayun Library 大雲書庫, the name of which was derived from the Mahamegha Sutra. As is the case with virtually all collections in the world, Luo’s own ended up in dispersion. In 1945, upon Japanese surrender, the Soviet Red Army occupied Lüshun and confiscated Luo family’s estate, and the Library became the Red Army’s guest house. The soldiers had no idea of the value of Luo’s collections, so books, calligraphy and paintings were thrown out of the window, while oracle bones and bronze vessels ended up in ditches. Local residents also participated in the onslaught. It was the communist leader Mao Zedong who, upon hearing the news, immediately ordered local officials to protect Luo’s collection, of which now only about three tenths remained\(^\text{144}\). Unlike his Soviet comrades, Mao was apparently aware of the immeasurable

\(^{144}\) See Wang Yunfeng 王雲峰. “Sanshiwan Cangshu Dou Nali Qule” 30 万册藏书都哪里去了.”
value of Luo’s legacy. Most of the remaining collection was donated to the state, which is now held at Liaoning Provincial Library and Dalian Municipal Library.

This tragic coda of Luo’s odyssey as a collector seems to have been preemptively prophesied by Li Qingzhao nearly a millennium ago. At the very end of the postscript to A Record of Metals and Stones, so says she:

In history, Emperor Xiao Yi didn’t care the fall of his country, but rather busied himself with bringing his book and painting collections with him to death; when [Emperor] Yang Guang’s capital Jiangdu fell, he wasn’t saddened by his own death, but returned (as a ghost) to claim back his books. Isn’t it human nature that [obsession with objects] cannot be forgotten in life and death? Or maybe heaven considers me unworthy of enjoying these precious objects? Or is it because the departed is conscious, and still clings [to the objects], not willing to leave it in this world? How difficult it is to collect things and how easy it is to lose them!

Alas! Between the age of eighteen (when I was married to Zhao) and fifty-two, for thirty-four years, how much care and worry, lost and gain [have I experienced]! But possession is always accompanied by lost, and gathering by dispersion. This is but commonsense. Someone loses a bow, someone else gets it: is this worth mentioning? The reason that I record the beginning and end [of our collecting endeavors] is that I want it to be a warning for lovers of antiquity in posterity.145

It would be truly a surprise if the erudite Luo Zhenyu had not come across this warning.

145 Li Qingzhao: “Postscript to A Record of Metals and Stones,” in Zhao Mingcheng: A Record of Metals and Stones (Shanghai: Shanghai Shuhua Chubanshe, 1985), 560.
Chapter Two

The Infinite Collection and the Mortal Collector:
Lu Xun, Flea Market Revolutionary

1. Lu Xun, Collector and Scrivener

Barely a year after Luo Zhenyu and Wang Guowei left Beijing for Japan, Lu Xun moved to Beijing to take up his position at the recently relocated Ministry of Education. In the afternoon of May 12, 1912, Lu Xun paid his first visit to the Liu Li Chang 琉璃廠 antique market, and bought Fu Yunlong 傅雲龍’s Zhuan xi lu Book Series 篆喜廬叢書, a collection of Chinese works lost in China but recovered in Japan. Lu Xun noted in his diary that it cost five yuan eighty cents.\(^{146}\) This marks the very beginning of his intense collecting activities during his fourteen-year sojourn in Beijing from 1912 to 1926.

Hailed as one of the greatest writers in modern Chinese literature, Lu Xun 魯迅 produced influential novellas that have been interpreted as exposé and allegories of the Chinese national character. With these works he has come to be considered a revolutionary visionary crusading against reactionary ideologies, and is posthumously labeled “the soul of the Chinese nation.”\(^{147}\) But his other, more backward-looking identity has often been overlooked: throughout his life, and long before he became a writer, he was an avid book collector and accomplished editor, producing a substantial amount of textual scholarship. It is the purpose of this chapter to comprehensively examine Lu Xun’s collecting activities and his textual scholarship, and to

\(^{146}\) Lu Xun, Diary of May 12, 1912, in Lu Xun Quanji, vol. 17 (Beijing: Renmin Wenxue Chubanshe, 2005), 38.

propose an answer to the following questions: do these collecting activities have a relation to his more famous works in fiction? If yes, what are they?

Liu Li Chang is a legendary antique market in the old capital, and arguably the most prestigious one in the country, which is not without a reason: when Qianlong Emperor (1711-1799) commissioned the most ambitious book collecting project in Chinese history, the *Imperial Library in Four Sections* 四庫全書 (hereafter the *Imperial Library*), he summoned about three thousand six hundred editors and about three thousand eight hundred scribes to Beijing. They were ordered to gather all the important book titles on the emperor’s territory in the imperial capital, then carefully select, edit and copy them. The editors lived in an area close to Liu Li Chang, and brought with them countless books - good, bad and mediocre ones all included. The area also attracted people who desired to recommend their own works to be included. Therefore Liu Li Chang was gradually transformed into the country’s center of book and antique exchange.

Lu Xun’s collecting activities did not begin in Beijing. According to his younger brother Zhou Zuoren 周作人, Lu Xun was very fond of copying books and illustrations as a child, before he had money to start his own small collection. Later he frequented antique bookstores while studying in Japan. And after returning to his native Kuaiji county (now known as Shaoxing), he continued to collect and transcribe old books, producing a series of critical edition of ancient texts.

It is possible that these works drew the attention of another Kuaiji native, the Minister of Education Cai Yuanpei 蔡元培, who employed Lu Xun in 1912 as an official 佥事 to work at his ministry in Nanjing. When the Beijing-based Yuan Shikai became president, Lu Xun relocated

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with the Ministry of Education to Beijing. In 1912, Lu Xun was still a virtually unknown figure - this name did not even exist then. It was another six years before the pen name “Lu Xun” was coined for the groundbreaking *A Madman's Diary* that established his fame as the leader of the vernacular literature movement. So there is the likelihood that Lu Xun’s editorial work, which was among a few of his not too conspicuous achievements so far anyway, played a part in his appointment.

But it was after moving to Beijing in 1912 that Lu Xun’s collecting activities took off in earnest. Since the emperors were the wealthiest and greediest collectors in the country - even though they were now gone - their collections and the magnetism remained. One year after the fall of the Dynasty in 1911, the Liu Li Chang markets remained the hub of antique collecting, providing ideal resources for Lu Xun the collector that the provincial town of Kuaiji could not compete with.

Throughout the years, he collected all kinds of antique objects, ranging from books, rubbings of inscribed texts and images, coins, bronze vessels to terracottas. I will discuss his extensive textual collecting and meticulous editorial work in detail in the following sections. In general, Lu Xun’s engagements with these texts fall into three major categories, with one sometimes being the basis of the other. The first category is textual collecting in the most literal sense: he transcribed ancient texts across various media. This becomes one of the preliminary steps of the second category, namely to prepare authentic versions of ancient texts through meticulous philological research. For this work he searched extensively from various sources for parts of a book or an article that as a whole had been lost, and reassembled whatever he could find into a single title. These two categories often provide the groundwork for the third category - the compiling or restoration of various collections of ancient texts.
It is on the basis of such textual scholarship that Lu Xun produced his scholarly output on literary history. Notable among them are *A Brief History of Chinese Novel* (中國小說史略), *A Brief Outline of the History of Ancient Chinese Literature* (漢文學史綱要), and an influential essay on Wei Jin Period literature and culture, “Wei-Jin Style, Literature, Medicine and Alcohol” (魏晉風度及文章與藥及酒之關係).

From this list, it is clear that although now universally known as a great novelist and prolific essayist, Lu Xun also made substantial contribution to textual scholarship, and this was undertaken mainly during his time in Beijing. Once he became famous as a novelist, and especially after his relatively stable life in the capital was troubled by political turmoil since the 1920s, his energy was gradually consumed by intense literary and political commitments. Although still engaged in collecting and editing from time to time, he never returned to them as single-mindedly and wholeheartedly as when he was in Beijing during these early years.

Before going into detailed analysis of this part of Lu Xun’s work, it is necessary to consider the background in which Lu Xun produced them.

### 2. The Politics of Obsession

Beneath the seemingly calm life as a government official and part time collector, it turns out that Lu Xun was harboring some painful feelings, and was in a particularly difficult period of his life. We can find a brief chronicle of this period of his life in the preface to his collection of stories *Scream* (吶喊). This preface is a literary autobiography documenting major phases in his physical and spiritual lives up to 1922, four years before he left Beijing.

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150 Also translated as *Call to Arms*. 

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It starts with an explanation of why he decided to study medicine in the very beginning - it was resulted from the trauma caused by his father’s illness and death. Then came famous “the slideshow episode,” the now classic moment of literary awakening, after which he decided to give up medicine for literature, because “sick souls cannot be cured by medicine.”\textsuperscript{151} But literary enlightenment and youthful ambition did not automatically generate success. His first attempt of using literature to cure the Chinese people’s souls was a failure. With friends he founded \textit{New Life 新生}, but lack of funding nipped the new life in the bud. This lead to his realization that he was not a leadership personality, hence the feelings of purposelessness, loneliness, lost and pain,

It was only after this [experience] that I felt for the first time a sense of boredom. Initially I didn’t understand its cause. Later I thought, when someone’s proposals met with approval, it would push him forward; if they met with disagreement, that would make him strive; and yet if he cries out among strangers, but gets no response, neither approval nor disagreement, as if he were in the middle of a boundless wasteland, clueless—what sadness this is. Then I realized what I felt was loneliness.

And this sense of loneliness grew day by day, entangling my soul like a giant, poisonous snake.\textsuperscript{152}

This is the reason he gave about his collecting and transcribing work. He terms this period’s work simply as “transcribing ancient inscriptions” 鈔古碑, even though it is much more than that.

In Lu Xun’s own words, it was a time when he was trying to “anesthetize himself” so as to escape loneliness and purposelessness,

This loneliness grows day by day, like a huge poisonous snake, entangling my soul.

[...]

\textsuperscript{151} Lu Xun, \textit{Quanji}, vol. 1, 439.

\textsuperscript{152} Ibid.
However, my loneliness had to be dispelled because it was causing me agony. So I used various means to anaesthetize my soul, to immerse myself among my fellow nationals and to turn to the past...

For years I stayed in this house, transcribing ancient inscriptions. I had few visitors, and there were no problems or “isms” in ancient inscriptions, so my life dimly faded away, which was all that I desired. On summer nights, when mosquitoes swarmed, I would sit under the locust tree waving my fan and looking at specks of blue sky through chinks in the thick foliage, while belated caterpillars would fall, icy-cold, on to my head and neck.153

A conversation between Lu Xun and Qian Xuantong (nicknamed Jin Xinyi) reveals the uselessness of this activity, and the emptiness, the boredom and the indifference on the part of Lu Xun:

“What’s the use of copying these?” One night, while leafing through the inscriptions I had transcribed, he posted this searching question.
“There isn’t any use.”
“What’s the meaning, then, of transcribing them?”
“There isn’t any meaning.”154

Lu Xun’s last answer is probably a pun: it can mean either “There isn’t any meaning” or simply “It’s no fun.” Such blunt indifference is rather striking, especially when we consider the coexisting obsession with which he transcribed the texts. Such “meaninglessness” obviously could not explain his persistence and obsession in collecting.

By far the most interesting and deceptively simple explanation is given by Lu Xun’s younger brother Zhou Zuoren, who was a witness and sometime participant of these activities after joining the former in Beijing in 1917. This so-called “escaping attention” theory is rather similar to Lu Xun’s own account. According to Zhou,

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153 Lu Xun, Quanji, vol. 1, 440.
154 Ibid., 440
During the preparation for the restoration of monarchy, Yuan Shikai’s secret police, such as Lu Jianzhang’s police law reinforcement, probably inherited (Ming Dynasty’s) Dongchang system. It was indeed scary. The number of people taken away by them and disappearing forever is beyond estimation. Officials in Beijing, regardless of their ranks, were closed monitored by the authority, in case they would rebel. Therefore, everyone tried hard to avoid attention. If possessing a certain obsession, be it ones heavier ones such as prostitution, gambling or keeping concubines, or lighter ones such as playing with antiques, calligraphy or painting, a person would most likely be regarded safe. A well-known example is Cai Songpo’s relationship with Xiao fengxian. I don’t know how Lu Xun’s circle of friends at the Ministry of Education, such as Xu Shoushang, managed this. But they were at least good at playing Mahjong, and this alone would make them pass the test. However, Lu Xun couldn’t even play the most basic Mahjong games; so he had to pretend to play with antiques. But he couldn’t afford buying ancient steles, so he had to be content with collecting inscription rubbings. But even this could not kill time in the long term; and he after all didn’t have enough money to buy a rubbing everyday, so he started to transcribe them. Thus a Han Dynasty stele could give him half a month to transcribe. This was a rather cost-effective activity. Unlike manuscripts, these steles were large in scale, and had many characters. What’s more, Han steles had lots of blemishes, so when a character on the rubbing was rather obscure, one has to position oneself from afar, near, left and right to recognize roughly what it was. As a result, there was no better way of killing time, though this did require lots of care. (Italics mine.)

Zhou Zuoren’s unassuming and far from flattering account of the cause of Lu Xun’s collecting activities is actually more illuminating than it seems. It contains a lot of subtle implications, the foremost among which is the dichotomization of obsession/pastime and political ambition. Among various obsessions, collecting antiques is described by Zhou as nothing less than trivial. His layers of negation assign transcribing ancient rubbings to the lowest possible caliber among the already unremarkable cohort of activities: Lu Xun could not play Mahjong, nor did he have money, so he had to content himself with the least costly, non-technical and almost miserable activity of transcription. In such an ironically demeaning description, antiquarianism appears to be pettier even compared to prostitution and gambling, the rather base obsessions with sex, money and game.

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155 Zhou, Guadou Ji, 345-6.
Zhou’s account gives rise to a question: was Lu Xun intensely engaged in collecting and editorial work? But the question itself needs to be questioned. First, it implies a condescending attitude toward this type of mechanical, repetitive work, considering it inferior to the creative, genius work of a great writer. Second, it also contains a somewhat anachronistic and deterministic assumption, namely Lu Xun was always predestined to become a great writer; any departure from it is a wandering off the track, and hence has to be justified. As if because Lu Xun is now recognized as primarily a novelist, such activities have to be the norm, against which all former ones should be valued, and the latter are naturally considered for many to be something less than meaningful, if not downright trivial. But we should not forget that after the above-quoted conversation, how reluctantly Lu Xun ceded to Qian’s request, agreeing to write something anyway. This reluctance makes his literary career almost seem like an accident.

In Zhou Zuoren’s commemorative essay on his brother, written a few days after Lu Xun’s passing, Zhou grouped the latter’s achievements into two categories. The first one, “searching, collecting, editing and researching,” contains nine titles. The second, “creative writing,” has only three titles. Reflecting the perception of Lu Xun’s work immediately after his death by someone once close to him (the brothers fell out in 1923), this categorization shows from another angle how much more than a novelist Lu Xun was once thought to be.

However, Zhou Zuoren’s seemingly unsophisticated and far-from-flattering account of the cause of Lu Xun’s collecting activities remains for me the most illuminating one. It contains a lot of subtle implications, the foremost among which is the dichotomization of obsession and pastime against political ambition. But before going into that, I would like to briefly discuss the

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156 Lu Xun, Quanji, vol. 1, 440.

157 Zhou, Guadou Ji, 154-5.
relationship between obsession and pastime, even though their relationship is worth more scrutiny than the scope of this chapter allows.

Obsession and pastime are two antithetical concepts that uncannily resemble each other. Zhou Zuoren uses them somewhat interchangeably: at the beginning of the passage, people sought shihao 嗜好 to avoid the authority’s attention, and I translate it as obsession. In the end, he said that Lu Xun transcribed rubbings so as to “xiao qian shi guang” 消遣時光, which means to kill time. Also, he says that “a Han Dynasty stele could give him half a month to transcribe.” The more usual expression, both in English and Chinese, would be that something “takes” a certain length of time to be completed. Zhou formulated the passing of time in quasi-economic terms that is opposite to the usual expression.

Such formulations of giving and taking provide two configurations of temporality in the experience of the collector, who seems to have an excess of time to spend (because collecting is not a practical labor), but always finds it not enough for him or her to collect all the things needed. When immersed in collecting, the collector would be surprised by how quickly time passes. Obsession usually costs time without one noticing it, while pastime is needed when one feels that time is not passing quickly enough. Obsession is intense, and requires devotion, while pastime is characterized by a certain degree of casualness and even boredom. Lu Xun seems to have an abundance of both.

Among all kinds of obsessions, collecting antiques is described by Zhou as nothing less than trivial. Zhou’s layers of negation assign transcribing ancient rubbings to the lowest possible caliber among the already unremarkable cohort of activities: Lu Xun could not play Mahjong, nor did he have money, so he had to content himself with the least costly, non-technical and almost miserable activity of transcription. In such an ironically demeaning description,
antiquarianism appears to be petit even compared to prostitution and gambling, the rather not so lofty obsessions with sex, money and game.

Zhou’s narrative might be too ironic, but he at least states a simple, and by no means novel fact, which is of crucial importance, namely a person with obsession is generally considered politically detached. This is supported by Lu Xun’s own words, “in ancient steles one does not come across any ‘problems’ or ‘isms’.” The question is, why are obsessions or pastimes thought to suggest safe political indifference? Why does someone devoting himself/herself entirely to obsessions have a relation to politics that is negligible?

Here Zhou Zuoren was subscribing to a logic that has a long history. It is summarized by the term “wan wu sang zhi” 玩物喪志, meaning “playing with things deprives one of ambition.” According to this concept, pastimes or obsessions are not just playful and indulgent, but essentially incompatible with serious aspirations that require commitment and hard work. They cause one to become lazy, playful and lacking a healthy work ethic, to say the very least. In more serious cases, it can turn one into a pervert.

Here I give a literal translation of Zhou’s terms “wan gudong shuhua” 玩古董书画 and “wan wan gudong” 玩玩古董 as “playing with antiques.” The concept of playing is embedded in the Chinese word for “collectible antique” - “guwan 古玩, a compound of words meaning “antique” and “to play” respectively, as if one cannot possibly collect antiques without a sense of playfulness. And my choice of words obviously also contains an erotic sense, pointing this activity to fetishism, to which I will return later.

On the other hand, contrary to the aforementioned negative opinion, obsessions in non-practical matters have also been invested by more liberal minded people with an abundance of positive symbolic values. They are considered an indication that a person has an interesting and
lovable character. Although the Chinese character for obsession, “pi” 痴 has a radical that signifying illness, therefore carrying with it a negative connotation, this self-deprecation is often deceptive and ironic. It is common to describe one’s obsession with a proud tone or even a touch of performativity. And yet such obsessions might well be a kind of escapism, which has been a strategy widely adopted by eminent figures in Chinese history who were afraid of prosecution, or tried to cover up their political ambitions. In this context, obsession takes the form of an excessive focus on any non-practical matter, be it sex, gambling, drinking, arts such as calligraphy, painting and music, or collecting, as long as it radically reverses a value system that places utmost importance on achievements in politics. The logic of this escapism is that, if one is obsessed with trivial things, he is too playful, and too perverted to have a normal desire for the success in the received definition.

It is noteworthy that literature is usually excluded from the list, because it can never completely divorce itself from possible allegorical interpretation, and is easily subject to censorship. This will become more relevant in my later analysis of Lu Xun’s late style.

Unsurprisingly, the collector stands out as the most common type of escapist, because collecting means unnecessary multiplicity and repetition beyond the need of utility. One becomes obsessed with something when the normal dose is inadequate, so an intensification or repetition of the experience is called for. Collectors are thus considered excessive and indulgent by practical-minded people - strange, but safe and politically non-threatening.

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158 In the above quoted passage Zhou Zuoren names a famous contemporary example, the general Cai E (Cai Songpo) who secretly plotted against Yuan Shikai, but openly self-fashioned himself to be only concerned about romantic affairs.

159 Females were almost always excluded from this discourse, for in a male-dominant society this escapism was reserved for men only.
However, this escapism can also take an alarming turn. The playfulness and aesthetization of daily life, when pushed to the point of adorning the insignificant, have a subversive effect that makes the ruling class at a loss as to how to deal with them. Such frustration is intensified when obsession takes on the form of proud performativity and even exhibitionism. One can find ample examples in the Wei and Jin Period, notably in *New Tales of the World* 世說新語 and other historic documents of the time, many of which Lu Xun spent much time editing. One of the most talented and subversive figure is none other than Ji Kang, whose works preoccupied Lu Xun for three decades.

One might venture to say that it is no coincidence Lu Xun’s textual scholarship focuses precisely on this period in Chinese history. It is indeed tempting to read political implications into Lu Xun’s interest in these texts, which is testified by his insightful essay “Wei-Jin Style, Literature, Medicine and Alcohol.” But while this seems a plausible interpretation, for want of further evidence, a factual link is cannot yet be established.

But in either case, the collector turns out to be a type of intellectual dandy, passionate and deeply preoccupied with something non-productive and lacking any referential relation to reality, while displaying an indifference toward everything else. As Charles Baudelaire puts it, “The dandy is blasé, or pretends to be so.”

Such a personality is perfectly captured in a passage by Honoré de Balzac’s *Le Cousin Pons* that is quoted by Benjamin in his essay “Eduard Fuchs, der Sammler und der Historiker,”

There one can often meet a very shabbily dressed Pons or an Elie Magus. They seem neither to respect nor to care for anything. They pay attention neither to women nor to window displays. They walk along as in a dream, their pockets are empty, their gaze is aimless and

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one wonders what kind of Parisian they really are. These people are millionaires. They are collectors, the most passionate people in the world.161

And unsurprisingly, “Wei-Jin Style, Literature, Medicine and Alcohol” contains a reference that reminds us of such a Baudelairian character.162 Remarking on the zeitgeist of the Wei-Jin Period, Lu Xun says that “from the perspective of modern literature, (the Wei-Jin Period) was a time of literary self consciousness, or of what people today call ‘Art for Art’s Sake’.”163

I borrow the term “intellectual dandy” from George Meredith, who in his novel The Egoist has one of his characters say that “cynicism is intellectual dandyism without the coxcomb's feathers.”164 By limiting dandyism with the adjective “intellectual,” I exclude characteristics such as emphasis on appearance, which does not seem to apply to Lu Xun. But essential elements in intellectual dandyism, including a sense of cynicism, a blasé attitude, and an intellectual curiosity and obsession misplaced that defy received opinions, are all relevant to Lu Xun the collector.

Undoubtedly, the collector is never an ahistorical, metaphysical category. Collectors are driven by specific motivations and desires, and bound by specific material and cultural conditions in different historic circumstances. The traditional collectors (notably in Wei and Jin Period, Song, Ming Dynasties) all came from the literati class, which wielded considerable political power. For example, in “The Collector, the Connoisseur, and Late-Ming Sensibility” Wai-Yee Li gives a detailed account and analysis of the intricate entanglement between object obsessions and political engagement in late Ming literai’s writings. As Li’s title suggests, playing

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161 Balzac, Le Cousin, 162.

162 Lu Xun translated Baudelaire’s works, and was influenced by him. See, for example, Ziji Fajian de Huanxi, Yizhe Fuji 自己发见的欢喜 (译者附记), 1924.

163 Lu Xun, Quanjì, vol. 3, 526.

164 George Meredith, The Egoist: A Comedy in Narrative (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1894), 60.
with things is tied to the political trauma of the time. Thus this obsession is almost always politicized, albeit in a disguised way, even when the literati try to detach themselves from politics through immersing themselves in objects of the past.165

Li also highlights the crucial fact that collecting is often tied to radical and traumatic changes in society. Witnessing years of revolutionary activities that culminated in the collapse of Qing Dynasty, Lu Xun also experienced tremendous historic rupture and the breakdown of traditional value. In this sense, Baudelaire’s classic definition of dandyism seems to fit the collector perfectly:

Dandyism appears above all in periods of transition, when democracy is not yet all-powerful, and aristocracy is only just beginning to totter and fall. In the disorder of these times, certain men who are socially, politically and financially ill at ease, but are all rich in native energy, may conceive the idea of establishing a new kind of aristocracy, all the more difficult to shatter as it will be based on the most precious, the most enduring faculties, and on the divine gifts which work and money are unable to bestow.166

However, something different from the previous dynastic cycle was also in place. When it comes to 1912, after the fall of the Qing Dynasty, and especially after the abolition of the Imperial Examination system in 1905, intellectuals were gradually deprived of the opportunity of aspiring to high positions in the government through studying the classics. Therefore, what distinguishes Lu Xun and his colleagues from their predecessors is the fact that they have now been relegated from the literati to mere office clerks. All the aforementioned implications of collector that is also a literatus disappear, when the collector is now merely a clerk in the government, or other similar identities that are cut off from the political capital the traditional literati class once possessed.


Therefore, Zhou Zuoren’s ironically demeaning description of his brother’s activity can be reformulated to refer to the political orientation - or the lack of it - of the intellectual dandy in general, and more specifically in the transition period between imperial and republic China, as represented by Lu Xun.

3. Ministry of Education, Liu Li Chang, and Anti-Collection

A casual survey of Lu Xun’s diary shows that, when he was not at home, he was either working at the Ministry of Education, or very likely roaming the streets in the Liu Li Chang area, in search of - or simply allowing himself to chance upon - antique books and artworks. Therefore my discussion will start with these two spaces in Beijing.

It should be noted that, by working at the Ministry, Lu Xun not only was a voluntary collector, but also became a “professional” one. As the head of the Ministry of Education’s Department of Social Education, he was responsible for overseeing affairs concerning “museums, libraries; art museums, art exhibitions; arts, music, theater; investigation and collecting of antiques; zoological and botanic gardens.” This job description is self-evident enough to show the degree to which collecting was part of Lu Xun’s professional life. One of these tasks stands out with great significance - even if it is only a symbolic one - for Lu Xun the collector. This is his administrative work concerning the Beijing Library.

The Department of Social Education was charged with maintaining the Beijing Library (now China’s National Library) that the Republic inherited from the Empire, and transforming it from an Imperial relic into a modern, public institution. What a few years ago still belonged to the emperors’ collections or the empire’s classified archives now seemed no more than remnants

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from an entirely different era. And yet they were still considered to be of some research, practical or even symbolic value, and an ideal addition to the Beijing Library.

One of these “relics” from the past is the archive once stored in Forbidden City, which Lu Xun not only wrote an essay on, mockingly entitling it “On the So-called ‘Imperial Archive’,”^168 but actually sorted out himself. Although governmental in nature, this archive was a mass of files representing a Byzantine system of administrative hurdle peculiar to the dynasty. It was never of great importance, but especially after the fall of the dynasty, such a governmental archive instantly lost all relevance, and was casually put into about eight thousand sacks.

It is worth pausing here to reflect upon such a loss of relevance in historic materials, and its relation to collecting. When societies undergo major changes that are more symbolic than physical - as was very much the case with the 1911 revolution - certain objects find themselves physically intact, but are deprived of a symbolic context that gives them raison d’être. This is the case with the Imperial Archive, which contained many documents that had meaning only in an imperial system, such as orders of knighthood, essays written at the Imperial Examination, tributary documents from Korea, ministers’ reports to the emperor, etc. Lu Xun even reported, not without a sense of mockery, rumors about curiosities like concubines’ embroidered shoes and princes’ skulls.^169

And yet the loss of the Dynasty is the gain of the collector. Collecting is not a simple gathering of things, but simultaneous taking things out to context, neutralizing their meanings, and cutting off them from a system of reference that allows them to relate to reality, despite the fact that afterwards a re-narrativization is sometimes attempted. Collected objects are symbols reduced to things in themselves when the meanings they refer to are forgotten or simply put aside.

^168 Lu Xun, Quanji, vol. 3, 585.

^169 Ibid., 585.
In a sense, the Imperial Archive is precisely an accumulation of such objects. According to Lu Xun,

[t]his so-called “Imperial Archive” thing was stacked at the Qing government for three hundred years, and at the Confucian Temple for more than a decade, and no one had uttered a word. But since the Museum of History sold its remains to paper shops, which resold them to Luo Zhenyu, who resold them to the Japanese, there has been many outcry[s], as if the national treasure is lost, and the nation’s fortune will soon follow suit.\textsuperscript{170}

The reason for the rise and fall of this archive’s fortune is that, at some point a few precious books and historic documents were discovered, which caught the interest of, among many others, the then Minister of Education Fu Zengxiang, who was also a antique book connoisseur. He ordered Lu Xun to sort them out. Lu Xun wrote that “whenever we put anything onto the table, they (Fu and others) always took them away, saying that they need to ‘take a look.’ When they were returned, there was always something missing. For God’s sake, this is true.”\textsuperscript{171} In the essay, this is but one of the many occasions in which this messy archive underwent gradual dispersion. Lu Xun bore witness to the physical abjectness of history incarnated in these dirty papers, and concluded that “in China, it is really difficult to preserve public property. If the people in power are ignorant, they would destroy it; if they are experts, they would steal all of it. And this is in fact not restricted to books or antiques.”\textsuperscript{172}

Another similar task allowed Lu Xun some further tangible experiences with the fate of collections. In 1914, the Ministry of Education ordered that one of the few existent copies of the aforementioned \textit{Imperial Library}, with its thirty six thousand titles, be transferred from the

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\textsuperscript{170} \textit{Ibid.}, 585.
\textsuperscript{171} \textit{Ibid.}, 585.
\textsuperscript{172} \textit{Ibid.}, 589.
\end{flushright}
emperors’ summer residence in Chengde to the Beijing Library, and Lu Xun was again assigned the task to sort them out.

The *Imperial Library* perhaps best symbolizes the perils that befall all collections. Ordered and sponsored by an almighty emperor, and made into *seven* copies, this tremendous collection represents one of the most elaborate and ambitious human efforts that aspire to immortalize all knowledge, and initially seemed absolutely indestructible. And yet as a result of wars, by 1914, barely a century and a half later, only three complete copies remained; as of 2015, none of the remaining ones is exempted from dislocation. Both the *Imperial Library* and the so-called “Imperial Archive” show how collections, amidst elaborate efforts of gathering and preserving, are always prone to “uncollecting” themselves.

But the compiling of this library itself tells even more about the irony of collecting. Reigning at a fortunate time, Qianlong Emperor saw himself as an immensely capable ruler and the most accomplished art connoisseur. Thus it is no surprise that he became possessed by a cosmic vanity to collect all the important books from his territory and gather them around him. This is collecting for absolute completeness and perfection.

However, these two standards in collecting - completeness and perfection - turn out to cancel each other. A perfect collection does not simply gather everything; it imposes a tyrannical ideology that revises and deletes everything not conforming to an all-encompassing standard. Therefore, Qianlong’s seemingly benign project of cultural preservation is also one of ruthless cultural destruction: alongside the 3503 titles that were included, 2855 titles were permanently eliminated thanks to censorship.\(^{173}\) Among the ones that were preserved, extensive changes and deletions were applied to ensure they all conform to the official ideology.

\(^{173}\) Wilkinson, *Chinese History*, 274.
The destruction almost at once initiated a process of dispersion: Qianlong’s collecting as an act of inclusion inevitably involved exclusion, which also created the categories such as the improper, the ought-to-be-eliminated, the inferior, the imperfect, the incomplete, the odd, the identical, the obscure, and even the worthy ones that were for whatever unfortunate reason overlooked. The project also created a very interesting category, the “cun mu,” literally meaning the “catalogue for preservation.” It listed all the book titles that were considered worthy of being known, but not good enough to be actually included. Thus a complete and perfect collection gave birth to what I call an anti-collection. Failing to gain membership in the prestigious royal collection, physically located inside the imperial space, the rejected books were condemned to the space for recycling, the prototype of which is the antique market, where a type of collector antithetical to Qianlong would roam, and where a different type of collecting would take place.

Naturally Liu Li Chang, the living quarter of the editors, became such a space. It continued to thrive until twentieth century, and was the fertile ground for collectors like Lu Xun. A brief statistic work on Lu Xun’s diaries during his Beijing years shows that Liu Li Chang was his favorite place, which he visited countless times, often with friends and/or with his brother Zhou Zuoren, amassing a considerable amount of books and objects.

So a chain of connections can be made: the perfect collector Qianlong’s cosmic vanity gave birth to the twins - the Imperial Library as the collection, and Liu Li Chang market as the space for an anti-collection. The latter in turn bred Lu Xun the anti-collector. By an almost uncanny coincidence, Liu Li Chang becomes a geographical nexus that connects two antithetic collectors: Lu Xun and Qianlong Emperor. Or: Liu Li Chang is the space where the genius loci of the collector dwells. And indeed Qianlong is the very opposite to Lu Xun the ironic, self-depreciative, obscure, unambitious collector. He had no aspiration to completeness or any other
distinction, even though he was probably much more obsessed and persistent, and surely more laborious.

Not surprisingly, the Imperial Library is touched upon in some of Lu Xun’s essays. In “Addendum to Hybrid Talks after Illness,” Lu Xun comments that

The compiling of the Imperial Library during Qianlong’s reign is praised by many as a great historic achievement, but [the truth is that] they (the editors) not only messed up the formats of ancient books, but also changed the writings of the ancients; they not only stored it in the palace, but sent it to the most cultural regions\textsuperscript{174} for the scholars to read, so that no one would ever know that among our Chinese writers, there were once some quite upright people.\textsuperscript{175}

In this essay, Lu Xun also calls it “the Manchurian assassination of Chinese writings,” giving several examples of how the writings were censored before concluding that

Some Qing Dynasty philologists had said that “Ming Dynasty people loved to print ancient books, therefore ancient books were lost,” because they casually changed the texts. In my opinion, subsequently Qing Dynasty people compiled the Imperial Library, therefore ancient books were lost... \textsuperscript{176}

This same problem is also the theme of another essay entitled “Precious Copy of the Imperial Library,” which I will return to very soon. Clearly Lu Xun was well aware of the cultural destruction that had been done in the name of collecting and preservation, not least from his experience at the Ministry of Education. But the quote contains another clue to understanding Lu Xun the collector: “Qing Dynasty philologists” was not a random phrase referring simply to

\textsuperscript{174} Besides the four copies stored in palaces in and around Beijing, Qianlong ordered that three copies be stored in specially-built libraries in the Jiangsu and Zhejiang areas, which were not only the richest parts of China, but unequalled cultural centers. They were also the provinces where the Manchu invaders met the most fierce and persistent resistance, both militarily and culturally.

\textsuperscript{175} Lu Xun, Quanji, vol. 6, 188.

\textsuperscript{176} Lu Xun, Quanji, vol. 6, 189.
philologists living in Qing Dynasty; it is a distinct school of classical scholarship that represents
a major cultural achievement of the era.

The Qing scholarship’s emphasis on strict philological approach to the classics has been
recognized early on, especially in contrast to the fancy interpretations made by its Song (960-
1279) and Ming (1368–1644) predecessors. In his 1924 History of Chinese Scholarship in the
Recent Three Centuries, Liang Qichao specifically connects the Qing scholars’ careful work to
political pressure: “whenever rulers like to interfere with people’s thoughts, scholars’ energy has
to be spent in interpreting classics.”177 He calls the Qing scholars the “scientific-minded
classicists,”178 which is echoed by Benjamin Elman. According to Elman,

Qing classicists, unlike their Song predecessors described by Lackner, contended that the
legitimate reach of ancient ideals should be reevaluated impartially through comparative
delineation of the textual sources from which all such knowledge derived. This turn to
empirically based classical inquiry meant that abstract ideas, metaphysical diagrams, and
rational argumentation gave way as the primary objects of elite discussion to concrete facts,
verifiable institutions, ancient natural studies, and historical events.179

Liang Qichao summarizes the Qing classicists’ work in thirteen categories, including
searching, supplementing historic materials; distinguishing fake books; collecting lost books;
textual editing; the study of the history of Chinese characters and their pronunciations (the
combination of which forms the Chinese equivalent of western philology); and epigraphy.180

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178 Liang, History, 27.
It is remarkable, but unsurprising, that Lu Xun’s work at this period encompassed all the above - unsurprising especially considering the fact that after giving up medicine and turning wholeheartedly to the humanities, Lu Xun studied privately in Tokyo with Zhang Taiyan, one of the greatest and last Qing classicists. The contents of his study included *Shuo wen jie zi* (“Explaining and Analyzing Characters”), a foundational text in Chinese philology. What is remarkable, though, is that Lu Xun omitted to mention this aspect of his career in the already quoted preface to *Scream*.

4. Lu Xun’s Textual Scholarship

As has been mentioned, Lu Xun’s textual scholarship falls into three major categories, with one sometimes being the basis of the other. The first category is the compiling or anthologizing of lost or uncollected ancient texts, often aided by existent catalogues. In this case, although the texts are lost, the catalogue still exists, which arouses the desire to recover the missing texts.

The second category concerns restoration of accurate versions of ancient texts through meticulous philological research. Since for various reasons the texts have been mutilated, Lu Xun’s task was to restore the urtext and/or the definitive edition - the two states of a text that are the targets of philologists’ unending quest.

The third category is Lu Xun’s manual transcription of ancient texts across various media, together with work in the related field of epigraphy. I argue that this work had an unexpected influence on Lu Xun’s overall understanding of the Chinese writing medium, and ultimately forced him to question the general system of signification.
In the following sections, I will argue that these activities are all Lu Xun’s attempts, in a profoundly materialistic way, to rectify or undo the inherent tendency in written records toward distortion of history, and to exposes the problematic nature of history in the making.

4.1. Recovering the Escaped: Catalogue as the Index of Desire

The messy and almost abject state of ancient books’ physical existence in general is amply shown by the compilation history of the Imperial Library, the last major effort in China to preserve all existent knowledge before the advent of the technology of digitalization. Undoing this messiness naturally requires painstaking labor in textual collecting, and it is such a labor that occupied a greater part of Lu Xun’s time in Beijing.

The texts that Lu Xun laid hands on were miscellaneous, showing no overall scheme. Here Lu Xun the collector, when idly roaming the streets in Liu Li Chang, resembled the flanur who strolled the flea market. But one theme loosely connects some of these texts: Lu Xun’s hometown Kuaiji. All these book titles were written by people related in one way or another to this place, during the period spanning the end of East Han (25-220) and Jin (265-420) Dynasties.

In 1961, a quarter of a century after Lu Xun’s death, Zhou Zuoren donated a manuscript of his brother’s to their hometown’s Lu Xun Memorial Museum. Entitled “Catalogue of Works by Natives from Former Shaoxing’s Eight Counties” 舊紹興八縣鄉人著作目錄, this seems to

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be the earliest existent book catalogue Lu Xun made. He intended it as the reference for a planned project that would gather these scattered works; but the project never materialized.\footnote{Lu Xun, Letter to Xu Shouchang, April 12, 1912, in Quanji, vol. 11, 86. See also Gu Nong 顧農, Lu Xun Yu Kuaiji Wenxian 魯迅與會稽文獻, in Shandong Shehui Kexue 山東社會科學 (June 2013), 82.}

However, this is only the beginning. Around the time he moved to Beijing, Lu Xun was already preoccupied with producing *Hybrid Collection of Kuaiji Prefecture Old Books* 會稽郡故書襍集 (hereafter *Hybrid Collection*), which would become the first of his major achievements in this field. He made it clear in his preface that this project resulted from his wish to preserve the local history of his hometown (280-1). The first title in this collection is *Biographies of Kuaiji Sages of the Past* by a Kuaiji native, Xie Cheng 謝承. This book was then lost, but it had been quoted extensively by many other books. Lu Xun culled the quotations from all the sources he could find - which were all that remained of this book - and put them together to reconstruct a rough version (304). Xie Cheng also authored the now mostly lost *A History of Latter Han* 後漢書. Lu Xun again gathered what was remained of this book from all available sources, and wrote a series of prefaces and editorial notes.

*Hybrid Collection* also contains *A Record of Kuaiji People* 會稽典錄, written by yet another Kuaiji native, Yu Yu 虞預. He wrote *A History of Jin* 晉書, which Lu Xun also copied.\footnote{Lu Xun, Diary, March 31, 1913, in Quanji, vol. 15, 117.}\footnote{Another focus of Lu Xun’s collecting activities is ancient novels and novellas, especially the *Sunken Old Novels Fished* (古小說釣沉, the English title is my literal translation of “gou chen,” a received name for a type of book that gathers thought-to-be-lost or uncollected works). This chapter will not address them, as much has been written about how Lu Xun drew inspirations from traditional vernacular novels for his own creative writing as well as scholarly works.}

In the preface to the *Hybrid Collection*, Lu Xun acknowledged that this project was influenced by the Mid-Qing scholar Zhang Shu 張澍 who was famous for his work *Eryou Hall Book Series* 二酉堂書記事, which was a further compilation of ancient texts.\footnote{Another focus of Lu Xun’s collecting activities is ancient novels and novellas, especially the *Sunken Old Novels Fished* (古小說釣沉, the English title is my literal translation of “gou chen,” a received name for a type of book that gathers thought-to-be-lost or uncollected works). This chapter will not address them, as much has been written about how Lu Xun drew inspirations from traditional vernacular novels for his own creative writing as well as scholarly works.}
酉堂叢書. In this collection, Zhang collected and masterfully edited obscure, scattered but important historic documents from northwestern China. This influence was testified by Zhou Zuoren:

(at some point Lu Xun) bought a copy of Eryou Hall Book Series, in which were collected all ancient yi shu, including histories, chorography, and biographies of local celebrities. From then on (Lu Xun’s) book collecting project had a clearer direction. Sunken Old Novels Fished and Hybrid Collection both stemmed from this.185

Another example can be found in the preface to Biographies of Kuaiji Sages of the Past, where Lu Xun quotes Hou Kang as saying that

among the various people and events recorded by this book, there are many yi wen. The two entries on Yan Zun are enough to complement the missing parts in the biography section of A History of Latter Han; the two entries on Chen Ye suffice to validate the notes on Wu Record and A Biography of Yu Fan. All these bits are worth our cherishing.186

The preface to Hybrid Collection opens with the statement that this book “gathers yi wen, biography and geographic records, and puts them into a collection, so as to preserve the rough contents of old books.”187 And again, in the preface to A Record of Kuaiji People,

this Record was already not seen in A History of Song’s Art and Literature Section, but it was still often (directly) quoted in Song authors’ works. So I suspect that some copies still existed among commoners, but were gradually lost. Now I search for the yi wen, and can still get seventy two biographies. So I arrange them roughly chronologically into two volumes. Some I suspect to belong to other books, and are set apart at the end for reference.188

185 Zhou Zuoren, Lu Xun de Gujia 魯迅的故家 (Shijiazhuang: Hebei Jiaoyu Chubanshe, 2002), 112.
186 Lu Xun, Quanji, vol. 10, 304.
187 Lu Xun, Quanji, vol. 10, 280.
188 Lu Xun, Quanji, vol. 10, 275-6.
A concept repeatedly coming up in these quotes is yi wen or yi shu (“wen” means “text” and “shu” means “book”). “Yi” corresponds to the characters 逸, 佚 or 軼. Being cognate to one another, they all refer to a spectrum of meanings that include “the escaped,” “the scattered,” “the overflown” or “the extra.” The popular target of textual collectors, this category of texts precisely corresponds to the anti-collection. In other words, these are the bits of history that have been excluded, eliminated by the complete, perfect and neat collections such as the Imperial Library. They are the part of history that has escaped. The cause of their existence ranges from natural disasters, wars, small scale and unintentional editorial errors to large scale, systematic censorship. Undoubtedly, behind the yi wen category stands centuries of deliberate mass cultural destruction.

To recover and reassemble the bits is to undo this violence that has been inflicted on the texts, but also on people’s thoughts throughout history. It is therefore hard to imagine that Lu Xun would not be acutely aware of the deceptive nature of official historic discourse and the unreliability of written records. His overall distrust in historic records must have come at least partially from this very tangible experience with the very making of written history.

Yi shu also calls our attention to another form of text central to a collector’s life - the catalogue. A yi shu is often known to have existed only because there are catalogues testifying it. But it has “escaped history,” so to speak, because a catalogue entry is all that remains. In a more general sense, a quotation can also indicate the sometime existence of a now-lost book, thus serving as an index of a nonexistent entity.

Naturally, catalogue occupies both ends of a collector’s life. It is the initial compass and itinerary, with which the collector starts to navigate both the metaphoric and actual antique market, and discovers what objects there are to be collected. It arouses desires, which propel the
collector to go into the world and fill the gaps, while expanding the original catalogue and personalizing it with more peculiar objects. At the end of the collector’s career, the catalogue of the completed collection becomes the epitome of his or her life’s achievement, indicating a myriad map of desires now fulfilled.

In the case of the textual collector, the metaphoric antique market is all the old texts, from which the collector “fishes” bits of quotations and clues that he or she painstakingly patches back into whatever they can make of a now lost book. Lu Xun the collector was no exception, using catalogues as a compass for planned projects. His textual collecting was essentially an effort to fill the catalogue’s voids with actual texts, reestablishing the correspondence between catalogue and its objects. The quotations he saw in other books were indexes that not only pointed him to the lost or scattered books, but prompted his desire to recover them.

Therefore, catalogue, the seemingly dry and bureaucratic form of recordkeeping, turns out to be a seductive device that can arouse strong desires. Furthermore, catalogue intensifies desires by pointing out the deferral of its availability. In the most extreme case, catalogue can go so far as to replace the objects. Here we see a classic example of catalogue undergoing an ontological transformation: derivative in nature, it is originally a virtual indication of actual objects; but if the objects are destroyed or beyond immediate reach, the catalogue first becomes the sole reminder and proof of the objects’ existence, then eventually replaces them as the virtual, indexical existence. In this case, the catalogue entry becomes the object, whereas the actual objects are ironically relegated to a derivative status.

Lu Xun’s essay, “The Precious Versions of the Imperial Library” 四庫全書珍本189 - unsurprisingly once again dealing with the monumental book collecting project - records a

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189 Lu Xun, Quanji, vol. 5, 283.
curious instance in which actual objects have to compete for the status of being referred to by the catalogue. As is mentioned, the project applied extensive and ruthless censorship to all the collected texts, producing sanitized versions that can be very different from the original ones. The sanitized versions received a royal-patent status, and were called zhen ben 珍本, or “precious versions,” whereas the original versions were called shan ben 善本, or “authentic versions.” Lu Xun’s essay satirizes the Republic government’s 1933 plan to publish the precious versions of the Imperial Library because of their royal prestige, and for the sake of convenience, rather than using the authentic versions.

This situation is strikingly reminiscent of a story, quoted by Jean Baudrillard (via Maurice Rheims)\(^{190}\) and Susan Stewart\(^{191}\) in slightly different versions, in which a wealthy collector thought he owned a unique copy of a book, until he learned that another copy existed. He then spent a startling amount of fortune to buy that other copy and burned it on the spot, in front of the appalled former owner, so as to keep the unique status of his own copy.

These two cases illustrate the typical ontological transformation a catalogue initiates: derivative in nature, it is originally an index of actual objects; but if the objects are destroyed or beyond immediate reach, the catalogue first becomes the trace and sole reminder of the objects’ existence, then replaces them as their virtual existence. For Lu Xun, it was about exposing political power’s age-old crusade against independent thinking. But for our discussion, it also shows how two versions of the same text become ontologically exclusive. It is therefore difficult—if not entirely impossible—for various versions of the same text to coexist, just like the two copies of that rare book, now existing not as a physical entity, but as a catalogue item. The contents have to compete for the name in the form of a catalogue entry, which now becomes

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\(^{190}\) Baudrillard, *System*, 93.

the object, tyrannically patented by the institutionalization of book collecting, whereas the actual objects are ironically relegated to a derivative status. Or in Stewart’s words, it is “the replacement of content with classification.”

In the face of historic catastrophes, Lu Xun’s effort to track down the texts that have escaped history, just like any such efforts by others, are destined to yield no more than an approximation of the original. But what is certain is that, such efforts unmistakably expose the discrepancy between name and essence, showing cracks in history as a cataloguing and referencing system - by way of language - whose smooth functioning relies upon correspondence between records and events. When such correspondence crumbles, the stability between reality and their linguistic references is destroyed, and the system’s very validity is called into question.

4.2. Restoring the Mutilated: Urtext versus Ausgabe letzter Hand

It has been shown that Lu Xun’s textual scholarship claims a genealogy to the Qing philological tradition, which has been characterized as scientific and evidential. For this tradition, recovering the truth is the ultimate goal, and any subjective speculation is strictly forbidden. This matter-of-fact quality is shown in Lu Xun’s worldview, which might also have to do with the western scientific training he received in Japan. His essay on his Japanese anatomy professor, “Mr. Fujino” 藤野先生, records a symbolic moment in the development of his scientific attitude,

Unfortunately, I wasn’t very diligent at that time, and was sometimes very self-indulgent. I remember that once Mr. Fujino summoned me to his office, and took out a drawing I made in my lecture notes. It was a vein on the arm. He pointed at it, and kindly said to me - “You see, you move this vein a little bit. Naturally, this makes it look better. But anatomy is not fine art;

\[192\text{ Ibid.}\]
the reality is such, and there is no way for us to change it. Now I have revised it for you. In the future you should draw it as I do on the blackboard.”

And yet if such a scientific attitude - no matter whether it comes from Qing evidential scholarship or western science - is all that is about Lu Xun’s work, then he would have been an accomplished, but by no means unique member of the school that includes many extraordinarily brilliant Qing scholars. Going from textual collecting to a more intimate level of engagement, namely textual editing, we can see that there is something else to Lu Xun the collector that the narrow concept of “evidence” cannot fully encompass.

Textual editing is the logical extension and natural next step of textual collecting. An ancient text usually exists in several versions, with many variations. So after gathering them, the scholar has to critically compare them, and decide case by case which form is most likely to be the authentic, original one. Lu Xun himself noted this step as part of his work in a note to Xie Cheng’s *A History of Late Han*. In a January 7, 1913 note, he even listed ten editing sessions with exact dates, in each of which he used a different reference for comparison. In other words, Lu Xun was solving a kind of textual jigsaw puzzle.

However, there is even more to that: a kind of historic imagination is required. Since the Urtext is permanently lost, there is no objective standard against which editors can examine their work. Therefore, what is needed is not a scholarship that solely relies on evidence. Under the Qing scholars’ scrutiny, the recreation of lost book titles requires far more than collecting scattered quotations from various sources: censored parts need to be reinserted, fake additions and editing need be undone, and wrong characters need to be corrected. Here a crucial step is

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194 Lu Xun, *Quanji*, vol. 10, 114-5.
195 Lu Xun, *Quanji*, vol. 10, 92.
being taken: the philologist, who a moment ago was objectively patching texts together, has now become a hermeneutist, being required to exercise his or her own subjective understanding to make an interpretive decision, rather than simply following evidence.

The editing of the third century poet and philosopher Ji Kang’s collected works, a major project that Lu Xun preoccupied himself with for decades, is precisely of this kind. Having arrived in Beijing, and simultaneous with the above-mentioned collecting projects, Lu Xun started to show interest in Ji Kang嵇康, whose family roots can be traced to Kuaiji. Ji Kang appeared for the first time in Lu Xun’s writing on September 23, 1913, when he recorded that he searched in vain at Liu Li Chang for the former’s collected works.196 On October 1, he borrowed a copy from a library.197 This marks the beginning of a long and obsessive engagement: from 1913 to 1931, Lu Xun kept editing Ji Kang’s works, yielded four editions.

Ji Kang was born around 223. He was a poet, Taoist philosopher, music theorist, composer and zither player. His music and performances can only be speculated through legendary descriptions, but his extraordinary accomplishments in all other fields are testified by his collected works passed down to us. His essay “On the Absence of Emotions in Sound” is in my opinion very close to what would have been called musical phenomenology, and would make an interesting comparison with the theory of Sergiu Celibidache, within the Husserlian tradition.

Ji Kang has long been revered as a great cultural icon, not only because of his achievements, but also his unyielding uprightness. He was extremely critical of Confucianism, and favored a Taoist worldview that championed inner freedom and artistic pursuit. He was said to have lived in bamboo forests, staying away from corrupted politics of the time, and showed insolence to powerful politicians he considered immoral. Because of his provocative behavior the regent

196 Lu Xun, Diary of September 23, 1913, in Lu Xun, Quanji, vol. 11, 166.
197 Lu Xun, Diary of October 1, 1913, in Lu Xun, Quanji, vol. 11, 168.
Sima Zhao found excuse to sentence him to death in 263. Legend has it that Ji Kang played his most famous piece, *Guang Ling San*, before execution, proclaiming that this music would now disappear from the world, because he was the only one who knew how to play it.

Written centuries ago, these texts passed down to Lu Xun’s time in multiple editions, and existed partially in anthologies, historic accounts and quotations across different historic periods. No doubt, the original form of Ji Kang’s writings was now nowhere to be found. All that Lu Xun could do was to collect the various versions of Ji Kang’s writings, compare the complex textual variations, select and assemble the reliable parts through his own philological and hermeneutic scrutiny to recreate a “critical edition” that was as close to the original as possible.

Naturally, the many contradictions of the existent editions made this reconstruction at best an approximation, or a compromise, and part of it remains subjective, determined by the editor’s own thinking. Where evidence stops, hermeneutic decision is required to step in to complete the process.

Lu Xun’s extraordinarily meticulous and obsessive editing of these texts yielded countless examples, among which I have chosen one sentence I consider telling enough to be a representative, because here Lu Xun’s editing was disputed by the prominent philosopher Mou Zongsan, and this small dispute points us to a dynamic network of authorial power relations between the author and the editors.

Mou Zongsan (1909-1995) has a profound influence on twentieth century Chinese philosophy. He specialized in Wei-Jin metaphysics, Buddhist philosophy, Confucian philosophy in both Confucius’ time and in Song and Ming Dynasties. The latter approach attempts to interpret Confucian philosophy as metaphysics, and emphasizes the heart’s role in it. Mou also
translated Immanuel Kant’s three Critiques, and endeavored to bridge the gap between Kant, Hegel and Chinese philosophy.

One of Mou’s major publications is Innate Quality and Metaphysical Thinking 才性與玄理, a treatise attempting to put Wei-Jin metaphysics into dialogue with Confucianism, Buddhism and western metaphysics. It has a chapter devoted to Ji Kang’s writings, and extensively quotes Lu Xun’s critical edition, giving his own assessment of Lu Xun’s many editorial decisions.

The sentence in question comes from an abstract and sophisticated philosophical essay by Ji Kang, “An Explication of Selfhood” 釋私論. It defines the perfect person as being free from the imprisonment of desires and intentions: “the so-called perfect person is someone whose heart does not manipulate judgments, and whose heart does not defy Tao” (夫稱君子者，心無措乎是非，而行不違乎道者也). From this foundational definition Ji Kang develops a comprehensive theory about how to handle the relationship between the self, emotions, actions and the external world.

Based on a variety of sources, Lu Xun produced four manuscript copies of this essay as part of the Ji Kang collection in 1913, 1922, 1924, 1931 respectively. Below is a chart of how the sentence reads in the four versions:

1913: 於是乎同疑作情之所措者，乃非所措也。欲<br>“同”或當作“用”。荀子曰：“故由用謂之道，盡利矣，由俗謂之道，盡嗔矣。”楊倞注：“俗當為欲。”

1922: 於是乎同之所措者，乃非所措也。俗之所私者，乃非所私也。

1924: 於是乎同疑作情之所措者，乃非所措也。欲<br>198 Mou Zongsan, Caixing Yu Xuanli 才性與玄理 (Rensheng Chubanshe, 1963).
1931: 於是乎同所措者，乃非所措也。欲所私者，乃非所私也。

牟： 於是乎世之所措者，乃非所措也。俗之所私者，乃非所私也。

The 1913 and 1924 versions are based on the same source, the Wu Kuan Congshu Tang Version 吳寬叢書堂本 of the Ming Dynasty. The 1922 version is based on several other sources; the 1931 version is the last one Lu Xun made, and was published as part of his widely circulated Complete Works, shortly after his death. The 1924 version was published in 1956 and wrongly labeled the “definitive edition.” Mou’s book was published in 1941 and hence was based upon Lu Xun’s 1931 version.

The chart shows that there are actually only two characters under dispute, but they are unfortunately the central concepts determining the meaning of the whole statement. If one names the first character as A, and the second as B, the sentence reads, “therefore what A manipulates is not what should be manipulated; what B privatizes is not what should be privatized.” My translation makes as little sense as the original, which Mou noted to be indeed incomprehensible. But the structure of the two clauses indicates a parallel relationship between A and B; they are either of opposite or similar meanings. And manipulation and privatization are also key concepts of the essay.

All the sources Lu Xun consulted use the character 同, meaning “sameness/commonness” for A, and use either 俗 (custom) or 欲 (desire/intention) for B. The incomprehensibility of this sentence indicates that mistakes must have been made by any number of scribes who took one character for another similar-looking one, and it required that Lu Xun make a hermeneutic decision. In the 1913 version, Lu Xun suggested 情 (emotion) for A, but adding a note quoting another philosopher, Xunzi, to suggest that it might also be 用 (use); he then reverted to
“sameness” in the 1922 version, and again adopt “emotion” for the last two versions. For B, he twice chose the character meaning “custom,” then reverted to “desire/intention” for the last two versions. Obviously a very complex decision making process was going on here. Lu Xun changed his mind almost every time, and reverted to old decisions he obliterated at the immediate previous time.

Mou Zongsan was only aware of the 1931 version that uses “emotion” for A and “desire/intention” for B, both of which he disagreed. His choices were 世 (society) for A and “custom” for B.

For both of them, A and B determine each other: once Lu Xun decided that B was “desire/intention,” then A must be “emotion.” When Mou suggested that B might actually mean “custom,” then A should mean something like “society.” We can summarize them into two possible pairs:

A=emotion; B=desire/intention
A=society/commonness; B=custom

This back and forth decision-making can be summarized as a dichotomy between subjectivity and societal reality, which manipulate and shape each other. Without any hope of ever recovering the true meaning of this sentence, one can still sense that it deals with the central tenet of the essay, namely the relationship between selfhood and the world, with emotions, desires and intentions constantly interacting with the external environment.

However, I would like to propose a third pairing that equalizes the above two, namely subjectivity and societal reality might be one and the same. An evidence can be found in the
phrase 物情, toward the beginning of the essay. A compound of “object” and “emotion,” this phrase does not mean the emotion of things, but the state of things, because the character 情 at Ji Kang’s time very likely meant both “emotion” and the objective “state” of things or events. In modern Chinese 事情, the word meaning “event” or “matter,” has the same element of 情 that mainly refers emotion.

Although it is not possible to delve into the complex issue of ontology in relation to subjectivity and objectivity in ancient Chinese philosophy, it is worth mentioning that this small editorial dispute concerns the history of emotions as represented in the Chinese language, which has been summarized by David Der-wei Wang, with an abundance of evidence, in The Lyrical in Epic Time: Modern Chinese Intellectuals and Artists through the 1949 Crisis. Any informed decision regarding this small textual discrepancy is both philological and hermeneutic. Precisely at such a moment, evidential scholarship as a method is shown to be far from adequate.

For this reason, Lu Xun’s endeavor to bring forth a reliable version of Ji Kang’s texts simultaneously represents two typical dreams of the textual collector, and interestingly, they bookend a text’s “life”: on the one hand, one desires to go back to the original moment when the author’s thought was born, which calls for the reestablishment of the Urtext. On the other hand, one hopes to determine the definitive, final version, or to locate the moment when the author seals the envelope forever, and announces the closure of a process. What one desires here is the version that represents the “last will” of the author.

Due to the texts’ multiplied existence, there was an inherent instability and inconclusiveness in the editorial work. As long as the editor-collector continues to live, the so-called definitiveness

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is always subject to potential rebuttal. Had Lu Xun not died, this editing could literally go on forever.

Go on forever it can, indeed, until the endeavor is terminated in an absolute circumstance, and the real closure takes place, and this could be nothing but the death of the editor. At this point a textual closure is brought to the same level as a biological closure. In comparison, all other closures are artificially decided.

To describe this situation, I borrow the phrase *Ausgabe letzter Hand*, or “the version of the last hand,” from Wolfgang von Goethe, who invented it for the definitive edition of his own works,201 and in so doing closed a potentially infinite process. In this sense, Goethe belongs to a cohort of distinguished cultural figures who suffer from artistic and intellectual indecisiveness. It includes the poets Samuel Taylor Coleridge and W. H. Auden, and the composers Robert Schumann and Anton Bruckner, just to name a few of the most prominent examples. In certain cases the materials seem too good even for such geniuses to fully master.

Were it not for the fact that Lu Xun was the editor rather than the author of these texts, he would have had a place in this cohort. But since the Urtext was nonexistent, Lu Xun, just like any other editor, was given extra authorial power, and entered into a conversation not only with Ji Kang, but more broadly with a long history of commentary and interpretation.

And yet the most intriguing aspect about Goethe’s phrase is the presence of the hand, which, despite its figurative implication, conjoins the text with the body, and hence the life, the physical existence, of the author. The closure of the text relies not exclusively on the text itself, but also on the life of the author. The variations of the text can be as infinite as those of a person’s will - until it is curtailed by an non-negotiable closure, which is of course the death of the author.

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But from the text’s point of view, the last version results from an intrusive, external event without following any internal, textual logic, and therefore bears no authority over earlier versions. Had the author lived longer, he or she could always revert to earlier versions, but the last is not always the best. This editorial instability makes the Urtext (the original form) and Ausgabe letzter Hand (the final form) seem more like conceptual constructions than reality. In certain cases the Urtext may be retroactively established by the hand that last touches the text to fit the Ausgabe letzter Hand, the final goal, which is epitomized in Karl Kraus’s motto, “Origin is the goal” (Ursprung ist das Ziel). When these two points of view - the text’s and the author’s - coexist, the text is turned into a speech act, just like a will is intended as such.

In “Autobiography as De-facement,” an essay on Wordsworth’s writings on epitaph, Paul de Man summarizes the essence of autobiography as the “autobiographic moment” which is of a specular nature, revolving between fiction (author in the text that bears his or her name) and autobiography (author of the text). He argues that

The interest of autobiography, then, is not that it reveals reliable self-knowledge - it does not - but that it demonstrates in a striking way the impossibility of closure and totalization (that is the impossibility of coming into being) of all textual systems made up of tropological substitutions.

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The cause of this impossibility lies in the fact that “writers of autobiography as well as writers on autobiography are obsessed by the need to move from cognition to resolution and to action, from speculative to political and legal authority.”205

Along the same line, de Man calls Philippe Lejeune “stubborn” for insisting that “the identity of autobiography is not only representational and cognitive but contractual, grounded not in tropes but in speech acts.”206 The contractual subject, epitomized by the signature, replaces the specular pair.

The nature of Lu Xun’s editorial work dictates that each new version produced by him was intended to overwrite the previous version, in the same way a new will overwrites the previous one. The impossibility of recovering the Urtext also dictates that this process is by nature unconcludable, or in the case of editing by one person, concludable only in the event of that person’s own death. Clearly, the complexity of this situation has already exceeded what “scientific” or “evidential” scholarship could fully describe.

4.3. Transcribing the Obscure: the Dissolution of Writing as a Symbolic System

From textual editing, I proceed to the last, and arguably the most intimate and physical level of Lu Xun’s textual engagement: manual transcription.

As is already quoted, “transcribing ancient inscriptions” 鈔古碑 is the phrase Lu Xun used to describe a variety of textual scholarship he was preoccupied with. One cannot but detect a certain ironic, belittling and self-effacing tone here, as if this is such a mechanical chore, involving no intellectual input at all, that it is no more than an empty pastime. It is true that Lu Xun’s main

205 Ibid.
206 Ibid.

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goal was to restore the original state of ancient texts, and transcribing was a natural preparatory step. And yet as Zhou Zuoren says, this is also a method for Lu Xun to acquire possession of something that he could not afford buying.

Here we come across what can be called a certain “collector’s mindset.” People value numbered copies in limited editions of a book over identical copies; a book with the author’s autograph certainly sells for more. The most valuable copy of anything is the one that participates in the owner’s private experience. A common desire behind collecting is to establish an exclusive relationship between the object and the owner: either in the form of a book with a dedication from the author, or a photograph with a few words to the owner from the person photographed. We all want our collected objects to be unique. An object is collectable only because it has a certain degree of uniqueness; the more unique, the more collectable. These are but some of people’s desperate efforts to preserve an exclusive relationship to works of art, or objects in general, in defiance of the pervasive mechanical reproducibility and seriality.

Therefore, arguably the most intimate, exclusive and unique way of owning an object is to manually recreate it. In the attempt to preserve such uniqueness, collectors tend to push ownership beyond the legal or physical sense to make the object part of, or a physical extension of, himself/herself. One wants to stamp personal marks on the object. Naturally, the ultimate way to do so is to manually recreate it. In this process of appropriation and personalization, the collector usurps the place of the original creator.

This foregrounds the significance of manual copying. Starting from Walter Benjamin if not earlier, the then modern technology that started a revolution in art already calls much attention to the problem of reproducibility. But it should not make one neglect some subtle but complex threads that are entwined in the more primitive method of reproduction – manual copying, which,
I argue, presents a more radical ontological trap and destabilization than even mechanical reproduction, with its destruction of the aura, can ever achieve, because every manual copy is unique, and in a sense authentic and irreplaceable. This is a good example to illustrate Martin Heidegger’s statement that “[t]he hand reaches and extends, receives and welcomes - and not just things: the hand extends itself, and receives its own welcome in the hand of the other.”

Precisely for this reason, compared with traditional evidential scholarship, Lu Xun’s work has yet another very prominent characteristic, namely an intensely tactile engagement with the very materiality of writing and its medium, embedded in the very act of manual transcription. At this point, it is worth revisiting how Zhou Zuoren describes Lu Xun’s transcribing activities,

a Han Dynasty stele could give him half a month to transcribe. This was a rather cost-effective activity. Unlike manuscripts, these steles were large in scale, and had many characters. What’s more, Han steles had lots of blemishes, so when a character on the rubbing was rather obscure, one has to position oneself from afar, near, left and right to recognize roughly what it was. As a result, there was no better way of killing time, though this did require lots of care.

This reminds us of how Walter Benjamin distinguishes two types of relationship between people and objects. According to him, “[p]ossession and having are allied with the tactile, and stand in a certain opposition to the optical. Collectors are beings with tactile instincts...

☐ Flâneur□ The flâneur optical, the collector tactile.”

In other words, in a more casual manner, the flâneur only engages the object visually, but the collector manually appropriates it, or at least desires to do so. The only difference in Lu Xun is that he seemed less concerned about possession than the process of appropriation. But it is this

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tactile appropriation that makes Lu Xun more a collector than a scholar in the traditional sense of scientific, matter-of-fact textual scholarship.

What is more interesting is that, along the process of this tactile engagement, something unexpected happened, and Lu Xun’s transcribing activities took an uncanny turn. And this is resulted from the very material condition of the texts he was transcribing. Chinese characters, like all writing systems, are conceived as transparent symbols referring to a semiotic system; they do not inherently rely on their physical medium. And it is in this sense that a hard copy of a piece of writing can be considered identical with an electronic copy. However, the obscurity of ancient inscriptions blocks such a transparent and smooth transition between the media. In the process of intently gazing and laboriously recognizing the obscure inscriptions on blemished surfaces, signs cease to be transparent references to something else, but assume a certain opaqueness that retain the reader’s sight on its material surface; they refer the sight back to its own physical existence. Thus the stability of a coherent system of reference between signs and meanings starts to dissolve. It is reduced to a physical existence, as characters become strange and illegible patterns. Or, by becoming merely visual patterns, the characters become things in themselves.

Unless hitherto unknown evidence is discovered in the future, it is impossible to establish any factual link between these aspects in Lu Xun’s textual editing activities and his fictional works. But I think it would not be entirely unjustifiable to at least point out how images of written characters and inscriptions appear in his fictional works, especially when such examples abound, from the mean but somewhat light-hearted satire in Kong Yiji to the grim revelation of history’s true nature in A Madman’s Diary, to the horrifying, abject interrogation in “Epitaph” in Wild Grass.
Kong Yiji is a short story about a miserable scholar failed by the Imperial Examination System. It is a satire on not only the Examination system, but the entire traditional education: despite Voltaire, Montesquieu and other European Enlightenment philosophers’ advocacy, the Chinese Imperial Examination for Lu Xun represented an archaic backwardness by stubbornly evaluating all scholars according to how well they acquired orthodox Confucian learning, which had little practical use. But then it selected these very scholars to be administrators in the government. Thus we see the scholar Kong Yiji well-versed in all kinds of traditional knowledge, but remaining a practically useless residue of the old society. One episode in the story, depicting a conversation between Kong Yiji and the narrator, a boy working for a tavern, pokes fun on his being able to write a character in four different ways:

Once he asked me:
“Have you had any schooling?”
When I nodded curtly he said, “Well then, I’ll test you. How do you write the hui character as in aniseed-peas?”
Who did this beggar think he was, testing me! I turned away and ignored him. After waiting for some time he said earnestly:
“You can’t write it, eh? I’ll show you. Mind you remember. You ought to remember such characters, because you’ll need them to write up your accounts when you have a shop of your own.”
It seemed to me that I was still very far from having a shop of my own; in addition to which, our boss never entered aniseed-peas in his account-book. Half amused and half exasperated, I drawled, “I don’t need you to show me. Isn’t it the hui written with the element for grass?”
Kong Yiji’s face lit up. Tapping two long finger-nails on the bar, he nodded. “Quite correct! There are four different ways of writing hui. Do you know them?”
But my patience exhausted, I scowled an moved away. Having dipped his finger in wine, and about to trace the characters on the bar, Kong Yiji saw my utter indifference; his face fell and he sighed.210

This skill, now seeming ridiculously trivial and useless, would have been part of the traditional learning a scholar was expected to master in order to excel in the Imperial Examination. Besides Lu Xun’s trademark satire of the tradition, this episode also foregrounds

210 Lu Xun, Quanji, vol. 1, 459.
the strangeness of the otherwise familiar written characters. An effective symbol points to some external meanings by negating itself, by deflecting our attention from its own existence. But now when a character such as this hui, apart from denoting a kind of herb, also has four - or possibly more - variations in writing, it ceases to be an effective symbol. It becomes itself.

Along the same line, but in a more striking manner, *A Madman’s Diary* directs our attention to the thingness of written Chinese as a medium for the recording of history. This short story that gave Lu Xun instant fame as the foremost novelist in modern Chinese literature assumes the form of a series of diaries written by a presumably “mad” man. The narrator is in constant fear of being persecuted, and especially of becoming a victim of cannibalism. He keeps imagining that his fellow villagers, even including his own brother, have long been plotting to eat him.

*A Madman’s Diary* was instantly received, and is still universally understood, as a powerful allegory denouncing the inhuman, suffocating cruelty of the traditional Confucian society. If the narrative only told of the “mad” man imagining others’ conspiracy, then the allegorical reading would have been no more than one among many possible interpretations. After all, it is uncertain whether the narrator is really mad, or he is the only normal person in a mad community. Or one could read it literally, namely the villagers were indeed plotting cannibalism. But one instance in the story serves as an unmistakable evidence that Lu Xun indeed intended it as an allegory, and as a result, cannibalism has a specific signification in the story:

Everything requires careful research if one is to understand it. In ancient times, as I recollect, people often ate human beings, but I am rather hazy about it. I tried to look this up, but my history has no chronology, and scrawled all over each page are the words: “Confucian Virtue and Morality.” Since I could not sleep anyway, I read intently half the night until I began to see words between the lines. The whole book was filled with the two words - “Eat people!”211

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211 Lu Xun, *Quanji*, vol. 1, 447.
The equation of “Confucian Virtue and Morality” with “Eat people” unequivocally exposes the allegorical structure underlying the whole story. This allegorical reading is so widely accepted that for a long time the term “Confucian morality” was - and sometimes still is - accompanied by the adjective “cannibalistic.” But what is most remarkable for the current discussion is that, this equation is accomplished through the act of reading, or rather, the act of intently gazing and laboriously recognizing something that gradually becomes unintelligible. The resemblance between the “mad” man staring at these pages and Lu Xun the scrivener obsessively deciphering the obscure inscriptions cannot be overstated.

My analysis of Lu Xun’s three levels of textual scholarship has shown that they are all attempts to remedy writing’s inherent tendency toward distortion, which in turn exposes the problematic nature of history as written records. History has seldom been able to distance itself from writing, as is partially testified by the fact that a historian is called a “scribe,” a word cognate to “script” and “scratch.” If historic discourses is always mediated, it is mediated first of all through the very materialistic instability of writing. Since Lu Xun experienced first hand writing’s uncanny opaqueness, he was inevitably always reminded of the very inauthenticity of historic discourses. If the traditional Chinese morality is exposed to be a form of cannibalism in A Madman’s Diary, this exposure is accomplished through none other than the “mad” man’s gaze, deflected and retained on the physical surface of written history, with all its abject obscurity.

4.4. Invoking the Dead: Releasing the Voice from Textual Imprisonment

It has been shown that Lu Xun’s transcribing work lead to the dissolution of a symbolic system through the reduction of symbols to their physical medium. At least in this case, the
collector’s tactile engagement with texts can be understood as a quest for the restoration of the intimate and almost carnal experiences that are imprisoned within the textual objects as abstract symbols. If this quest is allowed to be pushed even further, then ultimately the farthest point one can reach is the complete transformation of texts as tropological substitutions, through speech acts, into physically the most intimate part, which is the voice.

Perhaps not by coincidence, this transformation is present in Lu Xun’s fictional works, represented by the apocalyptically harrowing “Epitaph,” a prose poem in Wild Grass. Before quoting this astonishing piece in full, it is necessary to briefly discuss the epitaphic tradition, both East and West.

Among Lu Xun’s editorial work is the unfinished Catalogue of Six Dynasties Epitaphs 六朝墓誌目錄, together with individual cases of philological research on epitaphs, such as “An Investigation of Gong’s Epitaph” 《肱墓志》考, “An Investigation of Xu Fazhi’s Epitaph” 《徐法智墓志》考, and “Epilogue to Lü Chao’s Epitaph” 《吕超墓志铭》跋, and others. Due to the fragmentary and blemished state of the stones or rubbings, much of these epitaphs is unintelligible. And these short notes by Lu Xun contain no more than cautious and extremely laborious guesswork and accurate but dry editorial suggestions about the original characters.

These Six Dynasties (220 or 222–589) epitaphs, as most of epitaphs in classical Chinese tradition, are typically brief biographies, though some of them have an oratory verse attached at the end called “Ming” 铭. As a result, they are read and studied mostly for their historic, documentary values rather than as poetic works.

In this way, the Chinese epitaph is distinctively different from its European counterparts, which has acquired an additional poetic dimension independent of its biographic origin, manifesting itself not only in literature, but also in the visual arts. Two outstanding examples that
not only represent, but also consciously reflect upon the literary and artistic aspects of epitaph in
the European tradition are William Wordsworth’s series of essays on epitaph and Nicolas
Poussin’s two painting sharing the same title *Et in Arcadia Ego*, all of which are the
culminations of their respective traditions.

What is most striking about the European epitaph is its invocation of the human voice. This
is shown in the fact that Wordsworth puts much emphasis on the ideal gestalt of an epitaph:

We might ruminate upon the beauty which the monuments, thus placed, must have borrowed
from the surrounding images of nature—from the trees, the wild flowers, from a stream
running perhaps within sight or hearing, from the beaten road stretching its weary
length hard by. Many tender similitudes must these objects have presented to the mind of the
traveller leaning upon one of the tombs, or reposing in the coolness of its shade, whether he
had halted from weariness or in compliance with the invitation, 'Pause, Traveller!' so often
found upon the monuments. And to its epitaph also must have been supplied strong appeals
to visible appearances or immediate impressions, lively and affecting analogies of life as a
journey [...] These, and similar suggestions, must have given, formerly, to the language of the
senseless stone a voice enforced and endeared by the benignity of that Nature with which it
was in unison.\footnote{William Wordsworth, “Upon Epitaphs,” in *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, vol. II: Aesthetical and
Literary (New York: AMS Press, 1967), 31-2.}

Clearly all these aspects of the tranquil and idyllic gestalt recommended by Wordsworth
serve the same purpose - to give voice to the epitaph inscribed on the tombstone. In this way, the
text, laying there passively waiting to be read, transforms itself into an active force, a speech act
that stops the passersby.

Poussin’s two paintings, on the other hand, visualize two major interpretations of “Et in
Arcadia Ego,” and actually represent the two expressive possibilities of epitaphs in general. The
gloomy, dramatic and deliberately unbalanced baroque painting of 1627 interprets the epitaph as
a horrifying utterance of Death, who halts and haunts the passersby, reminding them that even in
Arcadia, “I, Death, hold sway.” The much more famous and ironic 1637-8 painting, now on
display in Louvre, which is of a tranquilly classical style, represents the epitaph as the consoling word spoken by the deceased, buried under the tombstone, that “even I, the deceased, was once in [the carefree] Arcadia.”

Perhaps unsurprisingly, these two works play an important role in the movements that are now part of modern western intellectual history: Wordsworth’s essays are the subject of de Man’s already-quoted “Autobiography as De-facement,” an important essay in the Deconstruction Movement, and Poussin’s painting is the subject of Erwin Panofsky’s “‘Et in Arcadia Ego’: Poussin and the Elegiac Tradition,” which helps define methods in art history, and particularly in iconology, in the first half of twentieth century. Arguably the most famous epitaph in the entire western tradition, “Et in Arcadia Ego” even finds its way into a late twentieth century literary classic, Tom Stoppard’s play Arcadia, which contains explicit reference to it.

In both cases, epitaph takes the form not just of a text, but particularly of an inscription that is intended to be read aloud. As such, epitaph as a text is considered complete only when complemented with a voice. What is so crucially present the European epitaphic tradition is its desire to reach beyond the physical inscription, to become a voice that actually speaks. A natural result is that epitaph becomes associated with the rhetorical device “prosopopoeia,” where a person speaks while assuming a different identity. In other words, it is a kind of role playing, a speech masked by another face (“prosopopoeia” has its root in “πρόσωπο”, the Greek word for both “face” and “person”). The surface of the tombstone becomes a face, assuming the identity of the deceased; it speaks though the inscription, which is the epitaph.

This speech involves two further peculiarities. First, as Sigmund Freud remarks, “writing was in its origin the voice of an absent person.” Writing inherently contains a lapse in time, a

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deferral, marking the absence of the speaker. Or, in Jesper Svenbro’s words, “What is written is present, the writer is absent... At the moment of reading, the reader finds himself before a written word that is present in the absence of the writer. Just as he foresees his own absence, the writer foresees the presence of his writing before the reader.” What makes epitaph even more peculiar and difficult to pin down is the fact that the speaker, who makes the speech when he or she is alive, is supposed to be dead, buried in the grave under the tombstone, when the words are being read. Or, it is written by the living imagining a speech made by the dead when he or she was still alive. It is an imaginary speech across the threshold.

The second indication of this process points to an intense play of power dynamics. Svenbro again notes that

The writer, who is present only at the action of producing the written statement and soon disappears for good, has foreseen the vocalization of his writing. Absent as he is, he depends on the voice that the reader will lend him. By writing, he deferred the production of his speech in sound... The most [the writing] can do is provoke a reading, prompt its own rendering in sound, get the reader’s voice going - the voice that... is part of the text. For the text to achieve complete fulfillment, the reader must lend his voice to the writing (or, in the last analysis, to the writer).

In other words, by borrowing the reader’s voice, the epitaph transforms itself into the dictator of a speech. The active reader turns out to be nothing but a voice that is a mere instrument of the text. The defining characteristic of epitaph is thus its goal toward a speech act that reaches beyond the flat surface of text to cause an actual consequence, and to exercise a real power that halts the passers-by, reminds them, even reprimands them, with their very own voice.

215 Jesper Svenbro, Phrasikleia: An Anthropology of Reading in Ancient Greece (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 44.
216 Svenbro, Phrasikleia, 45-6.
As far as I know, there is no epitaphic tradition in China that is similar to the one described. But strikingly, Lu Xun single-handedly brings into life what amounts to the equivalent of this whole western epitaphic tradition, through the powerful 1925 prose poem “Epitaph” in *Wild Grass*, combining it with his experience as an editor and transcriber of the obscure tombstone inscriptions:

I dreamed of myself facing a tombstone, reading its inscriptions. That tombstone seemed made of sandstone, with lots of blemishes and mosses growing on it. Only a few words remained -

...Catching a cold during fervent singing;
Seeing abyss in the sky.
Seeing nothingness in all eyes;
Redeemed in hopelessness.
...There is a wandering spirit, which transforms itself into a long snake; there are poisonous teeth in its mouth. It doesn’t use them to bite others, but bites itself, until it dies.
...Go away! ...

I turned to the back, and saw the lonely grave; there wasn’t any grass or tree on it; it was crumbling. Right away I saw the corpse through the big crack; its chest and stomach all broken, without heart or liver. But its face showed neither sadness nor joy, only smoke-like haziness.
In suspicion and horror, before I could turn back, I already spotted the fragmented words on the back of the tombstone -

...Picking one’s own heart to eat, hoping to know one’s own taste. So intense is the pain, how can one’s own taste be known?
...With the pain reducing, eating it slowly. But the heart is already old, how can one’s own taste be known?
...Answer me. Otherwise, go away!...

As I was about to leave, the corpse already sat up in the grave, and with its lips unmoved, uttered this -
“When I become dust, you will see me smile!”
I rushed away, and didn’t dare to look back, fearing it would follow.

June 17, 1925.\(^\text{217}\)

This piece is extremely rich in allusions. For example, the phrase “all eyes” 一切眼 probably comes from Buddhist scriptures, while “[s]eeing nothingness in all eyes” contains such complex references to Buddhist philosophy that it merits a separate study. Self-cannibalism is also a prominent theme in his writing, while the image of the snake, on the other hand, reminds us of the already-quoted preface to Na Han: “[t]his loneliness grows day by day, like a huge poisonous snake, entangling my soul.” Mythological connection can likely be made with the goddess Nüwa, on whom Lu Xun wrote the story “Repairing Heaven” 補天. Both the story and the preface were written in 1922.

And yet all these allusions are contained within the framework, in the form of a dream, of the “I” reading two obscure epitaphs on both sides of the tombstone. In both cases, what initially seems a neutral reporting of the words abruptly turns into a shocking imperative. In the latter case, the seemingly rhetorical question “[b]ut the heart is already old, how can one’s own taste be known?” turns out to be a real question, when the text sternly demands an answer from the reader. Here we see how the horrified reader, by unwittingly lending his voice to the epitaphs, is deprived of his control over the situation, and becomes the subject of interrogation by the dead.

In this way, the epitaph, an inscribed text, is transformed into the voice of the dead. But this voice is so powerful and present that it bursts forth from the text and manages to take control of the living reader, and eventually scares him away.

5. The Collector as Revolutionary

In theory, such editorial work can occupy a scholar for an indefinite length of time, because newly acquired materials would supplement or rectify any previous conclusions. But in reality,

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218 Lu Xun, Quanji, vol. 1, 439.
the seemingly infinite materials outlive the mortal collector. A private collection’s growth is curtailed by the death of the collector, a poignant testimony to which can be found in a melancholic remark made by Sigmund Freud right after he escaped imminent Nazi prosecution together with his beloved antique collection: “[a] collection to which there are no new additions is really dead.” But it also implies that a living collection can grow organically and infinitely. This aspect of collecting, set against the background of the allegorical flea market, exposes a material-based interpretation of history to constant ruptures and unsettling revisions. Here nothing is final; all judgments are subject to potential rebuttal. If ever history is a continuum, it is a continuum of ruptures.

It is this openness, I argue, that prepares the ground for the collector to become a revolutionary. Naturally, collectors are by definition conservationists. Yet they do not preserve the past intact, but gather seemingly infinite fragments, which can never be pieced back into the original whole, as if the ruptures never happened. This is why after the already quoted statement that the “most deeply hidden motive” of the collector is “the struggle against dispersion,” Benjamin adds that “[r]ight from the start, the great collector is struck by the confusion, by the scatter, in which the things of the world are found.” This puts the “yi” (escape) concept at the very center not just of textual scholarship, but of collecting in general. These “escaped” elements are victims of violent subjugation and mutilation that history tries hard to cover up. In other words, they represent the subalterns of history. This is why, beside the boundary-breaking Wunderkammer and the infinitely substituting seriality, I argue that the accumulation of anti-collection is another form of infinite system. The collector - such as Lu Xun - who endeavors to


220 Benjamin, The Arcades Project, 211.
gather these excluded fragments are destined to stage a revolution against the received narrative of history.

But the revolutionary root of the collector goes deeper. Collecting is simultaneously a process of de- and re-contextualization. Both Benjamin and Baudrillard talk about collecting being the *abstraction* of an object “from its function,”\(^{221}\) or to cause what Bielecki calls “deracination and dislocation, a sense of being estranged from the past.”\(^{222}\) Indeed, a collection is a strange value vacuum where things “refer only to one another”\(^{223}\) rather than to the outside world. Once placed in it, religious relics are deconsecrated, national treasures are depoliticized, and even monetary value becomes obsolete—even though money is indispensible for the accumulating process, hence Bielecki rightly singles out the July Monarchy as a period of universal monetization that brought forth the downfall of the collector.\(^{224}\) Even aesthetic values do not always hold sway (hence the separation of the collector from the connoisseur). By the same token, the disturbingly irreverent collector can be an atheist, an anarchist or an anti-capitalist. Hence Lu Xun’s ridiculing and sarcastic tone in mentioning concubines’ embroidered shoes and princes’ skulls, and the general loss of relevance of the Imperial archive. Overall, it is only natural that Lu Xun would turn from the quiet collector into a loud and radical leader of literary and social revolution: witnessing years of dispersion of collections and exclusion of valuable objects and ideas, he had a hands-on experience of tremendous historic rupture and the breakdown of traditional values.


\(^{223}\) Baudrillard, *System*, 86.

But if I may be forgiven to end this chapter with a less than uplifting note, I should say that the collector, with all these almost anarchist attributes, is not necessarily constructively progressive. He or she might go in the direction of nihilistic relativism. But in the end, it is never easy to draw the line between revolution and nihilism.
Chapter Three

Huang Binhong: Authenticity, Connoisseurship and Cosmopolitanism

November 4, 1918

Dear Mr. Binhong,

Your handwritten letter was received yesterday, together with rubbings of two dagger-axes and ancient seals. I thank you with deep respect. The two dagger-axes [rubbings] are extremely delicate. In the Longhou dagger-axe, I suspect that the third character is 縛. The character following the radical 四 or 固 is a complicated form; this is the only time I’ve seen it on ancient artifacts. The first character is not “龍” dragon; I doubt it is the same as 善. The shape of this 善 represents the front view of the object, whereas the shape of 善 represents the rear view. The two dagger-axes might have come from the same place. Is it right or not?

Sir, you are about to travel. I was wondering when you will return to Shanghai? I hereby send my thanks with this letter, and wait for a later time to visit and speak with you.

Yours respectfully,
Wang Guowei225

This is the only surviving letter from Wang Guowei (as is showed in The Complete Works of Wang Guowei), the aesthetician and historian who makes an appearance in the first chapter as Luo Zhenyu’s close collaborator on oracle bones research, to Huang Binhong 黃賓虹, the prominent painter, scholar, collector, connoisseur, and protagonist of this chapter. This short, informal note gives minimal information about the interaction between the two towering cultural figures, but it reveals as much as it hides. Though fragmentary, it encrypts rich implications that await unpacking, and points to a much larger picture about art collecting and intellectual

225 Wang Guowei, Quanji, vol. 15, 618.
exchange in China in the first decades of twentieth century. The various messages suggested in this short letter will be the major themes that this chapter will expound.

First, the very fact that the two were corresponding acquaintances already merits scrutiny. As we already know, Wang Guowei was an accomplished literary critic and historian, while Huang Binhong became known - albeit decades later - as one of the very greatest painters within the Chinese tradition in twentieth century. Although we possess neither Huang’s first letter nor his reply to the quoted one, we can infer that Wang was writing in response to some questions Huang raised. Huang must have sent the rubbings in order to ask for Wang’s verdict on the meaning of the characters. What brought them together? By way of answering this question, this chapter will reconstruct a small circle of intellectual in a Chinese city in the first half of twentieth century that consisted of members from opposite political camps; what bought these political enemies together was, I argue, a common obsession with antiquity in the form of collecting.

Second, that Wang asked when Huang would “return to Shanghai” shows that this correspondence took place when both were residents of the cosmopolitan city at that period. This dissertation emphasizes the specific urban spaces where collecting activities take place, and how the two influence each other. Three of the four chapters of this dissertation confine their geographical boundaries to Beijing, the Imperial Capital. The current chapter partly shifts the focus to Shanghai, in a sense the antipode of Beijing. One is a newly flourishing trading port, commercial center, and semi-colony, the other a centuries-old political center and symbol of China’s autonomy and power. Their differences induce various possible configurations and significations for the practice of collecting, which this chapter will explore in detail.

Third, that Huang included seal rubbings in the letter is no random fact, either: collecting ancient scripts and studying their scripts was a major pursuit of Huang’s life. If there was
anything that was important enough to rival the status of painting for him, it was his lifelong devotion to collecting ancient artifacts including paintings and calligraphic works, but in particular seals and their inscriptions. This collecting obsession was an organic part of Huang’s intellectual career, and formed a dialogue with the various debates about reforming Chinese writing and revolutionizing Chinese literature, both of which were at the forefront of early twentieth century intellectual debates.

Further questions remain to be answered: Why was the painter concerned about the meaning of ancient characters? What did his collecting activities have to do with his paintings, especially the surprising development in his late style? As a painter, Huang chose to loyally stick to traditional styles of ink painting at a time when the major trend was to modernize Chinese culture through learning from the West. Actually, Huang was nothing less than the very last great synthesizer of a centuries-old tradition of Chinese painting, devoting his long life almost entirely to diligently practicing and perfecting this tradition’s many styles. In the last two decades of his ninety-two-year life, Huang surprised his audience by transforming himself from the meticulous student of the ancients into a bold experimenter, creating astonishing and unprecedented abstract expressions that nonetheless maintained a link to tradition. By way of an analysis of this shift, the present chapter will establish a connection between Huang’s collecting activities and paintings, particularly the role his study of ancient scripts played therein.

Lastly, these aspects of Huang’s life and career indicate a cultural orientation that decidedly turned to the past rather than to the future. So he conveyed an impression of being a cultural as well as political conservative. But one only needs a very casual survey of his life to realize that he was not only a sympathizer, but an active participant in various revolutionary projects. In this regard, Huang should be considered an enemy of Wang Guowei, who nonetheless cordially
maintained a more than civilized friendship with Huang. Most surprising and fascinating in this regard is Huang’s friendship with the young Europhile Fu Lei 傅雷, a cultural critic and a legendary translator of nineteenth century French literature, who was a total of forty-three years Huang’s junior. An expert in European art history and a real connoisseur of paintings, Fu Lei found the ultimate realization of his ideal of a Chinese art for the future and for the globalized world in the seemingly untimely, old-fashioned Huang Binhong.

All the issues raised in the above aspects can be reformulated in two questions. First, both the conservatives and the revolutionaries seized “Guoxue” 国学, or the Chinese national learning, as a tool for realizing their goals. So how was this learning conceptualized and utilized within and across the binary opposition between China and the West, and between tradition and modernity? Second, in what way did Chinese national learning, which for some embodied the essence of Chinese culture contribute to a cosmopolitan and international configuration of modernity?

When one probes these big questions, the original context should not be ignored: the correspondence between Wang and Huang - and indeed their friendship - was prompted by a concrete question that came up during the process of collecting; issues related to connoisseurship, authenticity, dating and locating, as well as knowledge in philology were involved. Therefore, the present chapter tackles these questions within the context and through the lens of Huang Binhong’s collecting activities.

1. A Multifaceted Life

Although Huang Binhong’s career was exceptionally eclectic, today he has come to be remembered primarily as one of two most prominent ink painters recognized by the People’s Republic of China in twentieth century China (the other being Qi Baishi 齊白石). In a sense, this
simplification and pigeonholing is the result of the difficulty posed by Huang’s multifaceted intellectual engagements.

Huang was born in 1865 in the Jinhua Prefecture of Zhejiang, which was also the home Province of Lu Xun, Luo Zhenyu and Wang Guowei. Huang first received home schooling from his father Huang Dinghua 黃定華, who also tutored him in ink painting at the age of four. Dinghua was himself a well-educated man, with a fondness for ancient books, calligraphic works and paintings, which deeply influenced his son. Dinghua had a painter friend called Ni Yifu 倪逸甫. Binhong received instructions from Ni, and would remember his teaching some eighty years later. In his Autobiography at Eighty, Huang especially recalls this saying from Ni: “[painting] should follow the method of writing/calligraphy: each stroke should be clearly distinguishable, so that [your painting] would not resemble the craftsman’s.” This would prove to be a defining motto for Huang, who admitted that at the time when he heard this, he only understood half of it, but “I followed his instruction anyway, practiced it for years, and did not dare to slack off.”

At the age of eleven, Huang Binhong started learning seal-carving, another art that was to hold a prominent place in his artistic life. According to Huang’s student Wang Bomin 王伯敏, Huang’s father had a collection of seal rubbings, which he showed to Binhong. At one time the father was away for a month. And upon returning home, he was stunned to find that his thirteen-year-old son had carved a dozen or so seals according to these rubbings.

Huang Binhong continued to practice ink painting diligently. Simultaneously, he had the opportunity to view the originals of ancient paintings: “[at that time], old families still possessed some ancient artifacts, so that I was able to see the real traces of the ancients, many of which

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226 I base the biographical section about Huang Binhong on Wang Zhongxiu’s authoritative and exhaustive chronology Huang Binhong Nianpu (Shanghai: Shanghai Shuhua Chubanshe, 2005).

227 Wang Zhongxiu, Nianpu, 4.
were excellent works. I especially loved the ones by Dong Qichang 董其昌 and Zha Shibiao 查士標, which I imitated for several years.”

Huang followed a fairly conventional path for literati of his time, attending local academies to study the entire canon of traditional learning that included Confucian classics, history, philology, poetry and calligraphy. At the same time he duly pursued the long process of National Examination. In 1887, he also became a secretary to the local government in Yangzhou 揚州.

It was a this time that Huang started building his own collection of ancient artworks. According to Huang Jingwu 黃警吾, Huang Binhong did not find many ways to spend his salary, so he bought many paintings and calligraphic works. The Yangzhou and the nearby Nanjing 南京 areas were traditionally prosperous thanks to the highly profitable salt industry. Rich families not only accumulated wealth, but collected priceless ancient artifacts. But incidentally, the salt industry was being reformed at that time, and many of the traditional salt merchants’ businesses were failing. The fops from once-rich families had no skill to earn a living, so they turned to indiscriminately selling their family collections, with no idea about their true value. As a discerned connoisseur, Huang seized the opportunity and bought about three hundred treasures for low prices, including original works from the Yuan and Ming Dynasties.

In 1890, Huang’s father started a new business, which is of particular interest to our understanding of Huang’s own artistic development as an ink painter. At that time, trade with foreign countries introduced new techniques for ink making, but the result was a deterioration in quality. Huang’s father established a workshop in his native Huizhou, and started to revive traditional methods from the Northern and Southern Dynasties (420 - 589). Huang participated in

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228 Wang Zhongxiu, Nianpu, 10.

the production procedures, and was acquainted with all the details of ink-making, becoming a connoisseur in the history and different styles of ink.

Following the destruction of the Qing navy in the First Sino-Japanese War in 1894-1895, the Treaty of Shimonoseki ended Korea’s tributary status to China and turned it into a fully independent country; it also required that Qing Empire cede Taiwan to Japan. The disastrous defeat was traumatic for most Chinese intellectuals, including not only Luo Zhenyu and Wang Guowei, but also Huang Binhong. In 1895, scholars Kang Youwei 康有為 and Liang Qichao 梁啟超 led a massive petition to the Emperor in Beijing, appealing for a refusal of the Treaty and a reform of the government. This marked the beginning of a short-lived reform effort. Huang Binhong sent a letter to Beijing in support of the petition, firmly positioning himself in the pro-reform camp. Very soon the failed reform incited revolutionary attempts that aimed at bringing down the Qing Dynasty. The trend spread to Huang’s ancestral hometown Huizhou, where he now lived. Huang participated in an underground revolutionary party called “Gong Shang Yongjin Dang” 工商勇進黨, propagating radical thoughts. In 1906, he co-founded an organization called the “Huang Society” 黃社, commemorating the Ming Dynasty intellectual Huang Zongxi 黃宗羲, who was an outspoken anti-monarchist. But as a revolutionary, Huang’s political engagements were most closely linked to cultural and educational projects that aimed at enlightenment as a preparation for social change. In order to improve literacy in his native Huizhou, he established a primary school that provided basic education to children, and he planned to establish a local newspaper,


231 Wang Zhongxiu, Nianpu, 41.
allowing local people in this rather remote area access to information and new ideas from the outside world.232

Because of these activities, Huang was reported to the provincial government in 1907 as a “revolutionary party member,” and had to go into exile in Shanghai, thus entering a new phase in his intellectual life. Here he met two of his important and long-term collaborators, Deng Shi 鄧實 (1877 - 1951) and Huang Jie 黃節 (1837 - 1935), who initiated him into the Society for the Preservation of National Learning 國學保存會. Both Deng’s233 and Huang’s lives234 were exemplary for many people of that generation: they were initially deeply impressed by the achievements of the Western civilization, and devoted their times to popularizing its thoughts among the Chinese public. But very much like Luo Zhenyu and Wang Guowei, around the time when the West-inspired Xinhai Revolution succeeded in establishing a republic, they turned back to their native land’s culture, and to its past. Like Luo, Deng and Huang were also keen on collecting cultural remains of the past and publicizing them as widely as possible. As notable bibliophiles of the time, they rescued countless precious and once forbidden books.235 And their publication projects, with substantial contributions from Huang, were ambitious and successful.


235 See Li Yu’an 李玉安 and Huang Zhengyu 黃正雨, eds: Zhongguo Cangshu Jia Tongdian 中国藏书家通典 (Hong Kong: China International Culture Press, 2005).
Huang got on very well with them, and their friendship and collaboration on the Society were the main reason why he eventually settled in Shanghai in 1909. The name of the Society for the Preservation of National Learning must have been very suggestive to Huang. Those who live fully within a tradition might not be aware of this tradition as such at all. For a long time in Chinese history, there was no such thing as “Chinese national learning” for the Chinese; rather, it was simply “learning.” When the learning becomes something that needed modifications, it is usually when its culture becomes self-conscious, which is often also a sign of crisis. Hence the need for preservation. The Society was born of such an urgent awareness of crisis. It was founded in 1904 by Deng Shi together with Huang Jie, Liu Shipei 劉師培 and the grandmaster of national learning Zhang Taiyan 章太炎. Affiliated to it were a string of important institutions oriented towards the public, including the Guocui Xuetang 國粹學堂 (Academy of National Essence), the Society’s own library – the first public library in Shanghai – and the Guocui Xuebao 國粹學報 (Journal of National Essence)\(^{236}\), to which Huang Binhong and Zhang Taiyan were important contributors.

The first important point to note is the presence of Zhang Taiyan in this circle. Zhang was a revered scholar of traditional learning as well as a fierce and fearless revolutionary. He directly participated in bringing down the Qing Dynasty, and had been imprisoned in China and gone into exile in Japan a few times. In Japan, he famously tutored Lu Xun and other important scholars of the younger generation in traditional philology based on Xu Shen 许慎’s Shuowen Jiezi 说文解字 (“Explaining Graphs and Analyzing Characters”). This early-second-century text

had long been considered the most authoritative source and sole foundation of Chinese philology, but the newly discovered oracle bones contradicted many of its claims. In this regard, Zhang Taiyan was an enemy of Luo Zhenyu and Wang Guowei. Of course, they also held absolutely incompatible views on monarchy and revolution.

Although Huang was himself pro-revolution, and contributed to the same journal as Zhang, he maintained cordial relationship with Luo and Wang, and agreed with their views on the oracle bones. These entangled relationships on multiple levels (including politics and different branches of traditional learning) show the complexities of the scholarly community at the early stage of political polarization in twentieth-century China, and the impossibility of drawing clear lines between revolution and monarchy, conservatism and modernity, or Chinese essentialism and cosmopolitanism. Indeed, the journal’s name “Guocui” or national essence unmistakably exposes its culturally sinocentric and essentializing orientation. As Tze-Ki Hon observes, “In their attempts to identify a national essence to highlight Chinese cultural uniqueness, the Guocui xuebao writers are accused of turning back the clock when the country was modernizing its political, social, and economic systems.”237 It is within this context that Huang participated in this organization.

At first, his membership in the Society seemed to be occasioned by his need to flee persecution from the authorities of his native province. But Huang was not totally unprepared: the membership stipulated donations of either money or ancient artifacts, and Huang had precisely the latter. He donated one painting, one work of calligraphy, and his own treatise on ancient seals.238 If we consider the visions of the Society’s founders, the membership requirements are hardly surprising. Deng Shi and Huang Jie both recognized the importance in

237 Hon, Revolution, 2.
238 Wang Zhongxiu, Nianpu, 52-3.
collecting ancient books and artifacts, hoping to use them as the foundation for Chinese culture’s renaissance - this was precisely why they made the library an important part of the Society. The library, open to the public, nurtured such important personalities as the young Gu Jiegang, who would in the future became, paradoxically, a pioneer in the “Doubting the Ancients” movement.  

In 1909, Deng invited Huang to help him run another important organization, the “Shenzhou Guoguang She” (Cathay Art Union), which produced the monumental series *National Glories of Cathay* and *Cathay Outlook*. They reproduced images of a large amount of ancient Chinese paintings, calligraphies, bronze and stone inscription rubbings and seal rubbings, etc. for wide circulation. As a continuation of the aforementioned *Guocui Xuebao*, they were a major cultural achievement at the beginning of twentieth century, and a triumph for the modern technology of reproduction and mass dissemination. According to Yu-Jen Liu, “it was the first journal in China that specialized in publishing images of Chinese art, using the most advanced photographic and reproductive technology [...] to publicize [private] collections that used to be accessible only to very few people.” The most notable technology used here was “collotype,” which aimed at faithful presentation of the original object.

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240 Claire Roberts: *Friendship in Art: Fou Lei and Huang Binhong* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010), 53.


Huang gave the following reason for his involvement in both the Union and the Society:

at that time, it was being debated whether the Chinese script should be abolished, and I fiercely oppose abolishment. From then on I strengthened my will to concentrate on preserving [the Chinese] culture and arts. Then I went to Shanghai and met my Guangdong friends Deng [Shi] and Huang [Jie], and worked as an editor for the National Studies Series, Journal of National Essence, and National Glories of Cathay.”

The debates surrounding the destiny of the Chinese writing system drew in most of the intellectuals in the first decades of twentieth century; it would later turn out to figure prominently in Huang’s own collecting activities, and serve as the central theme of the interactions between himself, Luo Zhenyu, Wang Guowei and Zhang Taiyan.

Therefore, at the age of forty-five, Huang started to transform himself from a provincial literati and collector into an important player in the cultural life of the bustling semi-colonial metropolis. He embarked upon an impressive and eclectic career that stretched to every corner of the cultural sphere, co-founding numerous literary and artistic societies, editing and publishing newspapers and books. He also produced a large amount of paintings and calligraphies, for which he now found a much larger market to sell. He continued amassing ancient artworks and artifacts; moreover, thanks to new technologies and a burgeoning publishing industry, he would disseminate his own collections through the publication of catalogues.

In Shanghai, Huang also came into (or strengthened) contact with several important people; besides Deng Shi and Huang Jie, they also included Luo Zhenyu, Fu Lei, Shen Zengzhi 沈曾植, Wang Guowei, and Zhang Taiyan. Huang also became part of an international community of art historians, collectors and dealers. These people had diverse backgrounds and often opposing orientations, but were all based in the cultural mini-cosmos of Shanghai. The diverse cultural

243 Wang Zhongxiu, Nianpu, 68.
experiences that Shanghai had to offer proved most inspiring for Huang, who both contributed to and benefited from it. Apart from the large community of intellectual friends, Huang especially enjoyed the collecting scene of this metropolis, which was a world trading center located in the historically cultured area of Anhui, Jiangsu, Shandong and Zhejiang Provinces. Here Huang was acquainted with both Chinese and international collectors, and acquired hands-on experience with a large amount of ancient artifacts; they directly influenced his artistic style and thoughts.

For example, Huang’s calligraphy was deeply influenced by the style of the powerful Tang Dynasty Emperor Taizong (598-649). This came through a specific connection: it was the French orientalist Paul Pelliot who, as mentioned in chapter one, bought to Paris a large amount of priceless treasures from Dunhuang on the ancient silk road. Among the objects were a rubbing, made in early Tang period (therefore possibly a most faithful one), of an inscription of the calligraphy by Taizong called “Wenquan Ming” 溫泉銘. This was the first time an image of the now lost original inscription was recovered. It was directly photographed from Pelliot’s collection and published in a limited edition in 1910. Pelliot had met and corresponded with Huang, who possessed a copy of this treasured rubbing. According to Huang’s student Shi Gufeng 石谷風, the former had said that he

fell in love with it on first sight. [...] Taizong’s calligraphy initially seemed simple and easy, but after scrutiny, you would notice that his brushwork was like a needle wrapped in cotton, and the structure was tall, slim and stable, full of inner expressions. [...] My own calligraphy benefits from “Wenquan Ming.”²⁴⁴

Shi also pointed out that the way Huang wrote the characters in his name Bin 宾 and Hong 虹 precisely possessed a similarity with the Emperor’s in spirit.

²⁴⁴ Wang Zhongxiu, Nianpu, 77.
In 1913, Huang opened his own antique shop Zhouhe Zhai 宙合齋 in Shanghai, buying and selling all kinds of ancient artifacts but especially seals, his lifelong obsession. In 1916, Lu Xun visited the shop and chatted with Huang about the Liu Li Chang antique market in Beijing.  

It was probably during one of the numerous gatherings among Shanghai intellectuals that Huang met Wang Guowei. On June 24th, 1918, they both attended an exhibition of ancient artifacts hosted by the aforementioned reformer Kang Youwei, under the auspices of the Shanghai Jewish celebrity Silas Aaron Hardoon (1851-1931), who was himself an ardent collector of Chinese art. Wang was now back to Shanghai from his self-imposed exile in Japan, freshly reemerging from a period of intense study of the oracle bones. The next day, Wang wrote an enthusiastic letter to his close collaborator Luo Zhenyu, who still remained in Japan:

At yesterday’s Hardoon exhibition, there was nothing special about Kang Youwei’s stuff [...] But Huang Binhong showed a jade seal, with the inscription “Xiongnu Xiangbang” 兜[匈]奴相邦. If this seal is indeed authentic, it would have a great deal of significance for scholarship. So I requested two rubbings from him, and upon receiving them I will send one to you for your judgment. China has such a large territory and immensity of artifacts, really there is nothing that it does not possess. The Xiongnu seals that have been known to the world are all granted by the Han Dynasty, but this is the only one made by the Xiongnu themselves, and they must be made during the Qin and Han periods (Xiongnu did not necessarily avoid the character “Bang” 邦, but the seal’s material and script indicate that it should come from before Han. “Xiang” 相 is written as 相; “Bang” 邦 is written as 邊; they seem to have belonged to a script of the Six States). You will be very happy to hear about this, so I rush to inform you of it.  

Xiongnu was a confederation of nomadic people existed between third century BCE and first century AD. It had oftentimes tense relations with the Qin (221 - 206 BCE) and the Han (206

245 Wang Zhongxiu, Nianpu, 133.

246 “Bang” 邦 is the name of the first Han Emperor. According to ancient customs, if a character appears in an emperors’ name, its use in other places had to be avoided, so this practice becomes a method for dating historical documents: if a character in an emperor’s name was used, it most likely means the document was written before his reign began.

247 Wang Zhongxiu, Nianpu, 140.
(BCE -220 AD) Dynasties, and records about it exist mostly in ancient Chinese documents. While I am unable to determine all the issues about this seal that interested Wang Guowei, it is reasonable to infer that, besides its being a testimony to the interaction between the two sides, and the fact that Xiongnu did adopt certain Chinese practices such as the writing system, seal making and political structure, one important focus of Wang’s must be on the problem of ancient Chinese script reform. The Six States he mentions in the letter were the ones eliminated by the Qin Kingdom, which subsequently became the first Chinese empire, and united all the writing systems into one. Before that, each state had its own script, as demonstrated partly by the different ways the same character was written. After over two millennia, attempts to reform and revolutionize the Chinese script were again being made.

About four months later, Wang sent Huang the letter that is quoted at the beginning of this chapter. These two short letters not only demonstrate the depth of Wang’s scholarship and his sharp sensitivity to important issues indicated in historic objects, but amply show that Huang was also very likely on the same page, preoccupying himself with the same issues, and knowing exactly what was worth collecting, though Wang seemed to have more authority, while Huang was just as resourceful in actually acquiring these obscure and rare finds.

Evidence of correspondence also exists between Huang and Luo, again involving exchange of each other’s collected and treasured items. Although we possess few details, they are enough for us to imagine a lively intellectual exchange between two of the greatest minds of the time, facilitated by transactions of collectable ancient objects. And one should not forget that these cordial and likely very fruitful communications took place between a pro-revolution artist and two staunch loyalists.

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248 Wang Zhongxiu, Nianpu, 179.
Numerous smaller examples exist that testify to Huang’s intellectual and material transactions with a wide circle of scholars. In early 1921, for instance, a friend Cai Zhefu 蔡哲夫 wrote to Huang from Guangzhou (Canton), informing him that while the city wall was being demolished, many bricks with very ancient script inscriptions appeared. He included rubbings to Huang and asked his opinion.249

In 1931, Huang met another scholar, who was the opposite of Luo and Wang in almost every sense; and he would later play arguably the most important role in Huang’s life as a painter. On September 18, the very same day when Japanese troops attacked Chinese troops in Shenyang and started its fourteen-years aggression of China, the ocean liner Chenonceaux from Marseille arrived in Shanghai. Onboard were the controversial painter Liu Haisu 劉海粟 and his young friend Fu Lei. The next day, a banquet was held to welcome them back home, and Huang was invited to participate. There he met Fu Lei for the first time. That year, Huang was already sixty-eight years old, while Fu was at the tender age of twenty-four. Youthful, passionate and proud, Fu Lei was a Europhile steeped in the modernism of Henri Matisse and Paul Cézanne. Nothing significant seemed to have happened at that time between him and the elderly, old-fashioned painter. On the surface, they were indeed worlds apart from each other. But about a decade later, their friendship would unfold suddenly and against all expectations. It is the subject of the third section of this chapter.

Huang’s multifaceted and fruitful life in Shanghai continued through the 1911 Xinhai Revolution and the 1931 Japanese invasion well into 1937. Throughout this long period he built a reputation as an impressive collector especially famous for his ancient seals, a trusted connoisseur, as well as a respected and sought-after ink painter in the traditional style. However,

249 Wang Zhongxiu, Nianpu, 153.
it should be stressed that he was considered more as a well-rounded literati rather than a star painter, as he has come to be known posthumously. He himself had little ambition in branding himself as such. In his seventies, this exceptionally diligent and prolific painter had yet to even hold a solo exhibition.

Besides painting, collecting, writing and publishing, Huang also regularly invited to authenticate paintings and calligraphies. Most notably, he was hired to examine and authenticate the artworks in the Imperial collections in Nanjing in 1935, and subsequently in Beijing in 1936. When in Beijing, Huang was also hired to teach at the Beijing Art School in 1937. So at the age of seventy-four, he traveled to the northern ancient Capital to take up the new job, but the sojourn was significantly extended against his expectation: on July 7 of the same year, Japanese troops attached and subsequently occupied Beijing, effecting a full-scale invasion of China. As a result, Huang was stuck in the Capital and not able to return to the South.

Under such a depressing and difficult circumstance, he tried to continue his life in the usual way, quietly painting, reading, collecting and studying antiquity. His friend Xu Chengyao 許承堯, in a reply to his letter, says the following: “Beijing experienced such a disaster without [being destroyed] by the military; there should be no doubt that culture is being preserved and cherished. We discuss ancient calligraphies and paintings amid war and chaos, this is an exceptionally wondrous scene.”^250

Compared to the active and colorful Shanghai era, Huang’s time in Beijing was characterized by a more introverted atmosphere. Socializing with friends and collaborating with colleagues had been an important part in his artistic life, but in the Japanese occupied Beijing, he chose to close his door and even burn bridges. He maintained an unambiguous position regarding the puppet

^250 Wang Zhongxiu, Nianpu, 298.
authorities under Japanese rule. For instance, in 1939, he turned down an invitation to a banquet from a Japanese painter; when the latter then came to his home to pay a visit, he excused himself from receiving the guest by claiming that he was sick. In 1943 and 1944, the Japanese leaders of the Beijing Art School wanted to celebrate Huang’s eightieth birthday by hosting an exhibition. But Huang turned it down.

During this period, Huang wrote a number of important treatises on the history and aesthetics of Chinese painting, summarizing and reflecting upon his decades of experience. He also devoted more time to sorting through, organizing and publishing his collections. Based on them as unique and firsthand evidence, he produced scholarly works on philology and ancient scripts. Simultaneously, he continued to meticulously practice ink landscape painting, honing his techniques and exploring bolder new styles. Naturally he also sold his works, but only selectively, despite the serious inflation of the time. So says he in a letter to a friend: “I give paintings only to selected people, and would not paint a single stroke if the person asking is not introduced by the closest of friends. Requests from art shops are without exception all turned down. My intention is to leave refined works to the future rather than to compete with others for reputation or profit.”

Finally, Japan surrendered in 1945. And in 1948, after a whole decade, Huang returned to live in the South, settling in Hangzhou to take up a professorship at the local Art School. He continued to teach, paint and socialize actively after the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949. Huang Binhong died in 1955, at the age of ninety-two. His life spanned 251 Wang Zhongxiu, *Nianpu*, 413.

252 According to traditional Chinese custom, one’s age was counted one or two years more, so Huang, born in 1865, was considered to have reached the age of eighty in 1943.


substantial periods of the Qing Empire, the Republic of China, and the People’s Republic. Although his exceptionally long artistic and intellectual career maintained a unified vision that balanced the traditional and the modern, the native and the international, the perception of his art underwent changes that contradicted this unified vision. As has been shown, during the last years of the Qing Empire, he assumed an unambiguously progressive outlook. But during the Republican era, the increasingly radical Westernization movement quickly outpaced him; even though he was always aware of and sympathetic to European artistic trends, his choice of sticking to the traditional ink painting style and his unrivaled knowledge in traditional learning based on the study of its artifacts must have seemed both intimidating and outmoded for the modernists. In the fifties, the general cultural atmosphere was entirely gearing toward proletariat ideology. Although still revered, Huang already seemed old-fashioned and out of place. Unlike his much younger soul mate Fu Lei, Huang was lucky to have died well before the destruction of culture started, and was therefore spared of any humiliation. But this also cemented his image as a man of the past rather than of the future.

2. Collector and Connoisseur

In the proceeding section, I give a brief account of Huang’s long, multifaceted and prolific life. In the following sections I will highlight the episodes that played central roles in his intellectual and artistic development. These episodes invariably had close links to his activities as a collector. This aspect of his life has caught the attention of scholars specializing in Huang studies. But I want to push the existing scholarship forward to demonstrate that for him collecting was not a side project, a complementary pastime, nor simply a hobby, a preparatory stage in which he accumulated research materials, but it stood at the very heart of his career, and
is crucial for understanding him as an intellectual and artist. I argue that Huang used collecting was a method, a cultural technique, and treating it as an integral part of an epistemological and aesthetic development in which abstract, intangible concepts about history and artistic styles constantly negotiated with concrete materiality. It was through this back-and-forth process between thinking about and actually engaging with historic artifacts that Huang’s vision of the past and future of Chinese culture, and his relationship with the accelerating modernization and Westernization project, unfolded.

2.1. Ancients Seals, Script Reform, and the Materiality of Painting

As has been mentioned, Huang Binhong’s motive for joining the Society for the Preservation of National Learning was to fight against those who advocated for the abolishment of the Chinese script. Incidentally, these people included another protagonist of this dissertation, the literary giant Lu Xun.

The Chinese script has never been a transparent and neutral means of communication. On the contrary, it has been frequently used as a political tool. At the beginning of a unified Chinese empire stood the mighty Shi Huangdi [the First Emperor], whose decree to standardize the writing system across his territory was essentially a political decision. After more than two millennia, at the very end of the empire’s history came the iconoclastic May Fourth generation who advocated for a total abolition of the script. This generation of intellectuals fiercely took it to task for hindering social progress, for being a conspirator of disgraced traditional values, and for representing perverse ideologies. This debate involved many of the leading figures of the generation, such as Hu Shi 胡適, Qian Xuantong 錢玄同, Zhao Yuanren 趙元任, and last but not
least, Lu Xun. Among numerous examples are Lu Xun’s two essays dealing with this subject: “Chinese Script and Romanization” (1934) and “On New Script” (1935), where he criticizes the script for its inefficiency in recording and representing pronunciations. Apparently his attitude toward the traditional writing system was downright negative:

It is true that the Chinese script is a treasure passed down from ancient times. But our ancestors were older than the script, so we ourselves are more a treasure passed down from ancient times. To sacrifice us for the script, or to sacrifice the script for us? This is a question that anyone not yet completely mad can instantly answer.256

After the founding of the People’s Republic, a decision was reached that rather than abolishing the script, it should be simplified and rid of its archaic and outlandish complexity. The reform took off in earnest, and eventually manages to dominate part of today’s global proliferation of the Chinese language. But the Chinese script continues to be a problematic issue that attracts debates. For example, at the end of the 1980s, a time of cultural and political crisis, it was again taken to task for representing an oppressive but crumbling meaning-system, against which Xu Bing’s Tianshu [A Book from the Sky] staged another coup by creating fake characters that looked like real ones but meant absolutely nothing. By deconstructing the script’s semiotic functions, Xu Bing’s work frustrated its viewers and called the very authority of the script into question.257

Different considerations motivated people’s opinions towards the Chinese writing system; some were concerned about the efficiency of verbal communication across a broad territory in

255 For a general discussion on Chinese script reform, see Zhou Youguang: Hanzi gaige gailun (Beijing: Wenzi Gaige Chubanshe, 1961).

256 Lu Xun, Quanji, vol. 5, 586.

which too many dialects existed; some cared about raising literacy and improving access to knowledge; others believed that the only way to save the sinking Chinese Empire was to completely Westernize it, including its language. As a painter, calligrapher and collector, Huang Binhong was none of the above. His approach to the Chinese script was probably different from most others.

The previous two chapters have discussed Luo Zhenyu’s specialty of collecting oracle bones, and Lu Xun’s obsession with ancient stone inscriptions and their rubbings. For Huang, his lifelong choice of collectables was ancient seals. In “A Note on Binhong’s Collection of Han Dynasty Bronze Seals,”258 he recalls that he started learning to carve seals when he was a child. After growing up, he came across a certain Mr. Wang Huaizhi 汪懷之, who owned a delicate seal. Huang was fascinated by it, and Wang gave it to him as a present. So began Huang’s lifelong interest. Very soon he acquired a reputation for amassing large amount of precious and rare ancient seals. Dealers would come to him to sell them. He published numerous collections of the rubbings of his seals, and wrote prefaces for each of the publications.

Huang’s interest in seals was so famous that several times some of them were stolen. One documented incident happened on June 13, 1922. On that day his neighbor’s house caught fire; Huang’s wife took care their baby son, and entrusted the case containing the seals to their servant (Huang was not at home). After the fire, the case was nowhere to be found.259

What so fascinated Huang in these seals? Answers can be found in the large amount of articles he wrote for his collections, the most comprehensive among them being “On Seals” 敘摹

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258 Huang Binhong, Huang Binhong Wenji, vol. 3 (Shanghai: Shanghai Shuhua Chubanshe, 1999), 316-7.
259 Wang Zhongxiu, Nianpu, 158.
To open the article, Huang refutes the Han Dynasty scholar Yang Xiong’s claim that seal carving is trivial craftsmanship. He argues that seals preserved a lot of important historic knowledge when most of the easily perishable books were lost. More importantly, the seals recorded the history of scripts from their original down to today, and the complex relations among different script systems that were later assimilated and disappeared.

Then he continues with twenty-nine chapters dealing with specialized topics concerning ancient seals, including their history in each dynasty, their circulation, carving techniques, forms, scripts, rubbing, cataloguing, use, connoisseurship, collecting, forgery. In particular, he singles out the fact that the origin of seal carving unites the most important aspects of a civilization: language (in the form of script) and pictorial representation of the external world were one and the same technique. Together they held immense power that constructed political and cultural orders and laid the foundation of knowledge, though these were disguised behind myths.

The common origin of writing and painting, or the semiotic and representational techniques, is the foundational principle of Huang’s art. And these techniques are never detachable from their material media: before writing there was carving, which defined the semiotic system’s basic material form, and added an aesthetic quality to it. Huang’s lifelong study of ancient seals enforced this principle, and retrospectively illuminated the very first lesson he learnt as a child from Mr. Ni: “[painting] should follow the method of writing/calligraphy: each stroke should be clearly distinguishable, so that [your painting] would not resemble the craftsman’s.” Throughout his life, Huang concentrated on achieving, with paper and brush, the calligraphic qualities made through carving on hard surfaces of ancient artifacts. In a 1947 letter he writes, “for years, I have studied the scripts of the Seven States of the Eastern Zhou Dynasty, and collect many inscribed

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261 Huang, Wenji, vol. 3, 234.
ancient seals, bricks, tiles, potteries, coins and knives, especially those having inscriptions that are different from [the styles of] Shang oracle bones and Zhou bronzes, and [...] look for their beauty in calligraphy.”

This letter also touches upon another focus of his, namely the history of various ancient Chinese scripts that were in use in the Shang, Zhou and Qin Dynasties, based on evidence found in ancient seals. Aided by these studies, he ventured into philology, expertly explaining archaic characters’ meanings through investigating their origins and evolutions across different script systems. Examples include his authoritative interpretations of the characters “Nuo” 儼, “Sui” 綏 and “Xu” 許, all of which were based on the ancient seals he collected or came across.

Therefore, the script was never an abstract and immaterial system of signs for Huang; it was essentially indistinguishable from the material world. To understand the script’s historicity is to be mindful of its materiality, and to be aware of the hard surfaces on which the script was realized. In this sense, inscriptions on bones, stones and metals all interested Huang, which explains his affinity with Luo Zhenyu and Wang Guowei’s work on the oracle bones and their script. Huang himself benefited greatly from their research, and published several articles introducing and reporting its progress.

In comparison, although he spent most of his life dealing with paper and brush, even they seemed too immaterial to him. Indeed, the art of seal carving informed him of the path to transform calligraphy and painting; what he sought to achieve on paper was the sensation of hard-surface carving, with the lines’ hard-won subtleties and varieties. The art of seal carving

262 Wang Zhongxiu, Nianpu, 478.
was the soul of Huang’s calligraphy and painting. As will be discussed in section three, it is precisely this aspect that not only won Fu Lei’s appreciation, but also directly connected Huang to the spirit of the Western modernist movements in art that increasingly shun verisimilitude for abstract expressivity.

Huang’s view is most lucidly articulated in his article “The Value of Chinese Painting lies in Brush and Ink - a Discussion from Chinese Painting to Literati Painting.”266 In this essay, he names three levels of literati painting. In ascending order, they are the painting of poets and writers, the painting of calligraphers, and the painting of scholars who study bronze and stone inscriptions. Huang considers that the last one to be of the highest artistic value, because their paintings were closest to the most original material form of writing. The carving on hard surfaces preserved the most varied shades of manual power, and the most intense expressivity of the line, which again had nothing to do with superficial verisimilitude. Paintings by scholars who study bronze and stone inscriptions preserve the heaviest contents of history and tradition. In other words, the more material and less ephemeral a painting is, the greater artistic weight it carries.

Huang’s intimate contact with the materiality of the past through collecting provided extraordinary inspiration for him, enriching his artistic awareness of a long, rich and complex tradition. This was shown in his universal, almost encyclopedic taste for Chinese art. An example can be found in a letter answering his friend Bai Jiao 白蕉’s question concerning the authenticity of an artwork. The object in question was a jade piece with inscriptions, said to be from the Shang Dynasty. Bai sent a rubbing of the inscriptions to Huang for opinion. Huang laid out his process of reasoning as such:

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I have harvested a lot from collecting ancient seals. My arguments regarding one object are always supported by comparing another object; I never opinionate without evidence. Among the two [rubbings of] jades, one is of superior quality; its script is relatively late. In the middle there is a square seal; the ‘chao xi’ (朝錫) characters are quite clear, but the rest are illegible. The other [inscription] has an ancient script, but its spirit is close to Wei and Han Periods, so the only way to judge is use an aesthetic-historic method. Its outward beauty seems to differ from the inward beauty of the Three Epochs...

Huang was ninety-one years old when he said this. It shows that he had already assimilated the entire tradition in his mind and heart. He examined artworks by combining multiple methods, the chief among which are philology, the artifact’s formal history and its manner of writing. From these tangible aspects he felt the intangible spirit. Naturally, this latter one is subjective, and cannot be immune from scientific contestation. But rather than science, connoisseurship belongs to the realm of connoisseurship, where personal tastes and experiences are what matters. This aspect of Huang’s intellectual life will be dealt with below.

2.2. Transactions of Artworks and Thoughts on the Shanghai Cultural Market

Huang Binhong’s learnedness, fine taste, wide-ranging curiosity, passion for culture and open-mindedness took him beyond simply collecting artworks. He communicated with artists, art historians and dealers both close by and far away, some of whom were from abroad. Moreover, making good use of the vibrant commercial culture of Shanghai, Huang directly involved himself in the trade in artworks. This would be the natural next step for a collector who has amassed an impressive amount of objects. Exchange of objects would become much more frequent and in larger amounts, which in turn benefited his intellectual and artistic engagements; in the process, he was able to at least observe, if not actually own, an even broader scope of ancient artifacts. At one point, he was also actively working to bring Chinese artworks abroad for exhibitions as a

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267 Huang, Nianpu, 544.
way of promoting its aesthetics, and turning the transcultural project from theoretical discussion on paper into real transactions.

Shanghai provided the perfect setting for Huang to explore the exciting, oftentimes unexpected, and sometimes dangerous grounds of collecting and trading. Its American, British and French concessions were neighbors of areas whose sovereignty was still retained by the Chinese. The line between rule by multiple authorities and lawlessness was actually not so clear, which made this city the “paradise of adventurers,”268 and attracted all kinds of persons with diverse backgrounds from all over the world to hunt for fortune. The most famous example is the Baghdad-born Jewish merchant Silas Aaron Hardoon (1851 - 1931).269 Through successful investments in Shanghai, at one point he became the richest person in Asia. He and his Eurasian wife Lisa Roos 羅迦陵 built their family garden “Ai Li Yuan” 愛儷園, known as the Hardoon Garden, in which they also founded “Cangsheng Mingzhi Academy” 倉聖明智大學. This institution was able to secure no less a person than Wang Guowei as one of its faculty members, despite the latter’s reservation about its quality. The Haroos were also avid collectors of precious ancient books, artworks and artifacts, and generous patrons of scholarly research. It was in one of their academy’s exhibitions that Huang Binhong met Wang Guowei and saw his impressive Xiongnu seal.

This would be only one of numerous occasions in which Huang had the opportunity to view and even closely examine ancient artworks. Some of the more notable impressions are recorded


in an article he wrote, entitled “Notes on Shanghai Antique Markets” 滬濱古玩市場記.²⁷⁰ He remarks that since the time when Shanghai was established as a trading port, people from around the world had come to live next to each other, brought in international products, and naturally also antiques. Gradually the number of antique markets increased.

Huang identifies two major competitors on the Shanghai art market: the Beijing collectors and their Japanese counterparts. Resourceful mandarins in Beijing knew that there were numerous great ancient collectors in the South; their collections eventually dispersed and were up for sale. So every year these mandarins would take the trouble to travel southward and hunt for treasures. Their interests fanned an ingenious but infamous art: forgery. There were even different schools: Yangzhou forgeries and Suzhou forgeries were among the better ones. After the Qing Dynasty fell, ex-officials also joined the game, holding frequent exhibitions and selling their own collections.

Huang observes that the Japanese were the other major group of collectors, with informed and refined tastes. He mentioned a specific case that demonstrates the strong influence collecting is able to exercise on aesthetics and art history, and it involved none other than the great Luo Zhenyu: “Since Mr. Luo Zhenyu from Shangyu immigrated to Japan, he promoted the Song and Yuan Dynasty paintings, considering them way superior than Ming Dynasty ones. From then on, Japanese collectors all wanted to own the former.”²⁷¹

Luo’s activities are given detailed analysis by Hong Zaixin 洪再新 in his article “The ‘Leftover Old Man’ Establishing Himself on the International Art Market: On Luo Zhenyu’s

²⁷⁰ Huang, Wenji, vol. 1, 290-2.
²⁷¹ Huang, Wenji, vol. 1, 291.
Scholarly Achievements and Art Trades while in Exile in Kyoto.” Hong observes that at the time when Qing fell, Luo’s impressive collections already attracted international attention. The Chinese were worried that, with the anti-Republic Luo moving to Japan, the priceless treasures he gathered would be permanently lost to a foreign country, whereas the Japanese were amazed by the paintings he exhibited. According to Hong, Luo had a shrewd business mind, and was able to grasp the trends in both the art market and intellectual circles in Japan. He published catalogues of his own painting collection, and wrote authoritative and convincing prefaces to introduce lesser-known Chinese painters to Japanese collectors. This proved to be a successful promotion, and the earnings enabled him and Wang Guowei to continue their research on antiquity, in particular the oracle bones. As a result of Luo’s promotion, many Japanese collectors came to Shanghai in search of Song and Yuan Dynasty paintings, which once again prompted a wave of forgeries.

Moreover, the prosperous art market stimulated the surfacing of valuable and often hitherto unheard-of objects:

Since export has been numerous recently, ancient artifacts gradually become rare, but the demand grows, and price rises. Beside calligraphy and paintings, bronze vessels also cost much, ranging from a thousand to tens of thousands. Never-before-seen objects surface from time to time. As to porcelains, bronzes, jades and stones, sculptures, lacquers, these are all being dug out from ancient locations and remote countryside; abandoned temples’ steles, ruinous buildings’ murals - all obscure artworks are being removed and brought to the market to await collectors.


274 Huang, *Wenji*, vol. 1, 291.

275 Huang, *Wenji*, vol. 1, 292.
In other words, collecting and trading were among the crucial driving forces behind archeological excavations, which in turn served as the foundation and important inspirations of scholarly research.

Huang then recounts his own exciting journey of discovery, including famous ancients’ calligraphic couplets, letters, fans, landscape paintings, and especially a Zhou Dynasty large official seal and a Qin Dynasty small seal. “I was ecstatic that I bowed down my head and walked back and forth for a long time, feeling happy that [the dealer] did not trick me, and that I had the privilege to build connections with the ancients.”

During his time in Shanghai, Huang also came into contact with a number of foreign scholars and dealers. These people’s fresh views guided their collecting and research interests, which interacted with Huang’s own. In the process Huang exercised his influence on them, while he himself became aware of the international trends in art and aesthetics. For instance, Huang’s short article “Ancient Paintings Go Abroad” 古画出洋, and a preface he wrote for an art catalogue testify to his involvement and promoting the trade of certain branches of Chinese art abroad. In 1913, an art catalogue entitled Chinese Pictorial Art 中华名画 (Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1914)  was published by a foreign art dealer, E. A. Strehlneek. The reason I say “foreign” is because this mysterious businessman never revealed his true nationality, and let himself be described variously as being British, German, Latvian, and Serbian. He opened his own antique shop called “Strehlneek’s Chinese Studio” in Shanghai, and sold forgeries together with authentic objects. He therefore earned a bad reputation among foreigners in Shanghai. But he managed to brand himself as an upper-class philanthropist and presented himself as such to Chinese scholars.

276 Ibid.
278 E. A. Strehlneek: Chinese Pictorial Art 中华名画 (Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1914).
Strehlneed took much care to compile a very nicely printed catalogue of his own collections, which contains bilingual notes in Chinese and English, and Chinese and German. Behind the publication of this catalogue is an intricate story about collecting, advertisement and trade, and is full of cross-cultural connotation, deliberate misinformation and obscurcation. It has been recounted in detailed by Hong Zaixing in his essay “Artistic Ideal in Antique Deals.”

Strehlneed invited two authorities to evaluate his collection. As a result, the catalogue bears two eye-catching prefaces by two prominent figures of the time: Wu Changshuo 吳昌碩 and Huang Binhong. Wu was justifiably called “a famous artist.” But far more interesting and revelatory is the fact that instead of a painter, Huang was branded “a Chinese connoisseur,” a reminder of his primary identity in the 1910s. In the short note prefacing the catalogue, so writes Huang,

In days of old one Ni Yun-lin built the Ch‘ing Pi gallery, in which he arranged a collection of specimens of calligraphy, famous paintings, tripods, sacrificial cups, bowls and seals, artistically displaying their subtle charm so as to move even the admiration of foreigners. Nowadays, when European civilization is gradually pervading the East, our people attach the greatest importance to materialistic culture, and regard with unconcern and icy indifference the choicest flowers of antiquarian research, which are thus slowly perishing. This state of affairs is a source of deep pain to the exponents of Chinese art.

Huang goes on to praise Strehlneek’s knowledge and taste in appreciating Chinese art, and especially his commitment to collecting ancient masterpieces and publishing them to benefit the

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280 Strehlneed, Chinese Pictorial Art, 4.

281 Strehlneed, Chinese Pictorial Art, 6.

282 Ibid.
general public. Huang also supplied three general remarks on bronze, porcelain, and jade respectively.

Strehlneek’s shrewd advertising aside, what I would like to stress is that Huang was occupying a delicate position: on the one hand, he was speaking as a connoisseur, as someone who knew art and had the authority to authenticate it. On the other hand, he was working for a dealer whose aim was undoubtedly to make money. Even more complicated was Huang’s own national and cultural ideology: as a patriotic person he would not be too happy to see the invaluable treasures of his own country being exported to foreign lands. This is vividly illustrated by another article he wrote to promote this catalogue, entitled “Exporting Ancient Paintings.” Here Huang writes,

Since the International Legations invaded Beijing, the Central Dynasty’s antique artifacts and the palaces’ secret collections have been in untraceable dispersal; curious and incredible treasures have all been scattered. Famous paintings from dynasties have been exported by foreign ships.283

At this point we may rightly assume that this essay is an angry accusation of the barbarian acts of imperialism. And yet Huang’s concern is on something totally different:

American and European counties put them in exhibitions and museums for their compatriots to carry out academic research. From then on Westerners start to admire Eastern fine arts, and beside ancient porcelain, bronze and jade, they add ancient Chinese paintings to their collections, [They also] print them and gather them into albums, and spread them to the five continents.284

Therefore, his attention is actually on the intellectual and aesthetic exchanges resulted from war atrocities. And his attitude - at least in this specific case - is cosmopolitan rather than nationalistic. After mentioning Strehlneek’s collecting and publication of Chinese paintings as an

283 Huang, Wenji, vol. 1, 94.

284 Ibid.
example, Huang moves on to the issue of authentication. Acknowledging that “ancient Chinese paintings, regardless of whether they are exquisite or coarse, beautiful or ugly, all have been collected by dealers,“ he then takes pains to explain the materiality of silk, ink and pigments, and ways to determine what period a painting comes from. The essay concludes with an important statement regarding the evolution of Westerners’ appreciation of Chinese painting, as reflected in the former’s taste of collecting:

As the European and American collectors study the achievements of the Chinese aesthetic principles (Six Method 六法), their tastes also evolve in time, with their own different orientations. Initially the ancient Chinese painting buyers often collected colored, small-brushed works, by those who the Chinese call merely “artisan” (作家). So even unrefined printed and colored works on the market were purchased, often by the French at the time. Later [they] started to realize that Chinese painting theory emphasizes brushwork and the use of ink, to which countries in Europe and America subsequently shifted their attention, and collected works by Wu Xiaoxian (吳小僊), Zhang Pingshan (張平山), Jiang Sansong (蔣三松), what the Chinese call the arrogant and heretic. Later again they realized these works are too wild and radical, and shift to the orthodox...

This remark contains a crucial assessment of the Chinese pictorial tradition and its place in the world. As Kong Lingwei notes, two opposing views characterize early twentieth-century Chinese responses to Western art. On the one hand, the reform movement leader Kang Youwei thought that since Su Dongpo of the Song Dynasty derided a painter’s pursuit of verisimilitude as being childish, Chinese painting had been corrupted by what he considers a ridiculous disregard of techniques of mimesis. On the opposite side of Kang was Huang, who thought that the greatness of Chinese painting resides precisely in the abstract brushwork and the expressive power of lines

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286 Huang, *Wenji*, vol. 1, 96.
that defy rules of verisimilitude. In the already-quoted piece, Huang expresses his confidence that such aesthetics has a place in a cosmopolitan world culture, and hopes that the dispersion and wider circulation of the best and most unique branch of Chinese painting could hold a constructive dialogue with world art, and form an organic part of it.

Besides being involved in the Strehlneek project, Huang also befriended a number of foreign scholars. In 1925, he met Edward Bright Bruce, who was then traveling in China looking to purchase ancient paintings. He often consulted Huang regarding his choice of artworks. According to the Philips Collection’s website, Bruce’s Chinese landscape painting and sculpture collections form the core of the Asian collection at Harvard University’s Fogg Museum. The German art historian Viktoria von Winterfeldt-Contag (known as Victoria Contag, 1906 - 1973) was another regular contact of Huang’s. Under the latter’s influence, Contag compiled *Seals of Chinese Painters and Collectors of the Ming and Ch’ing Periods* (together with Wang Chi-ch’ien). Huang also built connections with the French collector and bibliophile Jean-Pierre Dubosc, as well as L. C. Driscoll, professor of art history at the University of Chicago. His intellectual affinity with the latter was particularly deep. In a 1940 letter to a friend, Huang says the following,

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In the recent three decades, the Europeans and Americans have been collecting ancient Chinese paintings and studying its theory, and gradually making progress, reaching its innermost mysteries. They have understood the secret of Song and Yuan paintings [...] Yesterday I received a letter from Professor Driscoll of Chicago University; she pays a lot of attention to late Ming painters’ works, and especially the value of their the minimalist brushwork landscapes. She is really enlightened.292

From comments such as this, we can reconstruct Huang’s approach to the relationship between Chinese and Western arts. He did not consider the native Chinese styles to be inferior, and was therefore not interested in fusion and reform. What he disliked was the superficial trends within the Chinese tradition, and he was upset with foreigners learning precisely these. Moreover, he was aware of the modernist trends being invented in the West, and held a positive view on them. In this regard, he believed that instead of “reforming” Chinese painting, the best of this tradition could actually contribute to a global movement of art revolution. This aspect of Huang’s thinking will become clear when I discuss his friendship with Fu Lei.

The vibrant scene of collecting in early twentieth-century Shanghai raises many of the major issues entailed by collecting, including dispersion, reevaluation, the role of money in aesthetics, and in particular the problem of authenticity, as well as the various methods that could resolve it. Although the scope of this chapter does not allow me to go into details, it is worth mentioning briefly that Huang was a friend of another painter - arguably better known among outsiders - Zhang Daqian 張大千. His own works were, in my humble opinion, clever but kitschy rather than having real depth, but in one field he was an absolute genius, perhaps with few equals in

292 Wang Zhongxiu, Nianpu, 424.
history, namely forgery. He was able to make fake works of famous ancient artists that tricked the sharpest eyes.293

While Zhang Daqian was busy making forgeries, Huang Binhong devoted himself to the opposite: authenticating the artworks in the Imperial Collections, which was another remarkable event in Huang’s life that had a significant impact on his artistic development.

After Japan intensified its assault on Chinese territory in 1933, the Republic government started to move the imperial collections and archives in Beijing southward. Countless treasures were packaged and transported to Shanghai in the same year, and then to the Republic’s Capital Nanjing in 1936. At that time an incident happened: Yi Peiji 易培基, the director of Forbidden City Museum, was wrongly accused of stealing artworks from the collection and replacing them with forgeries. In late 1935, the Capital prosecutor appointed Huang Binhong to authenticate these works, which is another evidence of Huang’s authoritative status as a connoisseur.294

On December 20, 1935, Huang entered the bursary to start his authenticating work, which lasted until April 1937, involving three locations: Nanjing, Shanghai and Beijing. For Huang - and indeed for anyone except the emperors - this was a once-in-a-lifetime experience to get intimately acquainted with the most sublime masterpieces from the entire history of Chinese painting, which were previously reserved for the emperors’ personal pleasure. This experience resulted in more than a thousand entries of notes written by Huang, each corresponding to one


294 Wang Zhongxiu, Nianpu, 368-72.
artwork. They were later collected and published as *Notes on Authenticating the Old Palace’s Paintings* 故宮審畫錄. In a short preface, he writes the following,

Most of the ancient Chinese paintings before the Tang and Song Dynasties do not bear signatures. Each has its own school, and is called “famous school.” Since Yuan and Ming Dynasties, painters learnt from various schools, but signed their own names, and are called “famous persons.” What are passed down from antiquity to today include methods of brushwork, use of ink, composition, and vital rhythm. Those that have both methods and vital rhythms are considered authentic. Those that have techniques in brushwork and ink, but no vital rhythms, are called “imitation by the eye” (臨本). Those that have [good] composition but no techniques in brushwork or ink are called “imitation by the hand” (摹本). [...] The work of authentication [is based on] the knowledge of chronology and the difference between various schools; so it needs strict research on principles and methods, but also close scrutiny of minute details of paper and pigments, and careful study of signatures, inscriptions and seals. Based on these, it is not difficult to find out forgeries.

This laborious but ultimately rewarding task enriched Huang’s already extremely refined artistic sensibility; it helped him further develop an empirical connoisseurship, and a concept of historical authenticity that was nuanced enough to accommodate the entire spectrum of ancient artifact’s complex states. The authentication notes contain plenty of examples to demonstrate them: besides the authentic ones and outright forgeries, he noted all kinds of possible combinations: authentic painting, fake inscription; or imitated painting that was done in so masterly a way and so close in time to the original that it retained the highest possible degree of authenticity; or simply a disciple’s work in which he/she practiced a certain master’s brushwork, and had been taken to be by the master’s. In the end, these paintings in the imperial collection proved that the idea of historic authenticity is relative and malleable, depending significantly upon the authenticator’s point of view: a tenth-century painting does not become fake by having a seventeenth century collector’s inscription and seal. In a culture that values innovation by way

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296 Huang, *Wenji*, vol. 4, 28.
of imitation, accumulation and assimilation, simply calling a sixteenth-century fine copy of a twelfth-century painting “fake” betrays an ignorance of precisely this cultural mechanism, and hinders rather than enhances our understanding of both this specific artwork and the style it represents. Oftentimes such a copy might be the only existent image of previous generations of copies that trace their Urtext back to the original, and therefore, instead of being a forgery, this last copy becomes a precious trace of the spirit of the original.

However, Huang Binhong had to negotiate between two poles: on the one hand, there were the complex meanings of historic authenticity; on the other hand, there was the simple and reductionist requirement of legal authentication required by his employer. Therefore every note ends with a terse, powerful verdict, as short as just one character. They are either “zhen” (authentic, 真), “wei” (fake, 偽), “jiu wei” (ancient forgery, 舊偽), or “mo ben” (manual copy, 拷本). Of course there are also cases where Huang suspended judgment, or gave only approximations, such as “no later than Ming.”

The straightforward verdicts aside, reading the descriptions and analyses, one cannot help wonder how they could be used as legal evidence by the judge: Huang seemed to care little about this line of reductionist thinking, and got totally enchanted by the wondrous, tangible details of history. Ultimately, he did not deny that judging artworks was essentially a subjective matter of taste and connoisseurship. Materiality is undeniably the basis, but the way to examine it is not through forensic technology, but through a tactile approach, namely viewing and touching, because the ultimate goal is not simply to determine the physical age of the material, but the spirit of the artwork: “The most important thing in assessing ancient artifacts is their spirit. The ancients’ spirit was primarily embodied in the making of artifacts, on which there are images,

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297 Huang, Wenji, vol. 4, 37, entry 72.
inscriptions and forms; all of these are where their spirit locates. [...] we should get to know the ancients’ spirit first of all through their artifacts."^{298}

3. Huang Binhong and Fu Lei: from Collecting to Cultural Cosmopolitanism

3.1. An Unexpected Affinity

As has been mentioned in the first section, when Huang reached the august age of eighty in 1943, the Japanese authority in Beijing hoped to honor him by organizing what would have been his very first solo exhibition, but the old master refused. Obviously the reason was a purely moral one, for around the same time, his first solo exhibition did take place, but in faraway Shanghai, in the artist’s absence. The curator was Fu Lei, the much younger art critic and Europhile whom Huang first met in 1932. There was not much interaction in the intervening eleven years. But now they quickly built a close intellectual and artistic affinity. Two aspects make their friendship unique: first, together they forged a possible path for the renewal of Chinese painting, which nonetheless grew out of their dissimilar cultural upbringings. Second, the practice of art collecting prepared the intellectual and aesthetic basis for this unexpected elective affinity; it is an aspect whose importance has eluded previous discussions on the subject.

In many ways, Fu Lei was the opposite of Huang. Born in Shanghai in 1908, he belonged to the radical May Fourth generation whose worldview was powerfully shaped by the West.^{299} He first received a traditional education at home, then went to attend the Anglican St. John’s University in Shanghai. At the age of twenty, he traveled to France to study art theory and French literature at the Université de Paris. In 1932, he returned to Shanghai, and remained there

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^{298} Huang, Wenji, vol. 2, 406.

^{299} For the life of Fu Lei, see Guangchen Chen: “Fu Lei and Fou Ts’ong: Cultural Cosmopolitanism and Its Price,” in David Der-wei Wang, ed.: A New Literary History of Modern China (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017).
for the most of his life. Today, Fu Lei is remembered primarily as an influential translator of French literature, with his most widely-known contributions being no less than fifteen of Balzac’s novels, works by Voltaire and Prosper Mérimée, and most notably an extraordinarily popular Chinese rendition of the Nobel laureate Romain Rolland’s Beethoven-inspired novel *Jean-Christophe*, which raises it to an iconic status in China that it never enjoyed in its native France.

But Fu Lei’s achievements went far beyond translation. In the field of literary criticism, he published prolifically on Victor Hugo, George Bernard Shaw, contemporary French literature, literary history, and translation theory. He was among the very first to recognize the talent of Eileen Chang when she was just beginning to publish novellas. But he also mounted a serious critique of her limitations in the first heavyweight analysis of her narrative art, “On Eileen Chang’s Novel,” the persuasiveness of which was such that it prompted the self-esteemed and rather aloof novelist to publish a serious response.

In the field of art criticism, Fu Lei prepared twenty lectures for his art history course at Shanghai Art School, covering artists such as Giotto, Donatello, Botticelli, Da Vinci, Michelangelo, Raphael, Bernini, Rembrandt, Rubens, Velasquez, Poussin, Reynolds, Gainsborough, Jean-Baptiste Greuze and the Barbizon School painters, as well as Diderot’s art theory. These lectures, published posthumously as *Twenty Lectures on World Art Masterpieces*, are infused with comparative insight between East and West. Beside lecturing on the classical tradition of European art, Fu Lei was also keen on introducing European modernism, such as Henri Matisse, August Rodin, Paul Cézanne, and even some Dadaists. He translated Paul Gsell’s

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Moreover, Fu Lei wrote an insightful review of the Russian-Jewish expatriate composer Aaron Avshalomov’s music that fused Western orchestration techniques and Chinese musical elements. He was the lonely champion of the talented and immensely promising but sadly short-lived and now forgotten composer and violist Tan Xiaolin 譚小麟, a Yale University graduate and one of Paul Hindemith’s favorite students. Fu Lei tutored his son Fou Ts’ong 傅聰 in both Chinese culture and Western classical music. Fou Ts’ong won prizes at the Warsaw Chopin Competition, has maintained a long and illustrative career, and is now a revered piano guru.

Fu Lei was at the center of an elite Shanghai intellectual circle in the nineteen-forties, maintaining highly symbiotic friendships with such towering figures as the legendary comparatist couple Qian Zhongshu 錢鍾書 and Yang Jiang 杨绛. He was also a close friend of the translator and translation theorist Stephen C. Soong 宋淇, who happened to be the confidant and literary executor of Eileen Chang. All these impressive activities show Fu Lei’s deep affinity with the European tradition and the modernist cultural movements in both China and abroad. They therefore form a striking contrast with another of his most important devotions: for over twenty years since 1943, he helped bring the then relatively obscure Huang Binhong to national prominence. The friendship between Huang Binhong and Fu Lei, two important but seemingly vastly different cultural figures in modern China, defies all expectation. Their difference was immediately apparent, not least because of the distance between Fu Lei’s circle and Huang’s: the former was comprised of youthful and cosmopolitan intellectuals, usually fluent in more than one foreign language and had studied abroad; in comparison, the latter consisted of elderly
literati of the bygone era. This friendship amply demonstrates the delicate equilibrium between the old and new culture, and between China and the West.

In the specific context of painting, the Chinese-Western contrast cannot be more pronounced. For those Chinese who were able to travel to Europe to observe and even study Western painting, an entirely new, and in many ways superior set of techniques became available. This is certainly true on the purely representational level: the immensely varied palate of colors and the scientifically-based perspective allow for a lifelike reproduction of visual experience. On the contrary, Chinese painting, and its landscape genre in particular, stems from calligraphy, and focuses on the expressive power of the line rather than verisimilitude. Therefore space is malleably depicted, the color more suggestive than realistic. More importantly, the idyllic mood of traditional landscape paintings was detached from the turbulent reality of modern China, a country saddled with national crisis on all levels. And this art form, traditionally associated with the literati class, seemed all too elitist for the proletariat class, which was gradually coming to the center stage of revolution.

Fu Lei was precisely one of those who had intimate experience with Western paintings. Therefore, it was understandable that nothing significant came through when the freshly minted Europhile first met the elderly master. The occasion was also highly symbolic: it was the banquet welcoming the painter Liu Haisu, whom Fu Lei had accompanied on the journey from France to Shanghai. Liu was older and much more famous, and Fu Lei looked up at him as an idol and the future hope of Chinese art. Huang and Fu were not on the same page at that time; after this event, Huang continued his usual life, concentrating on painting, collecting and socializing, whereas Fu Lei dashed into a passionate but oftentimes frustrating process searching for his cultural ideal.
So what was their difference at that time? How did their thoughts evolve respectively during the subsequent years? The inquiry starts with analyses of two early articles by Fu Lei, “La Crise de L’Art Chinois Moderne” (hereafter “La Crise”)\textsuperscript{302} and “Liu Haisu” (hereafter “Liu”).\textsuperscript{303}

He wrote “La Crise” in the last year of his stay in Europe, at the invitation of Florent Fels, editor of the Parisian magazine *L’Art Vivant*. It was originally published in French for the magazine’s special issue on Chinese art; Fu later translated it into Chinese and published it in Shanghai. It was partly a defense of Liu Haisu’s introduction of nude models in his painting class in China, but this article also epitomizes both Fu’s ideals and frustrations about Chinese art at the time. Reading it after reviewing the life and work of Huang Binhong, one can see very clearly how narratives about history are constructed according to the point of view one chooses to begin, and the goal one aims to reach.

This article contains accurate observations about the difference between Chinese and Western art, showing Fu Lei’s good grasp of the two traditions. According to him, the difference is as follows,

Artists [in China] should detach themselves from everything that is material, external, and fleeting, in order to remain in the truth itself, and maintain constant communication with the divine. Because of this, Chinese art has the character of being impersonal, unrealistic, and in a state of absolute non-action.

This is contrasted with one particular aspect in Western art, namely the interest in the human body. Christian art envisions the divine in human form, while ancient Greek art glorifies corporeal beauty. At that time, depicting naked bodies was a taboo in China, and Fu Lei grasps the core of the issue:

\textsuperscript{303} Fu Lei: “Liu Haisu,” in *Fu Lei on Art* (Nanjing: Jiangsu Wenyi Chubanshe, 2010), 161-4.
in the entire history of Chinese art, whether it is painting or sculpture, there is not a single image of the naked human body. This is not because the body is obscene, but rather because it is “vulgar” in the aesthetic and philosophical sense. Chinese thought never considers humans to be superior to other beings. Humans are not modeled in the image of “God,” as in the West. So compared with other beings in the universe, humans are not more perfect. In this aspect, “nature” is ten thousand times more transcendental, sublime and grandiose than humans. It is more infinite, more malleable, and more capable of leading the soul toward transcendence - not over everything, but outside everything. (“La Crise” 468).

Here Fu held a somewhat limited definition of Chinese art, where “a deep, wide and insurmountable rift exists between the purely spiritual Chinese art and the contemporary Western art that pursues the beauty of form, color and the body.” this is the reason why, according to Fu, now Chinese art has reached a dead end. In a lamenting tone, he paints a picture of the Middle Kingdom being forced to embrace its opposite as the new norm: “it is sad, but inevitable, that having been glorified by a subtle and transcendent art of the past, China now has to stubbornly pursue this ‘materialism’ that the West is already on the verge of rejecting!”

To make the situation even worse, Chinese painters in the traditional style “continue to imitate the ancients, whereas those painters who treat painting as pastime all proclaim themselves to be poets and philosophers. But their works are honestly only ordinary.” Although at the time of writing, he had not met Huang Binhong yet, Huang might very well fit into the type of painters Fu Lei intended to criticize.

Although such sweeping comparison inevitably falls victim to reductionism, Fu Lei’s observations still retain a substantial amount of truth. So what was his preference? Who would be his model? The answer, at that moment, was Liu Haisu (1896-1994), a pseudo-modernist painter who boosted a style of garish colors, dashing compositions, pompous scale and superficially heroic temperaments, and who claimed to have infused both the Chinese and

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305 Fu, “La Crise,” 467.
Western traditions. He borrowed the impressionist style that was trendy at the time, and conveniently aligned it with Chinese ink painting. The young Fu Lei, anxious for a new Chinese art that would be both cosmopolitan and rooted in native tradition, was completely overwhelmed by the charisma of Liu, and became a loyal follower. Yet as he matured, he gradually changed his mind. Their personal relationship cooled down, and Fu Lei became completely silent about his still famous former friend.

In the meantime, Liu continued his ambitious fusion projects. Like another influential painter Xu Beihong (1895-1953), Liu was part of a major artistic trend that believed the future for Chinese art lay in its fusion with Western arts, but the ways in which this fusion was actually carried out could be vastly different. Although the scale of this chapter does not allow for a full survey of all the complex currents and counter-currents in Chinese art from the 1930s to the 1950s, they can be briefly summarized as various configurations of three major stylistic orientations: the native Chinese tradition, the classical, realist tradition of Europe, and the group of contemporary modernist styles that were being invented and practiced at that moment in the West.

Among the protagonists of the Chinese art movements, the most prominent one was arguably Xu Beihong, a European-trained painter who studied with Pascal-Adolphe-Jean Dagnan-Bouveret and saw himself as the Chinese upholder of the prestigious tradition of academic realism. He rejected its modernist rebels, openly scorning the likes of Renoir, Cézanne, and Matisse. He felt he had the responsibility to introduce the best of the European tradition to China. He did manage to do so when he later became the President of the Central Academy of Fine Arts in the People’s Republic, making academic realism the norm for generations of young

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306 See Fu Lei, “Liu Haisu.”

painters. According to Chu-tsing Li, Xu’s ideas laid the foundation for Chinese socialist realism.  

There were more radical voices that called for the total abolishment of the Chinese tradition. For instance, the leader of the May Fourth Movement and effective founder of the Communist Party of China, Chen Duxiu 陳獨秀, argued in “Fine Art Revolution” that “To improve Chinese painting, the first task is to abolish the Four Wangs School.” Because to improve Chinese painting, it is absolutely necessary to adopt realism of the European painting.” The word “improve” 改良 carried with it the evaluation that Chinese painting was inferior, and that the Western style should be the norm, a typical case of cultural self-colonization. Chen saw China’s own tradition as an impediment rather than the basis of the nation’s artistic future. An old-fashioned painter like Huang was precisely one of those whom he would have liked to overthrow.

In a sense, Chen was echoed by Xu Beihong, even though the latter was less radical about abolishing his native tradition. They both saw in academic realism, which Fu Lei called Western Art’s “least interesting aspect” a propagandist potential. But when Chen and Xu tried to import what they thought to be the “Western norm” into China and marry it to political struggle, they were simultaneously turning a blind eye to the rupture that was occurring in that very same tradition they set as their model. Their antipathy to the modernist movements exposed their

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308 Chu-tsing Li, Trends in Modern Chinese Painting: the C. A. Drenowatz Collection (Ascona, Switzerland: Artibus Asiae, 1979), 98.

309 The “Four Wangs” are Wang Shimin 王時敏, Wang Hui 王翚, Wang Jian 王鑒 and Wang Yuanqi 王原祁. They were 17th century landscape painters famous for imitating ancient masters’ works.


311 Fu, La Crise, 467.
inability to truly comprehend European art as an ever-evolving tradition, and as one that was at that time trying to resolve its own inner conflicts.

Fu Lei was well aware of Xu Beihong’s ideas and his works back in the days when both were living in France. Contrary to Xu, Fu fully understood the immense artistic value and potential of European modernist movements, and was therefore rather uninterested in Xu’s projects. Together with Fu’s subsequent antipathy of Liu, this reflected his negative verdict on the synthesizing project that became the major trend in modern Chinese art. However, a solution that was cosmopolitan resorting to fusion became even harder to find.

Fu Lei’s search for such a viable alternative continued without much success, until 1943 he came across some works by Hunag Binhong. In Friendship in Art: Fou [Fu] Lei and Huang Binhong, the first monograph in any language on this extraordinary intellectual symbiosis, Claire Roberts provides a detailed account of how their friendship started in earnest.312 In May of that year, Fu took the initiative and write a letter from Shanghai to the old master, who was then in Beijing. Although Roberts meticulously traces some occasions where the two may have had contacts, judging from the cordial and reverent tone of Fu Lei’s first letter - even taking their age difference into account - it is fair to infer that this was their first serious communication. The Westernized Fu Lei fully demonstrated his cultural versatility by adopting the most elegant language and traditional formalities. In this brief letter, Fu enthusiastically praised Huang for achieving a level of sophistication that rivaled Song Dynasty painters.

Huang replied a few days later. Since then their letters became longer and longer. In his second letter, Fu compares Huang to Impressionism: in Fu’s view, Huang was similar to it without deliberately trying to imitate it:

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Your painting has some similarities with the work of Western Impressionists of late last century, who analyzed the effects of light on changes in color and came to understand the principle of intermixing light and shade and so abandoned fixed methods of shading (much as our artists paint rocks by making the upper area pale and the lower area dark) and concentrated on depicting shade within light and light within shade. At the same time they began to use unadulterated colors rather than mixed colors, and brushwork that was freely painted and appeared chaotic. On close inspection you could barely make out anything material, but when you stood back the imagery became apparent in all its light, color and magnificence, flickering and fluctuating in the most extreme way, which in so many respects is similar to the school of Dong Beiyuan 董源 and to your own objective that there is the wonder of arriving at an identical point via different route.\textsuperscript{313}

When speaking to Fu, Huang was obviously aware that he was communicating with someone with deep knowledge of the European tradition. So Huang wanted to let his young friend know that he was also well connected to Western scholars. In his second letter, Huang recounts his international connections:

Over the past twenty years Europeans have written widely on Eastern culture, for example the Frenchman Georges Margouliès on the study of Wen Xuan 文選, Paul Pelliot on archeology, the Italian Carlo Zanon, the Swede Osvald Sirén, the German Victoria Contag, the Chicago professor Lucy Driscoll and others, the majority of whom I have either met or corresponded with, all of whom can read classical works. In their research into Chinese painting theory some appreciated that in the Ming and Yuan Dynasties the paintings of literati towered above works of the Tang and Song, and that the paintings of Ming recluses and literati, which explore a brush method and were not solely concerned with superficial appearance, are not inferior to those of Yuan artists.\textsuperscript{314}

In fact, Huang already formed his own vision of the future of Chinese art and its place in the world. He did not believe in reforming it according to European academic realism, nor fusing East and West. Rather, he believed that the most original of the Chinese approaches, with its close link to calligraphy, had its true value that would contribute to the world, and indeed perfectly matched European modernism. In a 1938 letter to a friend, Huang says that “Europeans

\textsuperscript{313} Roberts, Friendship, 69. For the Fu and Huang letters I use Claire Roberts’s English translation in Friendship in Art: Fu Lei and Huang Binhong, with my own emendations.

\textsuperscript{314} Roberts, Friendship, 72-3.
and Americans [now] pay much attention to literati paintings. Whenever they see Chinese painters, they always encourage them to work in the purely Chinese style. Those who try to combine East and West are all looked down upon by these people.”315 This explains why it was Fu Lei who became Huang’s greatest champion, as the former was looking for the intrinsic rather than reformed elements in Chinese aesthetics that could lead towards cosmopolitanism. It also explains why this happened in 1943 rather than 1932 when Fu was still dreaming of Liu Haisu’s “fusion” of East and West.

Soon Fu and Huang began a regular correspondence that lasted until Huang’s death in 1955. In over a hundred letters from both sides - some are very lengthy ones - they discussed every aspect of art, among which the most prominent topic was the future of Chinese art and the role tradition played in it. Numerous transactions took place between them: in the ensuing decade, Huang sent a large number of what he considered to be his best works to Fu, who replied with detailed comments and questions. Fu Lei’s son Fou Ts’ong retains touching memory of this artistic symbiosis:

I grew up seeing Mr. Huang’s masterpieces; day after day I followed behind my father to watch these paintings. I remember that from time to time Mr. Huang’s large envelopes would arrive, and the whole household would get excited, as if we had the biggest happy event. Father would open the envelop, closely observe the paintings one by one, and give comments. [...]316

In the same year when they started correspondence, Fu Lei suggested that he curate the first solo exhibition for Huang in Shanghai. Given the fact that Huang is now regarded as one of the

315 Wang Zhongxiu, Nianpu, 425.
316 Fou Ts’ong and Han Bi: “Fu Lei, Huang Binhong yu Daoyi Rensheng,” in Shi shu hua, issue 1 (2013), 5 1-17.
very few greatest artists in modern China, it is indeed a surprising realization that this was the first ever solo exhibition in the artist’s hitherto seventy-eight years’ life. Fou Ts’ong recalls,

When father hosted Mr. Huang’s exhibition in 1943, before it began, all the paintings were hanging at our home; father constantly contemplated them, not feeling tired even after several days, and I became fascinated, too. So after the Cultural Revolution, when some of the confiscated paintings were returned, I could still recognized most of them. Some I hadn’t seen; these are works Mr. Huang painted after ninety [...] Mr. Huang passed away in 1955; in the last two years of his life, he still regularly sent his paintings to father.  

For this occasion, Fu Lei wrote an essay entitled “Viewing [the] Paintings and Answering a Guest’s Questions” 觀畫答客問, an imaginary conversation with a guest at the exhibition. It provides us with valuable insights into the evolution of Fu Lei’s thought at that moment. The fact that Fu Lei devised his essay in conversation form is telling. Reading through it, one finds that all the questions posed by the imagined guest must have been expressions of actual bafflement and misunderstanding. If we read the questions only, what we get is a snapshot of the popular opinions on Huang’s art at the time. This shows that Fu was conscious of how poorly Huang was being received, which prompted him to work hard to turn the tide. His appreciation of Huang was at the same time a manifesto of his own artistic principles, which centered upon the problem of verisimilitude in relation to brushwork that connects Chinese painting with calligraphy. According to Fu Lei, Huang Binhong’s greatness lies precisely in grasping this aspect that is at the core of Chinese painting.  

First, painting is an act of evocation; the object being depicted is not the painting’s ultimate subject, but only serves an indicative purpose: “The so-called object is no more than merely an indication, a locus where the feeling temporarily resides… only in this sense can one understand

\[\text{317} \textit{Ibid.}\]
that verisimilitude is not the goal of art.”\textsuperscript{318} Second, the medium in which this ideal is manifested ("外化") is ink, and especially brushwork, and brushwork is essentially calligraphy. He quoted the old saying that “painting comes from the same origin as calligraphy.”\textsuperscript{319} By emphasizing the expressiveness of line in itself, both arts seek a beauty that is abstract and detached from any realistic objects. The fact that Fu Lei follows the classical style and used the verb “write” ("写") instead of “paint” underscores this point.

Beside this article, we owe our knowledge of Fu Lei’s mature thinking about Chinese painting and many of the modern painters to a private correspondence that has been very luckily preserved: in 1961, Fu Lei resumed correspondence with his good friend, the painter Liu Kang 劉抗, who had immigrated to Singapore years ago. The long disconnection prompted both to write lengthy letters to recount in detail the developments in both their personal and intellectual lives. Fu’s letter\textsuperscript{320} is passed down to us, and this incidentally preserved document is of utmost importance: it allows us a glimpse into the most candid views of Fu Lei’s at that time. First, he acknowledged his past naiveté:

In the past two decades, my taste in painting has changed greatly [...] I have the feeling that our views on Chinese painting are rather dissimilar [...] When you were still in China, we didn’t see much (I gather that when the London Chinese painting exhibition was held at the Bank of China on the Bund, you did see it, right?). At that time we were still too young, and didn’t really understand the broad scope of Chinese painting and its aesthetics..."\textsuperscript{321}

\textsuperscript{318} Fu Lei, “Guanhua Da Ke Wen” 観畫答客問, in \textit{Fu Lei Wenji: Yishu Juan} 傅雷文集：藝術卷 (Hefei: Anhui Wenyi Chubanshe, 1998), 184-9. All quotes from this piece are my translations.

\textsuperscript{319} Fu, “Guanhua,” 185.

\textsuperscript{320} Fu Lei, Letter to Liu Kang, July 31, 1961, in \textit{Fu Lei: Letter to Friends} (Nanjing: Jiangsu Wenyi Chubanshe, 2010), 24-32.

\textsuperscript{321} Fu, Letter to Liu Kang, 25-6.
Once again, Fu Lei articulated his understanding of the most essential technical difference between Chinese and Western paintings - only now he had a different articulation: it was no longer about the human body. Although he was still clinging to the transcendental power of nature, he now got directly to the core of the issue: Chinese painting distinguishes itself by emphasizing the art of the line created by calligraphic brushwork. Neither verisimilitude nor color is the focus, but rather the abstract, expressive power of the line that conveys the sense of vital force in immensely varied forms, which is essentially the power of the brushwork that represents the aesthetic quality of the Chinese script. He calls the brush 筆 “the cells,” the “intrinsic and essential elements” of Chinese painting. Fu gives the example of Wu Changshuo, who “relied on his studies of bronze and stone inscriptions, and transposed the brushwork of ancient Zhuan 篆 and Zhou 篆 scripts to his paintings to achieve a kind of archaic, simplistic and elegant beauty.”

Based on these principles, he then gives some astonishing judgments on the major names of the time:

As to those who do not really work hard to learn the tradition but only sweep their bald brushes, and take pompousness to be powerful, that’s totally deceiving and self-deceiving, such as the Master. There are also those who haven’t entered the door of Chinese painting, but close their eyes and simply doodle, such as Xu Beihong. But the most laughable thing is that these people have big markets both in China and abroad [...] To superficially talk about innovation without steeping in the classical tradition only shows one’s ignorance and arrogance.

Here “the Master” refers to Liu Haisu, who was a mutual friend. Liu Kang had just praised him in his previous letter, hence Fu Lei’s sarcastic salutation. What follows is Fu Lei’s most comprehensive and insightful view on Huang:

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323 Fu, Letter to Liu Kang, 27.
according to my decades of experience seeing paintings, among today’s famous painters, except Mr. Qi Baishi and Mr. Huang Binhong, all the rest are cheaters of the world and thieves of reputations, and become immensely prominent. And even Baishi still reads too little, and does not have enough contact with tradition (his list of admirers stops at Jin Dongxin 金冬心). Binhong, on the contrary, has a broad base of learning, not confined to any one school; he is steeped in the traditions of Tang and Song, and synthesizes the best from masters of all periods, but then forms his own style. What is especially valuable is that what he conveys from the old masters is the spirit, not the appearance. [...] His skills in sketching real scenes are incomparable among traditional Chinese painters in the recent centuries, but even those famed Western style painters in China cannot beat him on this. His intellectual ability of synthesis and abstraction is very strong. That’s why he has the most varied facets throughout his life, and gains success very late. [...] In my opinion, in terms of synthesizing the tradition, after Shi Tao (1642-1707), there is only Huang Binhong.324

Fu Lei’s efforts as a curator and critic, and his unfailing support of Huang thereafter, played a crucial role in canonizing the old master, from whom he won heartfelt respect and gratitude.

When reporting to Fou Ts’ong about a seminar on Huang he attended in 1954, Fu Lei touchingly mentioned: “at the meeting I met many old painter friends like He Tianjian 賀天健 and Liu Haisu. They all said that Mr. Huang often mentions me, and says that for his entire life, he does not have many friends like me who truly understand his art”325. According to Fou Ts’ong, another of his father’s prominent painter friend Lin Fengmian said the following, which testifies to Fu Lei’s authority:

your father’s connoisseurship was incredible! None of the weakness in my paintings escaped his eyes. And he was always the first to grab the works I was most satisfied with. The Huang Binhong paintings he collected were all the best among the best. There’s absolutely no doubt about this!”326

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324 Ibid.
325 Fu Lei: Family Letters (Nanjing: Jiangsu Wenyi Chubanshe, 2014), 123.
326 Fou and Han, “Fu Lei,” 13.
3.2. Huang’s Late Style: An Alternative to Global Modernisms

So why did it take eleven years for Fu Lei to recognize Huang Binhong’s greatness? The previous section partly explains this by following Fu Lei’s intellectual development after they met. This section is devoted to analyzing the intellectual and artistic developments of Huang: his art was not in a static state, either; rather, it also underwent an ever-evolving process. Considering Huang’s unusually long career, some periodization is necessary. Fou Ts’ong recalls that his father had put it this way: “if Huang had died in his seventies, he would have been a chapter in art history; if he had died in his eighties, he would have become a book [in art history]; but he died in his nineties, so he actually became an encyclopedia!” 327

A survey of Huang’s paintings across his career shows that up to the time before he moved to Beijing, they were delicate and expertly crafted, but they lack a sense of freedom and distinct personality. They still dutifully remain within the boundary set by the ancients. Huang’s student Wang Bomin wrote an article entitled “On Huang Binhong’s Late Life Revolution,” 328 arguing that his teacher “started learning at an early age, but matured very late” (早學晚熟). 329 And he quoted an even harsher comment from an unnamed critic: “had Huang died at seventy, only his name would be remembered [in art history]; had he died at fifty, not even his name would be remembered.” 330 Wang considers the period after seventy (the Beijing period) to be Huang’s true creative highpoint. His use of ink was extremely bold, while his brushstrokes were full of vitality that had not a trace of restriction and discipline. And these qualities continued to intensify when he reached the age of eighty and ninety.

327 Fou and Han, “Fu Lei,” 11.


Huang achieved this not through an eruption of inspirations, but rather through years of diligent, meticulous and almost pious practice, imitating and internalizing the technical details of the ancients, while accumulating firsthand experience and knowledge through studying the artifacts. While in Beijing, Huang wrote a short piece entitled “On the Butterfly” 说蝶, which can be read as his allegorization of his own art. He describes the three stages in the life of the butterfly: egg, chrysalis and moth, which he then compares to the three stages of studying painting: learning from one’s teachers (師今人), learning from the ancients (師古人), and learning from the ever transforming nature itself (師造化). After the first stage (the “egg” phase), in which one acquires basic techniques and norms from one’s teachers, comes the long process of internalizing the entire tradition (the “chrysalis phase”). “Although one cannot avoid pedantry or the pain of self-restriction, when one acquires enough experience, a metamorphosis gradually becomes possible.” Once the metamorphosis does take place, all artificial technical labors will align with nature, and transcend the rule of verisimilitude, “just like the butterfly breaks out of the chrysalis.”

In a 1943 letter to a student, Huang talks about the correct path of learning, which further illustrates the butterfly metaphor:

For my whole life, I’ve been obsessed with painting techniques, and never give up any chance of viewing the real traces of the ancients. If I can afford, I always buy them; if something is beyond my means, I always transcribe it, learning its brushwork, use of ink, and structuring; I do not imitate its appearance, but absorb its technique and its spirit. My landscapes resemble none of the ancients, but every bit of them comes from painstakingly studying the methods of the ancients. I practice very hard; for these many decades I never took any break.

Here Huang makes clear the connection between painting and his serious collecting endeavors. Very much like Lu Xun’s transcription of ancient stele inscriptions, Huang treats collecting as the most intimate form of copying and learning; it is not so much about possessing, than about observing and internalizing the unmediated, original details of the ancients. This late-life transformation that Huang repeatedly stressed corresponds to the qualities that Fu Lei valued most: the brushwork that stems from calligraphy.

The individual characters of Huang Binhong’s art can be explained through a comparison with another very prominent painter of the twentieth century China: Qi Baishi. Both Huang and Qi were granted the highest accolades by the government of the People’s Republic. Qi was declared “the Most Outstanding Artist of the Chinese People” in 1950, while Huang was accorded the title “Excellent Painter of the Chinese People” in 1953. However, the original language shows a very obviously superior recognition of Qi, though politely and carefully avoiding any disrespect of Huang.

Although both were prolific and highly esteemed artists, Huang and Qi were very different both in style, methods, and the way they engaged tradition. A carpenter-turned-painter who also happened to be a great seal carver, Qi cultivated paintings of flowers, birds, insects and small animals. His innovative use of bright colors in bold combinations, minimalist, vital, playful compositions, and childlike brushwork lend a fresh and innocent air to ink paintings that seem to be largely free of the burden of tradition. This simplicity reflects Qi’s general character as an artist who came out of tradition more youthful rather than learned, and characterizes the way he worked and painted.
The difference between Qi and Huang is best illustrated by a description of their respective lives. In the essay “Two Gentlemen in the Old Capital,” Zhu An 鈞安 described the lives of the two as follows:

In the recent time there were two old painters of over eighty years in the old capital: they are Qi Baishi and Huang Binhong. Qi’s residence was bought with the money he earned by selling his paintings. He has long had the reputation for being capable of accumulating [properties], and is said to have more than one house, so he is doing quite well in his old age [...] Mr. Huang lived for only ten years in Beijing, and experienced wars in between, so he closed his door, did not mind external matters, and enjoyed himself very well, just like Mr. Qi. But Huang seemed more spirited.

There had never been a single work of calligraphy or painting hanging in Mr. Qi’s home; neither had there been a single antique object on his desk. Beside painting, he had no other interests. Mr. Huang, on the contrary, lived in a tiny place. It was so small that the space was not enough for one to even turn around; the books he was reading piled from the floor all the way up to the ceiling, part of which had fallen; some books were soaked by rain, but he didn’t care. He did not mind the books’ editions, but owned many specialized and rare ones. He was especially keen on collecting documents related to his native town, and did not spare any energy to study and popularize them. Ancient seals, jade wares and the like piled up on his desk. Although he no longer carved seals himself, he still often had new ideas about bronze and stone inscriptions, and like to write couplets in the Zhou 銘 script, which he casually gave away without any stinginess. Although those who pleaded paintings from him were numerous, he got up early everyday to practice by imitating the works of the ancients, purely for the purpose of entertaining himself, without the slightest trace of consideration for reputation or profit. His material life was simple to the extreme, but whenever dealers from Liu Li Chang brought calligraphies or paintings [for him to consider], as long as they were of great quality, he would spare no money to purchase them; the amount he spent was far greater than the price people paid for his own paintings [...] 334

This passage paints a vivid portrait of the elderly artist and collector, and his reclusive but spiritually fulfilling life in Beijing. It makes an interesting comparison with Qi. Among other things, it throws into relief the image of Qi as an artist relying upon intuition and aiming at minimalist expression; Huang was quite the opposite: studious, erudite, archaic, difficult and

334 Wang Zhongxiu, Nianpu, 498.
even daunting for the untrained eye. It matches Fu Lei’s judgment that Qi “reads too little” - with reading here meaning keeping extensive contact with tradition in general.

But what does it matter whether a painter is steeped in tradition or not at all? It is true that it does not necessarily matter. Qi and Huang represent two different orientations, and each has its merits, without one being definitely superior. But these orientations do affect their reception - especially internationally. How Qi and Huang have been received outside China says a lot about how Chinese aesthetics presents itself - or has been presented - to the world, and how it contributes to a cosmopolitan cohort of modernist movements.

Qi Baishi is valued in both China and abroad for his childlike simplicity and earthiness. On the one hand, this works well with the proletariat cultural ideology of communist China. On the other hand, it actually fits into the image of Chinese culture that has been widely received in the West, namely one that is characterized by a Zen-like minimalism. In comparison, Huang Binhong was the opposite: he was the learned scholar, the representative of the cultural elite, and seemed to maintain a considerable distance from the working people. In other words, he was a collector-type of painter who seemed to possess overwhelmingly excessive knowledge, behind which was the weight of thousands of years of cultural accumulation.

4. Bequeathing the Past: How a Private Collection Became a National Legacy

Huang’s image as a learned scholar-collector makes him less accessible than Qi Baishi, and prevents him from becoming a universal cultural icon. In effect, little in his legacy fits the

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requirement for such a figure. Unlike Lu Xun, Huang was not a vocal and fierce critic, ready to pick a fight with anyone who voiced different opinions. Unlike Luo Zhenyu, he ceased to actively participate in politics after the founding of the Republic, and did not let his political views affect his social life. He maintained cordial relationships with opposite camps. And although he socialized widely, he was ultimately not the type of personality that would become a leader or recognizable target. These all contribute to the ambiguity of Huang’s cultural identity as it has been perceived since his death in 1955.336

After the founding of the Republic of China in 1911, many progressive intellectuals seemed to have a collective “conservative turn.” These people included such famous personalities as Kang Youwei and Wang Guowei. They were initially pro-reform and sympathetic to Western civilization, or at least its technologies and political system. But when the revolution succeeded, they became critics of the new regime, and retreated to traditional ideology. And yet in the first place, their supposed “progressiveness” might have been a wishful thinking from the perspective of the revolutionaries. Even though they were at one point willing to learn from the West, these scholars were never the kind of vanguard figures that the younger generation imagined them to be. They did not suddenly turned back to conservatism, nor were they even outpaced by political and cultural progress. Rather, they firmly held on to their very specific cultural vision that never denied the validity of the native Chinese tradition as the backbone of a new society. In a sense, their mentality was not compatible with the simple framework of progress and revolution.

Huang was precisely such a figure: his cultural ideal was always tradition-oriented. But he did recognize that this tradition was clogged up and stale, and rejuvenation was urgently needed.

Moreover, he was aware that the way forward is a cosmopolitan culture that can actively participate in an increasingly globalized world and confidently answer its challenge while still maintaining its own identity. Therefore, the solution was neither Chen Duxiu’s self-destruction, nor Liu Haisu’s superficial fusion. In this respect, Huang and Fu were on exactly the same page. Huang’s contribution to rejuvenating Chinese culture lies in his ability to truly master and internalize his native tradition. And he understood that “tradition” was not an abstract concept, but was embodied in the concrete material remains from the past. So beside the typical methods of practice through imitating, he also devoted himself to diligently collecting ancient artifacts as a way to develop close contact with the ancients. Thanks to such an awareness and the resulting methods, he was able to recognize and seize his own tradition’s most unique elements, and bring it into dialogue with Western modernism. These elements were not a supplement to, or vindication of, an already established structure, but part of the groundwork for a new, yet-to-be-realized cosmopolitan cultural project.

After the People’s Republic of China was founded in 1949, Huang’s and Fu’s ideals quickly became outmoded. As Claire Roberts notes, in the 1950s, the new regime “promoted realist figure painting, propaganda posters, New Year pictures and serial pictures reflecting the official promotion of socialist realism and folk arts.” And Huang, then over eighty years old, was forced to produce figure painting “in accordance with the new, mass-oriented artistic policy.” These works “expose the artist’s difficulties in adjusting his painting style to a socialist realist art education regime that was populist and demanded a radical synthesis of Chinese and Western - including Soviet - approaches to art production.”

337 Roberts, *Friendship*, 138, 140
This cultural background determined the reception of Huang’s legacy. Before he died in 1955, he decided to bequeath his entire collection to the state, even though he knew that the latter was not capable of appreciating its value. The bequest included some ten thousand items, among which were four thousand of his own paintings. There were also his books, letters, manuscripts, and last but not least, ancient seals. He did so “in order that [the collection] receive better care and achieve a greater usefulness.”

In Roberts’ words, “[t]he bequest of his artworks to the state in 1955 may be understood as an act of defiance and an expression of confidence that his paintings would withstand historical scrutiny when much other contemporaneous art would not.”

To Roberts’ comment I would add that it is not just about his paintings, but also the ancient artifacts he spent his whole life collecting, of which his paintings were in a certain sense an extension. Very much like Luo Zhenyu, he wanted the tradition to be preserved through the continuous existence of its material remains, the locus where the ancients’ spirits still resided. Compared to Luo, whose invaluable treasures were thrown into ditches by the Soviet Red Army, Huang was much luckier: his collection was at least preserved, even though this also meant it was dead and neglected in the “care” of the state: on the one hand, Huang’s unique collection, reflecting his individual character and incomparable tastes, was incorporated into the collection of the Zhejiang and Anhui Province Museums, and virtually disappeared; on the other hand, his home became the Huang Binhong Memorial Museum, which was closed during the Cultural Revolution. Now it is an insignificant site in the popular city of Hangzhou, which has far too many attractions to allow Huang’s legacy to stand out.

338 Zhao Zhijun, Huajia Huang Binhong Nianpu (Beijing: Renmin Meishu Chubanshe, 1990), 184.
339 Roberts, Friendship, 197.
Huang was much less resourceful than the wealthy Bostonian Isabella Stewart Gardner; his collection, especially his ingeniously built up set of ancient seals, was absorbed into a faceless state collection. It did not really avoid the typical destiny of private collections, most of which would be dispersed in one way or another. Along with this dispersion is the cultural and historic message the private collector intends to pass on to posterity. When the painter-collector was still alive, the two parts formed an organic whole. Now that he is dead, even though his paintings are still being studied, valued, and even auctioned, they have been severed from their historical-material basis.

In May 1966, eleven years after Huang died, the destructive Cultural Revolution started. A few months later, Fu Lei and his wife committed suicide. Fu was never politically active; the cause of his death was purely cultural, a fact which corresponded to the stated purpose of the Revolution. His collection of Huang Binhong paintings, virtually all of which were among the absolute best, was confiscated by the State. Along with this tragic denouement came the end of a once promising project of cultural rejuvenation, and a revelation that cosmopolitanism had a political price to pay.
Chapter Four

Shen Congwen: Aestheticizing the Handicraft

1. The Death of a Writer, the Birth of a Collector

1.1. An Exhibition on the Meridian Gate

Sometime in the 1950s, an “Against Squandering Exhibition” was mounted by the Chinese National History Museum on the Meridian Gate of the Forbidden City in Beijing. It was open to participants of the “National Conference on Museum Work.”

At the exhibition, visitors were greeted by a gentle, modest, middle-aged man, who guided them through the exhibition cases and patiently explained the objects in amazing details. He was not only a researcher at the Museum, but the very person who purchased for his employer all the objects on display. The organizer put up this show not so much to warn museum workers around the country from wasting state funds on “useless objects” than to humiliate its own employee.340 The guide was Shen Congwen (pronounced as Tsong-wen), one of the greatest writers of modern China.

This small episode is full of symbolic significances. It reflected Shen’s personal destiny, as well as that of his work, in relation to the broad cultural and political atmosphere in China, especially since the 1949 Communist takeover. Questions arising from this episode abound: why was the eminent writer working for the museum instead of sitting at home writing? What are the objects on display, and why did he collect them? Why such insult? And why did he respond with such unfailing commitment? By taking on these questions, the current chapter will analyze Shen’s unique approach to collecting and studying material culture, its relationship with his

former identity as a writer, and its significance for the ways literature, art history and aesthetics were understood in the latter half of twentieth century.

1.2. The Dilemma of An Apolitical Literature: A Difficult Transition

Shen Congwen (1902-1988) was born in the western part of Hunan Province, then a very rural area populated mostly by the Miao people. It was both culturally and geographically remote from China’s urban centers. After a few years in primary school, Shen joint a local army and spent five years as a secretary, following the army to one station after another. Along the way, he closely observed the life of the rural west Hunan, accumulating experiences that would become materials for his future literary works. In 1922, the almost penniless Shen traveled to Beijing, hoping to attend university and eventually become a writer. Almost like a miracle, this outsider - as he so described himself throughout his life - soon fulfilled his dream: his short stories and novels got published, and he quickly became a well-received writer. Shen spent time in Beijing, Shanghai, Wuhan, Tsingtao and Kunming, taking up various university positions teaching essay writing, and at the same time continued to pursue his literary career.

Focusing on the everyday life of the ordinary people from his hometown area, Shen aspired to become the Chinese Chekhov.\(^{341}\) Through vivid realism, works such as *Border Town, Long River, Xiaoxiao*, and *The Love of the Shaman God* describe ways of life that are steeped in the rural and peripheral tradition, in stark contrast to China’s burgeoning and increasingly international urban culture. He thus became known as a nativist or “Native Soil” writer, carving a path rather different from that of the cosmopolitan cultural upbringings of prominent urban

writers in the early part of 20th century. This self-fashioning also had an intellectual significance, which I will explicate in the following sections.

Being a famous writer in the early-twentieth century China meant that taking sides in politics was inevitable. In the late 20s and 30s, Shen befriended two notable members of the League of Left-Wing Writers, Ding Ling and Hu Yepin. But Shen himself, with his cautious character, kept a neutral political stance, trying to distance himself from the League. In the intriguing and extremely polarized political climate, tolerance for ambiguity was minimal. Despite Shen’s moving personal commitments to their friendship, his reservation towards the Left Wing and his own literary orientation almost by default helped him earn a place in the opposite camp.

But there are other good reasons - for both the left and the right, ironically - to think that Shen was politically susceptible: he consistently advocated the separation of literature and politics. During the Sino-Japanese War, he expressly criticized the abuse of literature and language as propaganda in the essay “On the General and the Specialized.” In “All the Significance of the Literary United Front,” he targeted the Left Wing’s sweeping simplification of literature, and called for tolerance of different opinions within the Front. In “A New View on Literature,” he quotes certain critics’ words that “although there are many types of political parties, there are only two types of literature: either left or right, either friend or enemy,” and dismisses this attitude as stifling for the creation of good literature.

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342 For this part of Shen’s life, see Jeffrey C. Kinkley, The Odyssey of Shen Congwen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987).

343 Shen, Quanji, vol. 13, 141.

344 Shen, Quanji, vol. 17, 260-4.


346 Shen, Quanji, vol. 17, 168.
he lays out in more detail the fundamentally different natures of the two, and complains about his being dragged into trouble debating the issue with others.\footnote{Shen, \textit{Quanji}, vol. 14, 251-8.}

These are but a handful of examples of a substantial amount of writings on the subject. Through these prolific publications, Shen joined an international array of contemporaneous writers such as Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, Bertolt Brecht and Georg Lukács in the intense and highly contentious debate on the relationship between literature and politics, and more generally between art and reality, against a background of global revolutions. But the following sections will show that, though these thoughts of Shen’s are well put forth, he was yet to fully realize and articulate the depth and uniqueness of his intuitive perception of the potential of art - be it literary or material. It would require a series of severe, life-changing crises that pushed him to the brink of death to fully unleash these ideas.

As part of the Second World War, the war against Japanese invasion ended in 1945, and China quickly succumbed to the Civil War fought between the Nationalist Government and the Communist Party. Shen continued his political apathy, calling this war “a tragedy of national suicide.”\footnote{Shen, \textit{Quanji}, vol. 14, 278.} As if this was not bad enough, in the essay “Where is China going?” he prophetically writes, “It is difficult to end this inner conflict and opposition. Where is China going? Towards nothing but destruction [...] Even if it ends, what we are preparing for the next generation, I’m afraid, is an uncompromised ‘totalitarianism’!”\footnote{Shen, \textit{Quanji}, vol. 14, 323, 324.} Such statements sowed the seed for later tragedies in his writing career and personal life.

With the Communist Party taking over the entire territory on the mainland in 1948, China was set to turn into a communist country. At the end of that year, the Communist troops started
to target Beijing, the ancient capital, where numerous prominent scholars and writers worked. The Nationalist government made plans to transfer these people southward, and Shen was on the list. But he eventually decided to stay. He was hoping that he could still live on writing what he thought to be harmlessly apolitical literature. Those who chose to stay or had no choice of leaving had to be prepared to adjust to the new regime.

Even though he did not have high hopes, he was still too optimistic. The Communist Party’s demand was all-encompassing. It was not a simple political or military takeover. Back in 1942, Mao Zedong gave a talk at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art, which turned out to be the most consequential event for the cultural politics in China in the second part of twentieth century. In this talk, Mao argues that “[i]n the world of today, all cultures or literatures and arts belong to a certain class, and belong to a certain political agenda. Art for art, trans-class art, or art that is parallel to or independent from politics, in fact do not exist.” As a result, “for any class in any class society, the political principle is always primary, the artistic principle secondary.”

This influential talk laid the ideological groundwork for the Communist Party’s cultural policy, and continued to set the tone for the country’s cultural climate after the change of regimes. In late 1948, Shen already had the premonition that something damning was imminent. In a letter to his friend Ji Lu, dated December 1, 1948, Shen wrote:

The larger picture is still unclear. But overall, China is undoubtedly entering a new era. For those who write, if their aim is for the meaningful and useful, then the traditional writing method and attitude all have to be given up with determination, and they have to start learning from the beginning. Now nearing middle age, (my) concepts are frozen, my writing habit is hard to change, and what’s more, there are so many misunderstandings. Very soon,

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350 Shen Congwen, Letter to his brother, in Quanji, vol. 18, 515.
352 Mao, Talk, 32.
even if I’m not forced to give up writing, I will eventually give up anyway. This is the inevitable destiny of the people of my age.\textsuperscript{353}

Shen’s worry was not groundless. In May of that year, Guo Moruo, the scholar who contributed to the study of oracle bones and was now a leading pro-Communist intellectual, published a fiercely polemic article entitled “A Rebuke to Reactionary Literature and Art” where Shen was “awarded” a prominent place. Guo accuses Shen of writing pornographic novels that “soften people’s will to fight.”\textsuperscript{354} What is more, Shen has always been consciously active as a reactionary. At the early stage of the war against Japanese aggression, a time of life and death, he was singing the tune that “[literature] has nothing to do with war against Japanese invasion;” at the latter stage, when writers were strengthening their union to fight for democracy, he again cried against “writers participating in politics” [...].\textsuperscript{355}

In other words, for Guo and the leftist camp behind him, just to stay away from politics is enough justification for being an enemy. Guo’s unforgiving attack was a call to arms: after its publication, students at Peking University, where Shen taught, started to mount posters with large characters (a form of public accusation) against him. He even received threatening letters\textsuperscript{356}. Under attack from the most prominent leftwing critic, who apparently had the backing of the Communist government, he sensed what was waiting for his writing career. Even on a personal level, he felt alienated; pressure also came from within his family: his wife Zhang Zhaohe was working hard to be “revolutionary,” and thought that he was somewhat “dragging her legs” to

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\textsuperscript{353} Shen, \textit{Quanji}, vol. 18, 517

\textsuperscript{354} Shen, \textit{Quanji}, vol. 16, 289

\textsuperscript{355} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{356} See Zhang Xinying, \textit{The Latter Half of Shen Congwen’s Life} (Guilin: Guangxi Normal University Press, 2015).
progress. Shen experienced a series of extremely testing spiritual crises. In mid-January, 1949, he had a mental breakdown. As a result, he attempted suicide on March 28 by cutting his throat and wrist and drinking kerosene. But it was unsuccessful; he was eventually saved and taken to mental asylum.

Much in these events is worth probing. On the surface, it is not surprising that an intellectual like Shen would feel oppressed. But it should be noted that many people were not at fault with the new regime, and even genuinely embraced it. After all, what was promised was the leftist ideal of the triumph of the ordinary people, class equality, and social justice, all of which were once championed by the likes of Romain Rolland and Jean Paul Sartre.

It was therefore rather striking that Shen was more willing to kill himself than to be more accommodating in receiving “reeducation.” After all, this option was available to him as to everyone else, at least for a certain period. But Shen thought otherwise. His suicide attempt was the result of the failure of his first efforts to cater to the new ideology. It also shows how unyielding he was. After the suicide attempt, for over a decade, his family letters show evidence that he continued to try adapting to the new ideology, while at the same time refusing to renounce his own belief. And he kept failing, until he completely gave up the attempt, and shifted his attention to a very different field.358

1.3. Oscillating between the Abstract and the Concrete

Today we know many details of the struggle that was going on in Shen Congwen’s mind around the time of the Communist takeover, because he preserved his thoughts in two chapters of

357 Ibid.

358 For Shen’s attempt to adapt to the new ideology as a writer, besides Zhang’s The Latter Half of Shen Congwen’s Life, see also Li Yang: Shen Congwen: The Last Forty Years (Beijing: Zhongguo Wenshi Chubanshe, 2005).
an ambitious but aborted autobiographical project. Written after the mental breakdown and before the suicide attempt, this manuscript fragment was never published during his lifetime, and ends up in a most curious form: it consists of only two chapters, “One Man’s Confession” and “On Southwestern Lacquerware, et al.: A Chapter of Autobiography—An Improvisation on a Fantasy” (hereafter “On Southwestern Lacquerware”). The manuscript of the first chapter is incomplete, with one page missing. In the author’s own hand, it is dated “February, 38th year” (of the Republic of China, 1949). The other chapter is dated “March 6, 38th year.” On the first page of the latter chapter, he writes, “between this and the ‘Confession’ there should be eight chapters.” At the back of page 16, he writes that “the last document before liberation.” According to the editor of Shen’s Complete Works, here “liberation” means suicide.

The “On Southwestern Lacquerware” chapter deals with events closest to the time of writing. What made Shen skip a total of eight chapters? What kind of urgency propelled him to jump directly to Southwestern lacquerware, which does not seem related to any typical scheme of autobiography at all? The truncated, two-part form itself, with the surprising non-relation of the juxtaposition, is a striking testimony to the existential crisis Shen was undergoing. Considering the fact that he attempted suicide just about a month later, we may assume that he had an extraordinary sense of time, as well as peculiar priorities. He certainly would not have written anything that was unimportant. It may not be too far from truth to treat this text as his testament, within which the Southwestern lacquers were apparently of seminal importance for him. To connect one’s own, most intimate life experience with objects is probably the most characteristic trait of a collector.

359 Shen, Quanji, vol. 27, 37.
But before getting into the lacquers, an analysis of the preceding chapter is necessary. Opening “One Man’s Confession,” Shen states the aim of this autobiography: “serving as a sample for the study of pathology or abnormal psychology, I write down the following. In the future, if it is put side by side with all my works, together they may show the original quality of ‘the human’.”

This uncorrected, somewhat messy manuscript is a record of Shen’s stream of consciousness. He traces his life chronologically, but not continuously, recounting the deeply felt experiences that were at times beautiful, sad, and humiliating: his early military career, the brutal tragedies he witnessed, his numerous failures to receive education in Beijing, and the phantasmagorical urban life. Descriptions of events, scenes and people from the past are interspersed with reflections, comments, and occasional emotional outbursts. Apparently, the whole piece was written as a protest, a self-vindication, as well as an attempted statement of his philosophy of life.

He notes that, aside from all the rejections and deceptions he endured during the first half year in Beijing, the only person offering him help was the old man who would “strike a little bell at dusk everyday through the lanes to sell kerosene.” At one of Shen’s most difficult times, the old man kindly lent him two hundred coins. Shen immortalized him by transposing him into The Border Town, his most famous novella, as the old grandfather who daily transports travellers on a ferry across a river for fifty years:

I magnify the old man’s kindness in my writing, and magnify it in my own life thereafter, trying by all means to help young people... Any reader who once rested for a moment on that ferry in my story and got transported in their lives, have been indirectly supported by [the old man’s help]. Tracing the origin, one would be impressed by how deep the two hundred coins’

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360 Shen, Quanji, vol. 27, 3.

361 Shen, Quanji, vol. 27, 18.
impact on people’s lives and emotions can be. The continuity and infectiousness of life are truly surprising.\textsuperscript{362}

The last completed statement of this unfinished chapter is about the sympathy and friendship he offers to others. And he compares his sympathy and friendship to “the self-forgetting and selfless, abstract ferry” that is made out of “education of reality.”\textsuperscript{363} Here we find two keywords that repeatedly appear in his writings during this period: “abstract” and “reality.” What does abstract mean in this context? Why does he call the ferry “abstract”? And how does reality get transformed into abstraction?

Here I would like to further discuss the significance of the concept of the abstract in relation to Shen Congwen’s life and thought, since “One Man’s Confession,” supposed to be his testament of a sort, is neither his first nor last word on the subject; there are other important statements before and after it.

As early as 1941, Shen offered his reflection on the abstract in an enigmatic essay entitled, quite simply, “Life.” Here he contemplates the possibility of understanding life through detached abstraction, and considers that this approach, even if it does not end up against nature, could not avoid neglecting nature; such a concept would cause pain in the person, and create chaos in society. He then descends into an irrational monologue: “I am getting mad. I am mad for abstraction. I see some symbols, a shape, a line, a silent music, a poem without words. I see the most complete form of life. All of these exist perfectly in abstraction, but are compromised in reality.”\textsuperscript{364} The last line in particular reads like a reprise of the Platonic idea. The essay goes on freely with real moments in life, alternating with dream scenes and reflections, and ends with the

\textsuperscript{362} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{363} Shen, \textit{Quanji}, vol. 27, 19
\textsuperscript{364} Shen, \textit{Quanji}, vol. 12, 43
statement: “I want to use form to represent feeling-infused images.” In this context, “form” echoes the aforementioned abstract, expressive means of symbols, shapes and lines.

On the surface, this passage seems to be a relatively straightforward aesthetic and stylistic statement. But the abstract as an idea is seldom free of political implications. Just one year later in 1942, Mao Zedong gave that famous (or notorious) *Talks at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art*, in which the word “abstract” is repeatedly mentioned, and without exception as something negative. For example, for Mao, even love is essentially class-conscious:

> in a class society, there is only class-conscious love. But [some] comrades pursue the so-called supra-class love, abstract love, and abstract freedom, abstract truth, abstract human nature, etc. This shows that these comrades are very deeply influenced by the bourgeoisie. We should clear this influence from the roots, and humbly study Marxism and Leninism.

So Shen innocently positioned himself as the exact opposite of the Communist leader. As has been mentioned, the dominant theme of the difficult transitional period after the Communist takeover was the conflict between Shen’s ideal of pure literature and the Communist government’s highly politicized propagandistic literature. This was what the leftist Guo Moruo criticized Shen for. However, what is left out in Guo’s critique was this abstract expression that Shen ardently articulated. To put it in a different way, for Shen the conflict was one between abstract expressionism and realism.

Then in 1961, Shen wrote a seminal essay entitled “Abstract Lyricism,” expounding his thoughts on the idea of the abstract in great detail. Again, the essay exists in uncorrected manuscript form, and was never published during his lifetime. With Mao’s view in mind, one would be very surprised to find that Shen actually continued to adhere to abstract expression as

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365 Shen, *Quanji*, vol. 12, 45.

late as 1961, long after Mao’s Party conquered China. If in 1941 Shen was still innocently proposing the abstract expression as an apolitical literary style, then by 1961, he was consciously articulating the abstract as a response to political pressure: four years ago, the government launched the notorious Anti-Rightist Campaign. At first it benignly invited/enticed intellectuals from across the country to comment upon its work and help it improve. Then all of a sudden, the government turned hostile and severely persecuted those who dared to criticize it.\(^{367}\)

This event left a deep psychological scar on most intellectuals in China, including several of Shen’s close friends. So he was fully aware of all these goings-on when writing “Abstract Lyricism,” and luckily it was never published during his lifetime. Because of this background, the essay has several layers of meanings. Although it is on the seemingly apolitical subject of the abstract as well as the lyrical, the essay is actually a thinly veiled protest against universal politicization. Shen’s main argument is that literature and arts are deeply private, lyrical expressions that do not convey political meanings, so the government should not worry about it. On the other hand, twisting literature and the arts to serve political purpose would end up destroying them.\(^{368}\) The close interaction between abstract lyricism and political pressure in Shen Congwen makes him one of a handful of cases through which David Wang reevaluates the broad lyrical tradition in China, which has long been unjustly depreciated: “precisely because the mid-twentieth century in China was characterized by national cataclysms and mass movements, [...] this period helps bring into view the extraordinary work of Chinese lyricism at its most intense.”


And for Wang, lyricism, as represented by Shen, is no less than being “a poetics of selfhood that informs the historical moment and helps define Chinese modernity in a different light.”

The essay opens with a meditation on the relationship between life and the arts:

Life is constantly evolving; change is constant, contradiction is constant, destruction is constant. Life itself would not congeal; congealing is close to, or actually is, death. Only [when life is] transformed into words, images, notes, rhythms, is it possible to be preserved in a certain form, a certain state, creating another existence and extension of life itself. In this way, people living across long stretch of time and long distance in space, can communicate their lived experiences without any barrier. This is the value of literature and arts. The forming of literature and arts is itself filled with a wish to lengthen and amplify life.

Life, the subject of literature and arts, is a fluid, ever-changing phenomenon; Shen understands it from the perspective of the full range of emotions elicited by what has been lived and experienced in time and space. As such, people’s perception of life inherently has an abstract quality. To represent it, literature and arts also need to have abstract means. From the perspective of the reader/viewer, literary and artistic representations of these lived experiences are then translated back into *emotional* contents for them to experience. As a result, in so far as literature and art are about lived experiences, they are in essence lyrical and abstract. This is of course the very opposite of Mao’s vision of literature and arts in a communist state. Yet the disagreement is not just between Shen and Mao, but rather part of a much wider international debate upon the relationship between art and politics. The most prominent and immediate frame of reference is the German philosopher Ernst Bloch and his Hungarian counterpart Georg Lukács. In 1938, a few years before Shen and Mao published their views, Bloch and Lukács were already engaged in direct confrontation concerning Expressionism and realism, with Bloch’s “Discussing

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370 Shen, *Quanji*, vol. 16, 527.
Expressionism”371 (which was in part provoked by Lukács’s *The Greatness and the Decline of Expressionism*) followed by Lukács’s response, “Realism in Balance.”372

Expressionism in this debate specifically refers to the artistic and literary style that originated in Germany before the First World War and remained popular through the 1930s. But it shares many traits with the kind of abstract expression Shen envisions and partially realizes. According to *A Dictionary of Critical Theory*, “[r]ejecting impressionism and naturalism, expressionism is anti-realist in both approach and subject matter. It aims to ‘render visible’ [...] that which escapes representational painting, such as the raw affects of emotion, sexuality and spirituality.”373

This stylistic description of expressionism omits its political dimension, which is the focus of Bloch and Lukács’s debate. Defending expressionism, Bloch criticizes Lukács for his adherence to “a closed and integrated reality that does indeed exclude the subjectivity of idealism.” For Bloch, such a reality “is not so objective after all,” and “authentic reality is also discontinuity.” Therefore, the importance of expressionism precisely lies in its ability to “exploit the real fissures in surface inter-relations and discover the new in their crevices.”374 In defense, Lukács quotes Karl Marx: “The relations of production of every society form a whole,”375 and stresses the word “every” to support his argument that there is indeed a very real totality.

While I am not going to get into details about this debate, it is sufficient to note that the dichotomy between Shen’s abstraction and the Communist Party’s socialist realism echoes that between Bloch and Lukács. Shen’s abstract approach and Lukács’s realist ideal are apparently

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375 Quoted from Lukács, “Realism,” 31.
worlds away, and he is much closer to Bloch’s advocacy for expressionism. That said, from these quotes, one can detect a difference between Shen and his European counterpart: for Shen, abstract expression does not aim at disrupting the fake totality of reality, as Bloch argues, but functions as a depoliticizing, escapist gesture. With the help of lyricism and the harmless neutrality of emotions, Shen presents abstraction as a purely aesthetic matter.

However, there is a remarkable parallel between Shen’s abstraction and Bloch’s understanding of European expressionism. While praising expressionism’s “quest for the most authentic expression possible,” Bloch traces its link to traditional folk art and the ordinary people who create them:

in fact [the expressionists] were the first to open people’s eyes to this moving and uncanny folk-art [the Murnau glass paintings]... They rediscovered ‘Nordic decorative art,’ the fantastically complex carvings to be found on peasant chairs and chests down to the 18th century... the expressionists really did go back to popular art, loved and respected folklore - indeed so far as painting was concerned, were the first to discover it.376

For Bloch, the abstract, raw and direct emotional power of expressionism lies at least in part in the anonymous and unpretentious popular arts that expressionism is willing to inherit. In this sense, abstraction is actually not so far away from the socialist ideal of art that comes from the people and serves the people.

If we now return to “Abstract Lyricism,” we would find that Shen is concerned about the same issue:

All the praise people sing to life and youthfulness, their ideal for improvement, endeavor for a perfect life, and all cultures’ the knowledge gained from labor, all ideologies, through all kinds of materials and forms, create all sorts of objects—all of them gain recognition,

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validation and even encouragement from the process of social development (which is also the
development of human lives).\textsuperscript{377} (Italics mine.)

I highlight several keywords that indicate the core of Shen’s message: the representation of
“life” in literature and arts provides a key to understanding not only the abstract, but also the
concrete. Lived experience is intangible, fluid, elusive and transient, and can be preserved only
with literature and arts. On the other hand, the arts as embodiments of lived experiences bear the
indispensable material quality that is created by labor, by hand of the ordinary people. In the
process of their creation and use, they become witness of the lyrical side of people’s lives.

1.4. Flowery Patterns, Pots, Jars, Jugs...

Only with an understanding of these implications of how Shen Congwen conceptualizes the
abstract can we come to grasp the two-part structure of his aborted autobiographical project. The
pairing of “One Man’s Confession” and “On Southwestern Lacquerware” reflects the important
intellectual development he underwent in an attempt to bridge, and eventually reconcile, the
abstract and the concrete. Indeed, it is surprising that as someone obsessed with the abstract,
Shen would turn from literature to study the most concrete and tangible aspect of history -
material culture. And “On Southwestern Lacquerware” provides an important clue.

The chapter begins by stating that lacquerware has great importance for our understanding of
the history of applied arts, as well as the culture of the Southwestern peoples in China. Shen also
stresses that the collecting and studying of them has not been done at all before him. He then
adds a personal stroke to the picture: “the collecting of these artifacts was occasioned by
incidental individual fantasies.”\textsuperscript{378}

\textsuperscript{377} \textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{378} Shen, \textit{Quanji}, vol. 27, 20.
Without any transition, the next paragraph hacks back to autobiography, commenting on the relation between music, fine arts and his personal life:

I get to understand my own lived experiences through music, but I understand others’ lived experiences through fine arts... I once observed a young silversmith hammering silver locks and silver fishes; shedding tears, he hammered a little steel model to make decorative patterns. I observed a young carpenter and his young wife doing handicraft. I realized that aside from the work itself, the worker’s emotions either stick to or detach from (the object). I also realized that aside from labor, the making of an artwork exists in multiple relations of interdependence. What is especially important is that the colors and shapes, materials and purposes of these applied artworks, produced by ordinary people and provided for a large social class, have the same function as music: they gradually immerse into the lonesome inner life; they entertain me and educate me; they become intimately intertwined with and inseparable from the unfolding of my life.379

This passage lays out more explicitly Shen’s idea about labor, art and the lyrical contents of human life, and about the interaction between the abstract and the concrete. He further elaborates upon his attitude by differentiating himself from aestheticians who look for pure beauty, and instead stressing that artistic creation is intimately linked to vocation, apprenticeship, and the natural and social environment in which it is produced. He emphasizes that “what I like is not just fine arts, but the character and heart that produce lovely and moving works, the genuinely human, sincere and honest heart.”380

Therefore, it is not by accident that as a writer, Shen focuses on the ordinary people from peripheral rural areas. In this sense, his interest in the folk/handicraft arts is fully in line with his philosophy as a writer. He even thinks that, had he gotten appropriate training, he could have used art or music to “express the emotional waves and continuity of life much more broadly, profoundly and effectively than literature.” For him, writing is a makeshift, because he had to

379 Shen, *Quanji*, vol. 27, 22-3.

380 Shen, *Quanji*, vol. 27, 23.
“use rigid, dull and stale words to transfer from the mind batches of impressions, indistinguishable from sounds and colors, and represent them on paper.”

Shen’s fascination with collecting art and handicraft objects dates back long before the 1949 crisis. In an earlier autobiography of 1934, he traces the origin of this obsession in a section entitled “A place to study history.” While in the army, he served as a secretary to an aspiring military officer, who was an amateur collector of antique objects. The lucky Shen stayed in a building that housed the officer’s collections, which included

four to five big nanmu cabinets, storing about a hundred scrolls of paintings from Song to Qing Dynasties, dozens of bronzewares and ancient chinawares. Additionally there were ten or so boxes of books and stele rubbings; not long after, a set of *Si bu cong kan* also arrived.

He was charged with the task of binding, marking and organizing the collection. He spent virtually all his time in this house, learning “painters’ names, time periods and standings, or the artifacts’ names and uses.” He vividly depicts how he would leisurely examine the objects, as if he was caressing history itself that now became tangible:

So when I had nothing to do, I took out those old paintings scroll by scroll, hung them on the wall, and appreciated them on my own. Or I opened books like *Xi qing gu jian* or *Xue’s Catalogue of Ritual Objects, Bells, Tripods and Inscriptions*, and worked hard to know the artifacts’ names and values through identifying the words and shapes, and then randomly browsed other books. [...] That is to say, through this experience, I formed a preliminary and general understanding of the various arts this people created, throughout a long period of time, with a patch of color, a line, a piece of bronze or earth, a set of characters, infused with one’s own life experiences. This preliminary knowledge allowed a countryman, who lived on

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381 Shen, *Quanji*, vol. 27, 24.

382 *Si bu cong kan* is a series of major works in ancient China, published by the Commercial Press in early twentieth century.


appreciating human activities and natural sceneries, to further understand the glory of human wisdom, and incited in him an extremely broad and profound interest.\textsuperscript{385}

Here we find the phrase “a patch of color, a line, a piece of bronze or earth, a set of characters, infused with one’s own life experiences,” which is reminiscent of the already-quoted line from the essay “Life.” These elements are both abstract and at the same time incredibly concrete. Shen was able to experience the intangible expressivity through the touch of tangible, historical objects.

This early experience was like a seed planted in his soul. Years later, when wandering around Beijing looking for opportunities to study, he came across another “collection,” the one that I call the “anti-collection,” which had already nourished all the other protagonists of this dissertation, including Huang Binhong, Luo Zhenyu and Lu Xun: the flea market in Beijing. Yet another seed was planted in his soul. In a lecture given in 1980 at St. John’s University in New York, he remembers his experience back in 1923:

Incidentally, I lived on a small lane outside Beijing’s city gate. On the right hand side is a cultural center: several hundred antique shops. At hindsight, they constitute a museum of three millennia’s culture. [...] On the left hand side, twenty minutes by foot, there was yet another world: it was the representative of six centuries’ bustling market, and [another] cultural museum of Ming and Qing Dynasties, because it was only twelve years since the Qing Emperor had abdicated. [The royal collections] gathered since seventeenth century, including all those symbolizing the glory of the Dynasty, such as jadeites, agates, ivory, pearl - you name it - were all treated as trash. [...] Therefore, within just half a year, in conditions unimaginable by others, I quickly understood much of what I wanted to learn.\textsuperscript{386}

In 1923, Shen the barely literate countryman had not yet launched his dazzling literary career. But by 1949, he had accomplished almost all he was allowed to offer as a writer, and his literary

\textsuperscript{385} Shen, \textit{Quanjí}, vol. 13, 356.

\textsuperscript{386} Shen, \textit{Quanjí}, vol. 12, 385-6.
career sadly came to an end, after which he went on to live for another thirty-nine years, wholeheartedly and passionately devoting himself to studying material culture.

The political reason for this tragic shift has been explained. Since the shift was forced upon him, and since the two identities - the romantic, imaginative and creative writer of fictions and the quite, patient and objective researcher of historic objects - are indeed worlds apart, it is hard to avoid the impression that material culture was for Shen a makeshift, an escape, a sad alternative. But the aforementioned two “seeds” prove that he had a long-held fascination with it, and this choice actually cannot be more logical.

Shen himself indeed took every chance to stress that working on material culture was not a makeshift, and neither was his giving up literature a waste. In the St. John’s University lecture, he even refuted the claims that he was oppressed in the new regime and could not write freely, by saying that his literary works were indeed out of touch with reality. But the usually excessively humble old gentleman looked at his achievements in material culture with confidence and pride: “for the nation, my shifting to material culture and history is a gain rather than a loss, because the research methods I am experimenting have never been attempted before.”

In the 1983 essay “An Untamable Zebra,” he makes clearer what is unprecedented about his research:

the various departments of historic material culture have many blind spots, with many objects that have never been studied in the past or present; I have the opportunity to view and touch tens of thousands of them, and understand their historic characteristics and mutual influences in development. Especially those jars, jugs, pots, flowery patterns that have been looked down upon and ignored by experts, are carefully looked at and studied by me. I am like an old beggar woman in old Beijing who collects ragged clothes. But after collecting [these

387 Shen, *Quanji*, vol. 12, 386.
object], I follow Laozi’s instruction “to act but not to possess,” and present them to the institutions I am familiar with for general use.\(^{388}\) (Italics mine.)

One phrase in this passage is particularly important: “flowery patterns, pots, jars, jugs.” It becomes the title of his first published collection of writings on material culture,\(^{389}\) and hence the title of this section. The original Chinese expression repeats every character once: “hua hua duo duo, tan tan guan guan.” This is a kind of subtly diminutive expression, denoting something trivial. In other words, Shen ironically acknowledges the general impression people have about his research: it is those bits of useless stuff that he is “wasting” state funds on.

Also, “hua duo” means flowers, but I translate it as “flowery patterns” because first of all, Shen did not study botany or gardening. Secondly, he was especially interested in the history of decorative patterns on ancient artifacts and textiles. Although inspired by flowers, these patterns are nonetheless abstract and highly stylized. So here we have yet another example of how the abstract is at one with the concrete.

In this passage, Shen quotes Laozi’s saying, “to act but not to possess,” as his own motto, which reveals an important aspect of Shen as a collector. Most collectors are by definition hoarders till death. The continuous accumulation and possession of objects is the main goal of the collector. So what Shen did was rather unconventional. His sister-in-law, Chang Ch’ung-ho\(^ {390}\), testifies to this peculiar behavior:

Because of Brother Shen’s extensive experience viewing ancient artifacts, calligraphy and paintings, he later gradually turned to specialized research. In Yunnan he focused on collecting lacquerware in Yunnan, and porcelain in in Suzhou and Beijing. He started

\(^{388}\) Shen, *Quanji*, vol. 27, 380.

\(^{389}\) Shen Congwen, *Hua hua duo duo, tan tan guan guan: Shen Congwen on Art and Cultural Objects* (Beijing: Wai wen chu ban she, 1994).

\(^{390}\) Chang Ch'ung-ho (1914-2015) was an accomplished calligrapher, poet and Kunqu Opera singer. She was married to the German-American sinologist Hans Fränkel, a longtime professor at Yale University.
collecting blue-and-white (porcelain) long before foreigners paid attention to it. Though he liked to collect things, he was not keen on owning them, and often gave them away. Once having given them away, he started buying again. Later he also collected brocade, missing nothing that came his way: from the cover of the *Chinese Buddhist Cannon* (*Dangzangjing*), the cover of Third Sister’s only collected item, to the Song Dynasty rubbing of *Preface to the Holy Buddhist Canon* (calligraphy by Wang Xizhi). He imprinted all these patterns, colors and their related designs in his mind. But he was not a hoarder who clings to the antiques. He gave large quantities of these objects, such as lacquerware and old papers, to museums, because the true wealth is stored in his mind.  

391 (Italics mine.)

It is clear that Shen was not collecting for himself, but on behalf of the nation. He felt an urgency to preserve what he considered both invaluable and at the same time in danger of permanent lost. In the turbulent history of twentieth century China, Shen was now standing at the moment when the large-scale dispersion of ancient artifacts was finally in check, and new political stability made re-collection possible. By collecting objects at both the state’s and his personal costs against unfavorable environment, he was resolutely making a silent statement, and establishing a new value system, in which the “trash” is at least as precious as the treasures.

2. Imaginary Conversation I: Shen Congwen and Wang Guowei

2.1. The Un/Mediated Object

As the previous sections have shown, two key ideas dominated Shen’s career both as a writer of fiction and as a researcher of material culture, namely the abstract and the concrete. The abstract represents the essence of lyricism, whereas the concrete is at the heart of realism. Shen had long been oscillating between them, trying hard to strike a balance. And he was not alone in this quest. For China, twentieth century is a period obsessed by the idea of the real. David Wang identifies “a historic juncture when the master narratives vindicating China’s reality were in a state of disintegration.” And

[a]s intellectuals and literati desperately sought the Way to national strength, the question of how to read and write China ranked high on their agendas. The search for a new narrative paradigm was never merely a literary game [...] Both rhetorically and conceptually, a renovated narrative paradigm was regarded as the prerequisite for reflecting and rectifying reality.  

Another prominent intellectual displayed a strikingly similar cultural ideal to Shen’s, one that was torn between the abstract and the concrete, and between the fictional and the realist. By the time Shen Congwen started working at the National History Museum in August 1949, Wang Guowei, the literary critic, historian and interlocutor throughout this dissertation, had been dead for more than twenty years. By then Wang had been recognized as one of the most important historians in modern China. His call for historical research to combine evidence on paper with evidence from underground resounds in scholars’ minds, now becoming a widely accepted principle that transcended traditional philology and shook up the basis of discourses on the classics.

In his new role as a historian and museum researcher, Shen Congwen also advanced the same method: “Everyone knows that in China there are the so-called Twenty-Five Histories, but no one notices that what is being excavated from underground right now is ten times more than Twenty-Five Histories.” In an essay entitled “The Study of Literary History must Consider Ancient Artifacts,” he cites Wang Guowei as a pioneer in combining textual and archeological evidences in historical research.

394 Shen, Quanji, vol. 12, 387-8.
395 Shen, Quanji, vol. 31, 311.
However, there was no personal connection, direct or otherwise, between Wang and Shen. Wang was not a major influence on Shen. And they are rarely, if ever, discussed together. But under scrutiny, the two form an unexpected pair. Oxymoronically, they are similar to and at the same time completely opposite of each other. They tried to dig the same tunnel from two ends of the mountain, in opposing directions, and they did not eventually meet. But the two directions represented two profound views about the relationship between history and literature, between the real and the fictional, both of which were based upon their absorbing contemplations of materiality.

We remember that Wang underwent an intellectual crisis, which culminated in 1911, and coincided with the fall of Qing Dynasty and the establishment of the Republic of China. Wang had been frustrated with literature and Western philosophy for sometime, and decided to turn to Chinese history and archeology. This frustration actually dates back to 1907, which he details in two autobiographical pieces. At age thirty, he had read major works by Kant and Schopenhauer, among others, and felt relatively at ease understanding them. After tracing his study of Western philosophy, here is what he says about this crisis:

I have long been tired of philosophy. Most of its arguments are either beautiful but false, or true but not beautiful. I know what is true, but I love the false one. The grandiose metaphysics, sophisticated ethics and pure, absolute aesthetics are what I love. But if we are looking for the truth, then we should go for positivism in epistemology, the pleasure principle in ethics, and empiricism in aesthetics. What is true, I cannot love. What I love, I cannot believe. This is the greatest frustration I have in the recent two to three years. The reason my obsession gradually shifts from philosophy to literature is because I want direct consolation from the latter. To sum it up, since my natural disposition is such, I am too emotional and not intellectual enough to be a philosopher, but on the other hand, I am too rational and not emotional enough to be a poet. Poetry? Philosophy? To which will I devote the rest of my life? I do not know. Or maybe be something in between?396

396 Shen, *Quanji*, vol. 1, 121.
In other words, at the core of Wang’s concern was the quest for the believable and reliable truth, the real. And we know the rest of the story already: he completely abandoned his already well-established career as a literary critic and aesthetician, and instead wholeheartedly devoted himself to the study of Chinese antiquity, employing objective and rigorous methods to analyze both ancient texts and artifacts. In the first chapter, I discuss how the political situations affected Wang’s cultural values and orientations and led to his change of career. But here we have a more fundamental aspect that explains the change: he abandoned the fictional (despite its beauty) in quest for the real. But what is real?

There is no answer to this question, or to the multiple questions Wang asked himself. His own choice of career may have given him peace of mind, but it did not resolve the conflict between the beautiful and the real, or between literature and history.

The striking parallel between Wang Guowei and Shen Congwen gradually becomes clear through a comparison of their experiences. They were both passionate about literature, art, aesthetics - the beautiful. But the beautiful was challenged by the real, though under very different circumstances. Wang’s own reflective and inward character pushed him in the direction of doubting literature and aesthetics’ validity altogether, whereas Shen’s equally inward character was under external pressure to conform to a new ideology. In both cases, drastic political changes lurked in the background. Both of them eventually gave up literature altogether, and turned to the study of history through scrutinizing its material remains. Both used material evidence to challenge and rectify centuries of traditional writings.

Wang’s and Shen’s midlife shifts of intellectual focus have long puzzled scholars, who struggle to find logical explanations. These shifts are particularly disappointing and frustrating for their admirers, who never stop expressing their regrets about the loss of two giants in literary
criticism and the art of narrative. In the case of Wang, the shift was characterized by resolute silence, whereas Shen did explain his case in multiple occasions, as mentioned above.

Before Wang Guowei turned to study ancient artifacts, he already developed an interest in the objective state of the world, but it was seen through a poetic lens. His definition of objectivity and the concept of the real is shown in his writings on aesthetics and poetry, where he puts particular emphasis on the word “guan” 觀. This word covers a spectrum of meanings in English related to the sense of sight, without strict differentiation between meanings such as to see and to look, etc. But it is best rendered as “contemplation” in the visual sense. The word’s important status is established by Confucius, who describes it as one of poetry’s major functions: “poetry enables [us] to contemplate” 詩可以觀. 397

Stressing the optical experience of an object, Wang argues that so as to reach its truth, our gaze should be purified and completely freed from any consideration of the object’s use value or its sensual qualities that may incite any desire in us. He advocates an absolutely pure contemplation of the material world. In the essay “Comments on Literature,” he argues that “[t]hose who have true emotions are able to contemplate objects unobstructed.” 398 In a poem written in Suzhou, we find this line: “In quietude, there is no obstacle contemplating the self.” 399 In another poem “Huan Xi Sha” 浣溪沙: “[I] climb to the zenith to gaze at the bright moon; incidentally [I] open the enlightened eye to contemplate the world; sadly this body belongs to the worldly mortal the eye sees.” 400

398 Wang Guowei, *Quanji,* vol. 14, 94.
399 Wang Guowei, *Quanji,* vol. 1, 155.
Wang Guowei is most famous for being the author of the immensely influential collection of commentaries on poetry entitled *Ren Jian Ci Hua*, which contains a wealth of elegantly crafted aesthetic judgments. Again, “guan” is a central concept, appearing multiple times in his appraisal of a particular type of poets and their poetry:

In the self-infused state, objects are contemplated through the self, so everything takes on the color of the self. In the self-less state, objects are contemplated through objects, so one cannot tell what is the self, what is the object.

Each word describes the object as if it is right in front of the eyes—this is called “unmediated.”

Regarding the universe and human life, the poet should penetrate inside them, but also stand outside them: penetrating inside, so as to describe; standing outside, so as to contemplate.

Based on Wang’s intellectual upbringing, it is not difficult to detect two sources from which Wang gained his inspiration. In the essay “Confucius’ Principle of Aesthetic Education,” Wang quotes a Song Dynasty work *Huang Ji Jing Shi* as follows, where the optical trope abounds,

> [t]he sage is able to grasp the principle of ten thousand things’ essence because he is able to reflect. So-called reflection means not to contemplate objects through the observing self. Not contemplating object through the observing self means contemplating the object through itself. If one is able to contemplate the object through itself, how would ‘I’ appear in it?

From the essay’s title, apparently reminiscent of Schiller’s theory of aesthetic education, we can also sense the influence of German Idealism, which was indeed an important component of Wang’s intellectual background. This reminds us that Wang had been a devoted admirer of

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403 Wang Guowei, *Quanj*, vol. 1, 478.
404 Wang Guowei, *Quanj*, vol. 1, 15.
Schopenhauer until his resolute “defection” from aesthetics to the study of history. What Wang wanted from this pure contemplation bears striking similarity with Schopenhauer’s appreciation of Dutch still life paintings in *The World As Will And Idea*, a book that left a deep imprint in Wang’s mind,

Inward disposition, the predominance of knowing over willing, can produce this state under any circumstances. This is shown by those admirable Dutch artists who directed this purely objective perception to the most insignificant objects, and established a lasting monument of their objectivity and spiritual peace in their pictures of still life, which the aesthetic beholder does not look on without emotion; for they present to him the peaceful, still, frame of mind of the artist, free from will, which was needed to contemplate such insignificant things so objectively, to observe them so attentively, and to repeat this perception so intelligently; and as the picture enables the onlooker to participate in this state, his emotion is often increased by the contrast between it and the unquiet frame of mind, disturbed by vehement willing, in which he finds himself.\(^405\)

In an interesting twist, this disinterested contemplation of the object becomes for Benjamin one of the characteristics of the true collector, who
detaches the object from its functional relations. But that is hardly an exhaustive description of this remarkable mode of behavior. For isn’t this the foundation (to speak with Kant and Schopenhauer) of that ‘disinterested’ contemplation by virtue of which the collector attains to an unequaled view of the object - a view which takes in more, and other, than that of the profane owner and which we would do best to compare to the gaze of the great physiognomist?\(^406\)

This intellectual background, though not adequate to answer the question “what is the real?” for Wang Guowei, provides insights into his mentality. What he asked for was a reduction, a purification, a detachment of external, useful and sensual qualities. The purer and more immaterial the object we get, the closer we arrive at the truth, the *real*. This aesthetic seeks to


\(^{406}\) Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 207.
distance the beautiful object from concrete things found in everyday life, liberate it from all contingencies, and turn it into an abstract idea, devoid of historicity and materiality, in particular sensual attractiveness. When it is caught by a disinterested eye, the seer is able - even if just temporarily - to transcend the bondage of worldly suffering caused by endless desire, and enter into a calm state of contemplation.

Wang’s quest for the real eventually transcended even his greatest hero Schopenhauer. He was no longer satisfied with the master:

My study of philosophy began during the period between 1901 and 1902. In the spring of 1903, I began to read Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason, but was frustrated because I could not understand it. Then I turned to Schopenhauer, and was fascinated by him. From the summer of 1903 to the winter of 1904, Schopenhauer’s books were my companions. What I liked most is Schopenhauer’s epistemology, through which I was able to make sense of Kant’s philosophy. And Schopenhauer’s philosophical view about life, its acute observations and sharp insights were particularly refreshing for me. But I gradually sensed that there is something contradictory about them. Although my “Commentary on The Dream of the Red Chamber,” written last summer, bases its central arguments upon Schopenhauer, its fourth chapter already raise serious questions. Soon I realized that part of Schopenhauer’s theory is the product of his subjective disposition, and has nothing to do with objective knowledge.

So what caused him to question Schopenhauer? And what did he think about The Dream of the Red Chamber, the greatest Chinese novel ever written, in relation to Schopenhauer? This masterpiece is both the most fantastical and most realistic work - with a dream world constructed out of a kaleidoscope of minute, lifelike details - that has ever been written in the Chinese language; it blurs the boundary between the fictional and the real. Unsurprisingly, it elicits some of Wang Guowei’s most profound insights on the relationship between reality and literature.

407 Wang Guowei, Quanjí, vol. 1, 3.
2.2. *The Dream of the Red Chamber*

a. The Incompatibility of Aesthetics and Ethics

Universally considered as the peak of Chinese fiction, *The Dream of the Red Chamber* is shrouded in mystery in every aspect. Its author is known to be Cao Xueqin (1715-1763), who came from a once affluent and politically powerful family, but our knowledge of him is minimal. Also called *The Story of the Stone*, the novel exists in multiple highly fragmented manuscripts copied by different hands. A large number of variations exist from one version to another. And the last forty of the novel’s alleged one hundred twenty chapters are either missing or unfinished, being completed by a different and supposedly inferior hand. Therefore, any “complete version” is little more than a compromise.

The novel contains nearly forty major characters and over four hundred minor ones. They are woven into numerous subplots and half-hidden clues. This narrative labyrinth inspires Jorge Luis Borges in the short story “The Garden of Forking Paths” to imagine “a novel that might be even more populous than the *Hong Lou Meng [The Dream of the Red Chamber]* and to construct a labyrinth in which all men would become lost”\(^{408}\)

As if this is not complex enough, the novel’s narrative is ingeniously wrapped in layers of ironic declamations that it is fictional, which are counteracted by both the author’s autobiographical introduction and the countless minute and extremely realistic details. The author is deliberately confusing fiction and reality, filling the novel with complex literary riddles and obscure allusions. Almost every poem, character’s name, place and building name contains allegorical meanings. Painstaking research has been spent to decipher these riddles, revealing multiple links to historic figures and events, but they are framed within or interspersed with

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dreams, fictional and fantastical plots, and ultimately could not vindicate the work as a record of true history.

The backbone of the novel’s narrative is the triangular relationship between the sympathetic and sensitive adolescent boy Jia Baoyu and his two female cousins, Lin Daiyu and Xue Baochai. Their relationship unfolds against the background of the gradual decline and eventual demise of the once politically powerful Jia Family. The family name “Jia” is a homophone of the word “fake.” So the protagonist’s name Jia Baoyu can also mean “fake precious jade,” which is one of many ironies the author designs to confuse his readers.

Because of such intricacies, the novel becomes a treatise upon the boundary between the real and the fictional, which concerns not just history, but also life itself, which alternates with dreams. Unsurprisingly, almost all commentators feel propelled to grapple with the problem of the historical reality this novel presents. And this is precisely what Wang sets out to criticize: “Since evidential scholarship flourishes in our Dynasty (Qing), readers of novels also view them with an eye for evidence. Therefore commentators of The Dream of the Red Chamber always seek who [the historic origin of] its protagonist is. This is rather puzzling.” Wang dismisses such attempts to find the object of literary allusion as naive and unaesthetic, and feels frustrated that scholars constantly bypass the important ethical and aesthetic message this novel so poignantly conveys. Wang is indeed the very first in the history of The Dream of the Red Chamber studies to focus on these values.

For Wang, the true theme of this novel is about desire, suffering and the liberation from them: “What is the essence of life? Nothing but desire.” The insatiability of desire is the root of all suffering. This interpretation is based on his reading of the opening chapter of the novel, which

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409 Wang, Quanji, vol. 1, 76.
410 Wang, Quanji, vol. 1, 55.
describes Jia Baoyu’s mythical origin as a stubborn and useless stone (hence the alternative title of the novel), discarded by the Goddess Nüwa during the process of mending heaven.\textsuperscript{411} The message of this enigmatic scene is encoded in the name of the peak under which the stone finds itself: “Qing Geng Feng” 青埂峰. It literally means “green ditch peak,” but its pronunciation indicates “the root of desire,” and in Chinese, “root” 根 also figuratively refers to the penis.

Wang also points out, somewhat controversially, that the character for jade ("yu") in Baoyu’s name is homophonous with the character for desire.\textsuperscript{412}

According to Wang, Jia Baoyu eventually realizes the root of all his sufferings, and understands that they are all unavoidable unless he detaches himself from desires altogether. Wang considers the entire \textit{The Dream of the Red Chamber} neither a political allegory nor an autobiography (even though it contains elements of both), but essentially a “history of [Baoyu’s] spiritual liberation.”\textsuperscript{413} And the ultimate purpose is to attain a state where one has neither hope nor fear any longer, and is “a desiring self no more, but an enlightened/knowing self.”\textsuperscript{414}

In this study, Schopenhauer’s imposing presence can be found everywhere. Indeed, Wang confesses that his arguments are all based upon his philosophy.\textsuperscript{415} Wang sings a paean for Schopenhauer, who philosophically explains the suffering of all human beings by coming up with a “metaphysics of love between man and woman.”\textsuperscript{416} And through Jia Baoyu’s enlightenment and relinquishment of worldly desires, \textit{The Dream of the Red Chamber} solves this

\textsuperscript{411} Cao Xueqin, \textit{Hong Lou Meng} (Beijing: People’s Literature Press, 2005), 2-3.

\textsuperscript{412} Wang, \textit{Quanji}, vol. 1, 61.

\textsuperscript{413} Wang, \textit{Quanji}, vol. 1, 64.

\textsuperscript{414} Wang, \textit{Quanji}, vol. 1, 56.

\textsuperscript{415} Wang, \textit{Quanji}, vol. 1, 3.

\textsuperscript{416} Wang, \textit{Quanji}, vol. 1, 60.
dilemma. This state of mental freedom and liberation is reminiscent of the aforementioned disinterested contemplation of the pure material object represented by art. In Wang’s interpretation, this novel forms a dialogue with Richard Wagner’s two Schopenhauer-inspired operas, *Tristan und Isolde* and *Parsifal*, with their common themes of sexual desire, suffering and negation of the Will.

However, as is already quoted, Wang also raises serious doubt about Schopenhauer’s philosophy. In chapter four, entitled “The Ethical Value of *The Dream of the Red Chamber*,” Wang tests both philosophy and literature against reality:

> according to Schopenhauer’s philosophy, all human beings and living things are one. Therefore, his theory about the negation of the Will can be realized only through all living beings’ collective negation of the Will; without this, an individual’s Will cannot be negated.”

This analysis leads to his conclusion that “Schopenhauer discusses an individual’s liberation without discussing the whole world’s liberation, thus [the theory of liberation] is incompatible with the theory that all living beings are manifestations of the Will.”

Wang closes chapter four by saying that the ethically ideal is indeed different from the real; although this novel is ultimately idealistic, its representation of the path toward liberation unrealizable, it is still a great aesthetic achievement for making us aware of what the ideal looks like. Thus he calls *The Dream of the Red Chamber* a “grand masterpiece of the Universe.”

Wang’s unyielding and inflexible quest for the real borders on becoming stubborn, and propels him to a dead end. Because of his insistence of imposing the ethical value upon the aesthetic, an

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417 Wang, *Quanji*, vol. 1, 72.
418 Wang, *Quanji*, vol. 1, 73.
419 Wang, *Quanji*, vol. 1, 75.
inspired and productive philosophical reading of a literary text thus turns to be pedantic. With Wang’s reading of *The Dream*, we can finally grasp the meaning of his lament that “[w]hat is true, I cannot love. What I love, I cannot believe.” We are also able to glimpse the inner conflict and frustration of a rather too serious but genuine and pure mind.

### b. The True History of Two Fake Objects

Wang Guowei’s “Commentary on *The Dream of the Red Chamber*” was written in 1905. In 1961, Shen Congwen published a short article about the same novel. During the fifty-six years that lie between the two, China had witnessed the devastating Sino-Japanese War and Civil War. Having taken over the mainland, the Communist government was consolidating its rule in all areas, especially culture. A new edition of *The Dream of the Red Chamber* was being prepared, which aimed at providing an authoritative and “correct” text for the public.

One important task in this project was to add explanatory notes to this notoriously difficult work. Compared with 1905, 1961 was a completely different time, and three factors dictated how the task should be carried out: 1) the powerful and much-feared supreme leader Mao Zedong, immensely capable of reading between the lines to “discover” political implications, was a fascinated reader of this novel; 2) under universal censorship, virtually every word that one uttered had to be politically correct; 3) Marxist historic materialism was the guiding principle of all scholarly work - and Schopenhauer was of course totally out of the question. Under these impossible requirements, the task of annotating a novel became a potentially dangerous test in political loyalty.

Aware of all these pressures, the famous scholar Qi Gong, who was designated to carry out this task, was scared enough to wisely choose the safe path of minimalism, giving as simple and 

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420 Wang, *Quanjì*, vol. 1, 121.
curt notes as possible. And yet the naive Shen Congwen, engrossed as he was in the novel itself, seemed unaware of - or uninterested in - this intriguing background. As an expert in ancient material culture, he was consulted on related issues in the novel, and supplied with nearly five hundred supplements to the original notes, completely undoing Qi Gong’s painstakingly minimalist (and trouble-free) strategy.\textsuperscript{421} Few of Shen’s supplements were accepted.

Shen’s most interesting contribution is the 1961 short article “‘Ban Bo Jia’ and ‘Dian Xi Qiao’: Some Disagreements on The Dream of the Red Chamber Annotations,” written during the same period as “Abstract Lyricism.” There is neither Schopenhauer, nor any grandiose metaphysics and sophisticated ethics. What we find instead is a matter-of-fact analysis of two objects that appear in the novel. And yet this unassuming little piece shows how a nuanced engagement with material culture can widen the horizon of literature and complicate the interaction between the real and the fictional.

Shen’s article concerns a scene in chapter forty-one,\textsuperscript{422} where Baoyu’s grandma and the respected head of the family, Lady Jia, receives a distant relative, Granny Liu, in the luxurious and labyrinth-like family garden, with Baoyu, Daiyu and Baochai accompanying. Granny Liu is a humble peasant who never before came across anything remotely resembling the dreamlike garden, the delicate and delicious dishes and the incredibly fanciful utensils. After a banquet and much drinking, the group proceeds to a nunnery built inside the garden, and is received by the resident nun Miaoyu. Miaoyu, of dubious origin, is described as beautiful, smart, cultured, but extremely fastidious. Cao Xueqin does not give explicit judgment on Miaoyu’s character, but lets it emerge through details of her actions and the objects she uses.

\textsuperscript{421} Zhang, The Latter Half, 151.

\textsuperscript{422} Cao, Dream, 548-60.
The group is treated to rare tea, brewed with rain gathered in the previous year. Miaoyu respectfully hands Lady Jia a delicate, five-colored teacup with cover, on a flower-shaped crabapple tray decorated with gold-lacquered dragon and clouds. After tasting the tea, Lady Jia passes it to Granny Liu and asks her to try it.

Soon Miaoyu takes the two girls Daiyu and Baochai away, and makes even more delicate tea for them. This time the water comes from the snow on plum blossoms she gathered five years ago in a temple, which she stored in a jar and buried underground. Their little gathering is discovered by Baoyu, who protests and wants to join. At this moment the servants return with the used teacups, and Miaoyu instructs them to leave the one used by Granny Liu outside. Baoyu notices this, and understands that she feels Liu has tainted its cleanliness.

Then Miaoyu takes out two very special teacups for Daiyu and Baochai to use, and lets Baoyu use her own “Lv Yu Dou” (green jade dipper). This is where Shen Congwen takes issue with the original annotation. One cup has an inscription “Ban Bo Jia,” followed by the phrase “Wang Kai’s cherished object,” and another line: “seen by Su Shi of Meishan in the Imperial Secret Collection, in April of the fifth year of the Yuanfeng reign in Song Dynasty.”

The original notes tell the reader that 1) “Jia” is a large drinking vessel in ancient times, whereas “Ban” and “Bo” are names for gourds. So this is a gourd-shaped cup; 2) Wang Kai was a ridiculously wealthy nobleman in the Western Jin Dynasty (265-316), and Su Shi was the famous poet, once powerful politician and a connoisseur in Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127). Most readers, including the author of the original notes, naturally think that all this indicates the cup “is an extremely precious ancient collectable.”

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423 Cao, Dream, 554.
424 Quoted from Shen, Quanji, vol. 30, 287.
The brief inscriptions contain rich information: they are fragments of the object’s mysterious history as a collectable, and arouse great curiosity. The name “Ban Bo Jia” is outlandish both in pronunciation and the appearance of the characters, suggesting a sense of antiqueness and rarity. The second inscription, “Wang Kai’s cherished object,” is not only an indication of provenance, but actually Wang’s proud proclamation of ownership. The third inscription is even more seductive: it shows that the cup had been hidden within the Song Emperor’s secret collection, and an elite like Su Shi had managed to only have a glimpse of it. What happened before and after is shrouded in mystery: how did it end up in the Emperor’s hand? Where did it go after the brutal Jurchen troops sacked the palace and taken away all its treasures, and even abducted the Emperor’s successors? The fact that now it resurfaces as Miaoyu’s drinking utensil adds to the mystery of her background, as well as the complex historicity of this supposedly precious gem.

However, Shen’s sharp eyes would not let any suspicious detail pass unscrutinized. As a statement of principle, he says that Cao Xueqin’s writing is such that we need to read the novel from both a concrete and an abstract angle.\(^{425}\) The abstract angle refers to the novel’s allegorical framework. In terms of the concrete, he reminds us of the historic background of material culture: in Ming Dynasty, the increasingly affluent Southern middle class was fond of showing off elegance in everyday life. Their frequent picnics made it necessary to have portable utensils. So it became common to use gourds to make drinking vessels. But in order to assume the appearance of elegance, they were made to imitate ancient bronze and jade artifacts. “Jia” is precisely such a Shang Dynasty bronze drinking vessel. Then in the Qing Dynasty, the portable

\(^{425}\) Shen, *Quanji*, vol. 30, 287.
gourd vessels became popular among the royal and noble circles in Beijing. Now the Forbidden City still holds a large collection of such vessels, which Shen himself was familiar with.\footnote{Ibid.}

Shen then concludes that, quite the contrary to the precious ancient “gourd-shaped cup” proposed by the original notes, “Ban Bo Jia” is actually a gourd vessel in the shape of an ancient bronze artifact. Therefore, even within the fictional context, we can date the object’s creation to no earlier than Ming Dynasty, which was founded in 1368. Obviously, the other two inscriptions by earlier historic figures are anachronistic, and only serve to expose the “gem” to be a ridiculous forgery.\footnote{Shen, Quanji, vol. 30, 287-8.}

The other vessel that Miaoyu shows off to her guests is called “Dian Xi Qiao” 點犀齧, in the shape of a shallow bowl.\footnote{Cao, Dream, 554.} The original note says that “Qiao” is a kind of ancient bowl; “Dian” means a dot, “Xi” means rhinoceros, and together they refer to the white line (seen as a dot on cross section) that goes from bottom to top in the middle of a rhinoceros horn. The note quotes a line from the Tang Dynasty poet Li Shangyin, “the hearts are like miraculous rhinoceros, communicating through a dot” as the source of this name.\footnote{Quoted in Shen, Quanji, vol. 30, 287.}

From a concrete angle, Shen traces the history of artifacts made of rhinoceros horns, and argues that during the Ming and Qing Dynasties, the drinking vessels were hollow horn-shaped objects rather than bowls, and it is impossible to retain that white dot in them. And he does not neglect to stress that “over two hundred such drinking vessels have passed through my own hands, none of them fit (this description of) rhinoceros horns with a white dot”. What is more,
“Qiao” as an ancient vessels usually has legs, thus does not conform to Cao Xueqin’s description of it being a shallow bowl.

In both cases, the original notes get it all wrong. Casual readers will end up remembering how much fancy and fuss the meticulous Miaoyu creates, but few would get the message Cao Xueqin ingeniously transmits through highly coded language. On the other hand, through a more abstract dimension, Shen convincingly demonstrates that both objects indicate the fake purity and pretentiousness of Miaoyu. As a nun, she strives to present herself as detached from worldly snobbishness, but these fake objects, her extremely acute sense of the different social statuses of various personalities, and not least her disdain of the humble Granny Liu, tell us precisely the opposite. The fact that such a fastidious person as she is would let someone else use her own drinking cup also implies that she and Baoyu might have some especially intimate relationship unnoticed by others.

Shen seizes this opportunity to educate his readers on the importance of preserving and studying material culture. He says that a number of publications around the time the novel was written focused upon material culture, and became household readings for the literati class. So such guesswork would not have been difficult even for servant girls in the novel. But now “even the Minister of Culture could not be sure to grasp them!” What is more - and here Shen could not refrain from speaking again as a museum guide -

[a]lthough the objects described in this novel may be prominently on display in the Forbidden City Museum (I remember the Museum’s Treasury used to exhibit a rhinoceros cup with tall legs), if no one points out that this is precisely what The Dream of the Red Chamber mentions in this or that chapter, then the knowledge still could not be used in the notes. With neither empirical knowledge nor reference to dictionaries, and based only upon

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430 Shen, Quanji, vol. 30, 289.
subjective speculation, the annotator of course cannot connect various elements and make a coherent interpretation.  

Now returning to the novel itself, one might be mildly startled to realize what a fictional, fantastical and occasionally absurdist literary world Shen is dealing with. From the characters to the space to the plot, nothing is real. And yet Shen just takes us on a journey of meticulous study of ancient material culture down to minute details. Contrary to one’s assumption, the only real element in the fictional scene is the most curious object, “Ban Bo Jia.” Such an object not only does exist, but is prominently displayed in the most conspicuous of all museums in the country. And its mysterious provenance refers to true historic figures. In the light of Shen’s approach, Cao Xueqin’s phantasmagorical masterpiece is constructed on a concrete material basis. Just as a “Jia” with a Su Shi inscription (or a Romantic-Era sculpture with Michelangelo’s signature) raises questions about the layered complexities of the concept of historic authenticity, Shen’s materialist approach to a literary “dream” teaches a lesson about fictional realism, to borrow David Wang’s phrase. If we solely rely upon the original notes without the help of Shen’s careful reading, neither the true meaning of this scene nor the genius of Cao Xueqin would be revealed to us.

Compared with Wang Guowei’s conceptualization of the aesthetic object, we find the exact opposite in Shen Congwen. For Shen, an object’s beauty resides precisely in its materiality and historicity, in the traces or inscriptions as signs of the passage of time and ownership. When Shen Congwen’s approach is put next to Wang Guowei’s, one cannot even call them a “dialogue.” The ways in which their questions were articulated were so different that they did not operate in a shared framework of thinking. Wang Guowei’s focus was an ahistorical, metaphysical reality, whereas Shen’s target was a reality in its full historicity and materiality, even though in the case

431 Ibid.
of *The Dream*, this reality can be embedded in fiction. Wang Guowei, who abandoned philosophy and literature in pursuit of pure objectivity in the materiality of history, remained a philosophical idealist. Shen Congwen, the one-time fiction writer who also gave up literature for objectivity in the materiality of history, turned out to be a lyrical realist. His method was entirely object-based: “since there is a large amount of objects, my research is carried out using new methods: at the beginning, I do not look at texts, but only analyze a problem through objects; I do not give conclusions, but only discuss the objects, and provide new to other research departments...”\(^{432}\)

At that time, mainstream debates about literary realism centered upon narrative. But Wang Guowei’s concern was a practicable “metaphysical realism,” and narrative never interested him. But Shen’s evidence-based method corresponded to a certain understanding about history that he presented in his own fictions. In David Wang’s words,

[t]he dimension of history emphasized by Shen Congwen’s narrative is the microlevel of seemingly insignificant happenings, the empty space between the significant disruptions of historic events. The trivial, contingent events and figures may repeat one another in a meaningless way, but they may also manifest their historical significance by simply “being” there over a sizable period of time. Not without a sense of irony, Shen Congwen feels this is where the real history happens, a history that refuses to be interrupted by the “plotting” of wishful historians, one that asserts its own autonomy in a repetitive temporality.\(^{433}\)

Shen’s reading of the aforementioned episode is precisely an example that echoes David Wang’s observation. The antique objects, with only partially preserved information about their provenance, are indicators of such contingent events. They may be completely meaningless until at some point when, with a stroke of luck, their relations to historic events suddenly become clear. But if good luck does not come (which is often the case), we have to be content with their

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\(^{432}\) Shen, *Quanji*, vol. 12, 387.

\(^{433}\) Wang, *Realism*, 226.
fragmentary and isolated state of existence. They disrupt the “plotting of history,” and point to
the “empty space between the significant disruptions of historic events,” but do not illuminate it.

One last parallel exists between Wang Guowei and Shen Congwen: they both attempted
suicide. In “Commentary on The Dream of the Red Chamber,” Wang says that “the path towards
liberation exists in detaching oneself from the world, not in suicide.” But twenty-two years
later, he ended his life in suicide. Shen tried the same without succeeding. He lived on for
another thirty-nine years, and endured much more hardship than Wang, but he eventually
attained a serene sense of fulfillment.

3. Imaginary Conversation 2: Shen Congwen and William Morris

3.1. The Lonely Museum Guide

Another series of questions, in connection with the “Against Squandering Exhibition” that
opens this chapter, remains to be answered: what kinds of “trash” did Shen collect? Why did he
do so? What were his criteria? By creating another imaginary conversation between Shen and
someone whom he never met, and probably never even heard of, I hope to provide an answer to
these questions.

As has been mentioned, Shen had an extremely difficult period of transition after the
Communist takeover. In April 1949, after his suicide attempts, he lost his teaching position at
Peking University. In August, he became an employee at the National Museum of History.
Shortly afterwards he was sent to a so-called college of politics to receive “re-education” for
about a year. Upon leaving the college, he had the choice of resuming his writing career, but he
gave up, thinking that his ideas would not work for the new ideology anyway. Instead he
returned to work for the Museum. He vividly describes his loneliness during this period:

434 Shen, Quanji, vol. 1, 62.
On a superficial, everyday level, I could be said to be “completely finished, collapsed.” I could hope for nothing anymore. My colleagues from the past, such as old friends like Ding Ling, have gained high status; even Mao Dun, Zheng Zhenduo, Ba Jin, Lao She all became prominent and very active, always flying abroad as important guests. In comparison, I myself, at that time, would leave home before dawn, buy a roasted sweet potato to warm my hands, take the trolleybus to Tiananmen, which was not open yet. I would then sit down to watch the sky, stars and the moon, and enter [the Museum] when the door opens. When I go home at night, sometimes there is rain, and I would just wear a gunnysack...

However, spiritually, he slowly regained balance and tranquility, and even became passionate and fulfilled again. He was finally able to devote himself to something extremely rewarding. At the Museum, he served as a tour guide, and provided explanations to visitors at exhibitions. He started to be exposed to large varieties of ancient artifacts. For example, he had seen over a hundred thousand pieces of textile. His familiarity with the artifacts was such that “regarding Qing Dynasty porcelain and dishes and bowls, only touching their edges and feeling their curves and shapes with my eyes closed is enough for me to date them.” But his ambition was not confined to this:

I have a wishful thinking, namely to use cultural objects as the basis for studying working people’s achievements, [thus creating] “a history of labor culture,” “a history of material culture,” “a new history of fine arts” focusing upon working people, and specialized histories on the developments of pottery, porcelain, silk, lacquerware, and metalwork. Research on these topics are still blank in China, and difficult to begin. But [if we] start from practice, with good conditions, it is possible to make things clear. They will also be very useful for the compilation of general histories. Because if we say “all culture is created by the working people’s hands,” we need to know historical facts to consolidate the argument!

435 Shen, Quanji, vol. 27, 247.
436 Shen, Quanji, vol. 27, 244.
437 Shen, Quanji, vol. 12, 112.
438 Shen, Quanji, vol. 27, 245.
On the one hand, studying cultural objects was politically much safer than writing literature. But on the other hand, Shen’s choice was much more than an escape or a tactic turn to self-protection. He genuinely believed in practice, empirical evidence, and direct engagement with objects. Luckily, this also fitted conveniently in the ideology that emphasized the core status of the working class and the value of their labor.

Combined with this tactile, hands-on engagement with objects was Marxist Materialism, reincarnated in Mao’s theories, such as expressed in *On Practice*, which argues that knowledge is gained in the dialectic process of verification through practice. Shen tried hard to adapt to this theory, and this time with success, thanks to his new job that dealt with material culture:

To apply the learning method in *On Practice* to the new task of engaging cultural objects, without the influences of either Western archeology or the Chinese connoisseurship that treats cultural objects as curios, but developing a brand new method and attitude to study cultural objects: this really has not been widely practiced by my colleagues in China. [...] If we do it well, we can hopefully bring the methodology to new developments, which has the significance of revolutionizing scholarship.

Throughout most of his life, Shen never stopped emphasizing his modest upbringing and outsider identity. He repeatedly reminded his audience that he was from a place not only very rural, but remote from the center, a border town; that he did not know how to use punctuation when he arrived in Beijing; that he only had primary school education, etc. These are all true, but emphasizing them is also a tactic and self-protecting gesture; it is a form of self-fashioning. Such a modest identity did not just excuse him from the highbrow discourses, it helped him articulate a down-to-earth, matter-of-fact and genuinely materialist approach to culture and history.

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More importantly, Shen was not just admiring the beauty and ingenuity of these artifacts for their own sake, but was always mindful of the human elements behind them, making the case that they had been created by the common people, infused with their emotions, lived experiences, and their understanding of society. These artifacts were the carefully crafted symbols of humanity in its most sublime state.

Shen’s impressive research covers the entire range of applied and decorative arts. He partly benefitted from the encyclopedic imperial collections, but he also collected new items according to his own concept of art. He passionately gathered materials related to the history of textile production, including the techniques of raising silkworms, of dyeing, the design of patterns; he studied their relationship to political and economic history, to canonical texts, to paintings, dance, and interaction between different ethnic peoples. He worked on the art of paper cutting, the history of bronze mirror and their decoration patterns, the design of fans, jades, ceramics, harnesses, drums, lamps, chariots, architecture, and more. He also closely followed all the archeological findings, in particular of burial objects. In other words, anything from miscellaneous objects to monumental remains interested him. And he was always able to discover significant cultural and historical messages in them, no matter how trivial they seemed to others.

But it is not at all easy to turn this wishful thinking into reality. From 1949 to 1976, Shen endured wave after wave of political movements, in the name of “learning from the people,” which created completely meaningless hindrances to his work in recovering the importance of the people’s arts. These included an extended period of exile in Hubei province from 1969 to 1972, when the ailing Shen was already in his late sixties. The difficult conditions, created by
absurd bureaucracy, were unimaginable. And studying material culture becomes for him a way of anaesthetization.441

What is more, he was collecting and studying artifacts against the grain, valuing what most others ignored or even looked down upon. This is also why the importance of his work went largely unrecognized. He self-mockingly admitted that he was spending a quarter of his income on “non-cultural objects, trash.”442 And he had to endure all the institutional injustice and inconvenience that added to the difficulty of carrying out his research. Hence the deeply humiliating “Against Squandering Exhibition.” His account of the exhibition’s contents provides important details about his principles of collecting, and the cultural and aesthetic logic behind them.

The first exhibiting case displayed two big cases of Ming Dynasty (14th -17th CE) manuscripts about military practice, which Shen bought from Suzhou. They contained some images of strange, colorful clouds. He bought them for the sake of a Tang Dynasty Dunhuang manuscript (7th - 10th CE), as well as canonical works such as Records of the Grand Historian (c. 94 BC) and History of Han (111 CE), contained writings about the practice of watching clouds and weather before military actions in the Northwestern desert area, and these strange, colorful clouds depicted precisely this practice. Even more important is the fact that the mythical Yellow Emperor, an evidence for dating an ancient text, was mentioned in connection with this practice in the History of Han. The Ming Dynasty manuscript he bought (invaluable in itself) can therefore help to retrospectively collate the important Dunhuang manuscript. But Shen’s extremely ignorant and arrogant boss treated this as a “randomly collected superstitious book [disguised] as cultural object.”

The other example is a large piece of dark-hued silk, with the words “woven by Hejian Fu” on it. “Hejian Fu” was a prefecture that originated in the Song Dynasty (10th-12th CE), and this area had been an important center of silk production since Han Dynasty (2nd BC - 3rd CE). This piece, bought by Shen for four yuan, was an invaluable testimony to the long history of silk production, and a rare material for the study of economic and institutional history. But now it was displayed as a piece of trash, an evidence of how Shen “squandered” state funds.443

3.2. The Rise of the Applied/Decorative Arts

Ignorance and meanness aside, this episode also demonstrates important clues in the development of intellectual and aesthetic history. Shen did not possess an asset that many intellectuals of his generation like to boast of: being a “Native Soil” writer, he never styled himself as one of those cosmopolitan and international visionaries who bring together wisdom from East and West. In him we find no grandiose vision such as Wang’s fusion of Schopenhauer and Cao Xueqin. Both his works’ subject matter and his methodologies remain local and unassuming; he maintained his earthy wisdom as well as the tie to his native, remote soil, rarely if ever quoting foreign thinkers or participating in the international cultural community. But the most fascinating thing is that, with his endeavors in such a manner, Shen unwittingly entered into a productive dialogue with a major, multifaceted and international cultural trend that has had strong repercussions in issues ranging from aesthetics and art history to social reform and political activism.

One small historic detail fully demonstrates the wide-ranging scope and international relevance of Shen’s thoughts, and how much he was part of a world culture that was more and more conscious of the cultural and political importance of material production. This detail has

appeared in many writings that discuss Shen Congwen’s work on Chinese costumes, but its implications have never been noticed.

Shen had longstanding interests in textile production and pattern design, which extended to include the entire history of Chinese costumes. For example, when most scholars only paid attention to the contents of the Chinese Buddhist Canon, he would direct his attention to the “trivial”: the silk-embroidered cover and wrapper of a Ming Dynasty copy. He complained that many colleagues did not understand textile’s historic and cultural meanings, and thought what he was doing was “merely personal interest” and “unnecessary.” On the contrary, he told of several incidents to show how a thorough knowledge of this subject could greatly contribute to the study of history, and especially the dating of ancient artifacts. For example, the National Museum of History purchased what was said to be a precious Song Dynasty bound rubbing, but Shen instantly recognized that the cover’s decorative pattern belonged to the mid-eighteenth century. So all the pompous claims about this object turned out to be lies. Another example was a painting depicting the Goddess of Luo River, attributed to the painter Gu Kaizhi (c. 348-405), which was treated by everyone as a priceless national treasure. But Shen pointed out that all the costumes worn by the figures in the painting typically belonged to a period no earlier than 439.

His interest in textile and costumes had yet another dimension, one that leads us back to his reflection on an abstract lyricism and its relation to history. David Wang observes that “as an object that mediates the domains of intimacy and sociality, clothing conveys the felt relations of

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444 Shen, Quanji, vol. 27, 250.
the civilizing process of a society. It provides Shen Congwen with a unique entry point into history […] Shen would have called it a ‘history of feeling’.”

This intense interest in textile and costume culminated in the seminal *A Study of Ancient Chinese Costumes*. This project preoccupied Shen for a total of seventeen years. Its writing was done through unimaginably difficult times and numerous interruptions, including the devastating Cultural Revolution. It all started in the summer of 1964, when the Chinese premier Zhou Enlai held a meeting with the officials of the Ministry of Culture. He lamented that when accompanying foreign visitors to watch theater performances, he noticed that the costumes for historic settings were a mess, and did not conform to historical truth. Furthermore, while visiting abroad, he saw that some countries had museums devoted to costumes and textiles, and produced histories of them. But China had none of these. So he wondered if anyone was doing research on these topics, and if an illustrated catalogue of Chinese costumes could be produced.

Vice Minister of Culture Qi Yanming replied that Shen Congwen was working on exactly that. After this conversation, the Ministry of Culture took Shen’s research seriously. Under Zhou’s order, resources were set aside to support Shen’s research and writing of the book, which was then tentatively entitled *References for Ancient Chinese Costumes* (Zhang 173). This is how Zhou unknowingly put Shen on the map of an international art movement, and allowed him to belatedly participate in a major shift in the conceptualizations of arts and aesthetics.

It is unclear which countries Zhou was referring to, but by 1963, apart from nearly a dozen African and Asian countries, he had also visited Budapest in the then Hungarian People’s Republic, and Prague in the then Czechoslovakia. Budapest and Prague both had (and still

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have) museums devoted to decorated and applied arts. And they are both within the cultural orbit of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire, which fell apart only forty-five years ago. Vienna, the capital of Austro-Hungarian Empire, was a center of the pan-European movements *Art Nouveau* and *Jugendstil*. The then Imperial and Royal Austrian Museum for Art and Industry (k.k. Österreichischen Museums für Kunst und Industrie) was the model for both the Budapest and Prague Museums. But most importantly, they were all influenced by the South Kensington Museum in London, founded in 1837, which is now the Victoria & Albert Museum. According to Marie-Louise von Plessen, it inspired new museums all over the world devoted to applied and decorative arts. They number more than thirty, including the aforementioned three, as well as the German Decorative Arts Museum in Berlin, the Cooper Union Museum for the Arts of Decoration in New York, and the Musée des Arts décoratifs in Paris.\(^{449}\) A key figure behind the founding of the South Kensington Museum was Prince Albert, who wanted to improve British domestic decorative arts. Therefore it was “a new kind of museum, created not to house a collection but to achieve a purpose: the improvement of British design.”\(^{450}\)

These all happened as part of a trend that aimed at a musealization of the everyday, and at recognizing the importance of the applied/decorative arts - a rather exact equivalent of what Shen Congwen would be doing. It aimed especially at highlighting and protecting these arts’ human elements at the height of the Industrial Revolution. Risking generalization, I characterize the applied/decorative arts (angewandte Kunst/Kunstgewerbe) movement as a war on two fronts. On the one hand, it is born out of a disdain towards industrialization and its corruption of art, of labor, and of the relationship between human and materials. So there is little surprise that it finds


its most engaged expression in Britain, the place where the Industrial Revolution began. On the other hand, this movement is also reacting against the idea of art being semi-religious, self-sufficient, transcendent, and superior to mundane and useful objects.

The quest for profit and efficiency reduces human labor to detached, mechanical routine. The human elements - the laborer’s emotions, mindfulness, concentration, creativity, imagination and attachment to the material - are replaced by carelessness and mechanical repetition. Along the process, not only that the product becomes cheap, unsophisticated and inhuman, but also - and much more importantly - the laborer becomes alienated. For this reason, the conceptualization and theorization of the applied arts has a strong political dimension.

On the other hand, the idea of usefulness has usually been incompatible with an aesthetic, particularly since Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*, that emphasizes a transcendent, idealistic and pure beauty, unblemished by worldly materiality, historicity and practicality. A detailed analysis of this aspect is given in the following section.

Even before the South Kensington Museum as a model museum came into being, there was already an awareness of the importance of applied and decorative arts, with the cultural giant John Ruskin articulating a theoretical basis for it. More prominent was the eclectic William Morris, who was at the forefront of this movement. Unsurprisingly, he had close connections with the South Kensington Museum, even though here he came across ignorance similar to what that Shen suffered:

advising on its purchases of Iznik pottery, Persian carpets and medieval tapestries, and using its collections as a source of inspiration for his own work; having persuaded the museum to pay £1,250 for the Troy tapestry, he wrote in his diary on 26 January 1887, “it was bought for me since scarcely anyone will care a damn for it.”

Morris’s wide-ranging achievements not only shaped art and design in Britain; his influence throughout Europe and the United States, inspiring ways in which programs of (often utopian) social reform are intimately bound with artistic innovation.

3.3. William Morris

Shen Congwen and William Morris are thus connected, though only indirectly. And indeed, up to his death Shen was working independently, using his own modest methods. Even his participation in the international interest in applied and decorative arts was probably something he himself was unaware of. But precisely because of a lack of direct connection, the many consonances between Shen and Morris are all the more striking.

William Morris, English textile designer, poet, novelist, translator, socialist activist, and a leading figure of the Arts and Crafts Movement, was born in Walthamstow, Essex in 1834, to a well-to-do middle-class family. Raised in the Essex countryside, he early on had exposure to both nature and the human labor based on it. Woodford Hall, Morris’s family home since he was six, was right next to the Epping Forest. The estate still retained a semi-feudal, self-sufficient way of life, keeping horses, cows, poultry and pigs, and supplying food for its own occupants. The Epping Forest also offered Morris the material remains of human history’s mystery: in the middle of it he discovered two early Iron Age sites: the Loughton Camp and the hill-fort Ambresbury Banks. From them sprang his later enthusiasm for preservation of both natural and historic heritages.

In 1852, Morris went to Exeter College of the University of Oxford. It was there that he developed an intense interest in medieval history, art and architecture, at a time when what
became known as Medievalism was in its heyday.\textsuperscript{452} This movement was not just a matter of regressive taste, but was closely connected to the economic and political conditions of the time. According to E. P. Thompson,

Medievalism was one of the characteristic forms take by the later flowering of the romantic movement in mid-nineteenth-century England. It was, in its essential impulse, a revolt against the world of the Railway Age [...] It posed the existence, in the past, of a form of society whose values were finer and richer than those of profit and capitalist utility. Within this prevailing pre-disposition toward medieval themes and settings, some of the most significant conflicts of ideas of Morris’s time found their expression.\textsuperscript{453}

In this respect, Morris was deeply influenced by two leading cultural figures: Thomas Carlyle and John Ruskin. During his time in Oxford, Morris read Carlyle’s \textit{Past and Present}, a fierce critique of industrialization and capitalism and its corruption of humanity, which at the same time presented a utopian vision of medieval times, when human life was still intimately bound to nature through labor.\textsuperscript{454}

More important is the influence of Ruskin, whose magnum opus \textit{Stones of Venice} became a life-long inspiration for Morris. In this monumental work on the history of Venice and its art and architecture, Ruskin exemplarily demonstrates the moral significance of the Gothic tradition of art-marking, which is at the core of his ideal society. In the second volume, which Morris was particularly fond of, Ruskin sets out to refute two premises: “the first, that one man’s thoughts can be, or ought to be, executed by another man’s hands; the second, that manual labor is a degradation, when it is governed by intellect.”\textsuperscript{455} Such a division of labor, and particularly the

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elevation of thinking over handiwork, is the basis of both social injustice and the regression of civilization:

We are always in these days endeavoring to separate the two; we want one man to be always thinking, and another to be always working, and we call one a gentleman, and the other an operative; whereas the workman ought often to be thinking, and the thinker often to be working, and both should be gentlemen, in the best sense. As it is, we make both ungentle, the one envying, the other despising, his brother; and the mass of society is made up of morbid thinkers, and miserable workers. Now it is only by labor that thought can be made healthy, and only by thought that labor can be made happy, and the two cannot be separated with impunity.456

For Ruskin, medieval art balances thinking and making in an ideal proportion. What is retained there is not just fine taste, but an art that has a vitality uncorrupted by the greed for profit, and more importantly, a complete and unalienated humanity. Therefore, the call for a return to medieval times is in essence a rejection of industrial capitalism’s corruption of art, social relations and ultimately human nature.

Morris enthusiastically responded to Ruskin’s call, and put it into practice. During his time at Oxford, Ruskin also befriended the like-minded Pre-Raphaelites, including the eminent painter and designer Edward Burne-Jones, the talented painter and poet Dante Gabriel Rossetti, as well as architect Philip Webb. Together they embarked on numerous projects. Morris’s eclectic design works fully demonstrated the breadth and width of his handicraft capability and imagination, and the degree to which he was determined to practice Ruskin’s philosophy. In Fiona MacCarthy’s words,

Morris had a deep attachment to things, and a huge reservoir of knowledge of their history. [...] He was in the great tradition of the Victorian connoisseur. But unlike most connoisseurs he was himself a maker. With an almost manic industriousness Morris set out to rediscover lost

456 Ruskin, Stones, 169-70.
techniques for fabricating, in succession: embroidery; stained glass; illumination and calligraphy; textile dyeing, printing and weaving; high-warp tapestry.\footnote{Fiona MacCarthy, \textit{William Morris: A Life for Our Time} (New York: Knopf, 1995), ix.}

Morris was also famous for being the founder of the Kelmscott Press, which produced delicately illuminated, limited-edition books. In an attempt to preserve the medieval art of book-making, the Press’s products perfectly combine beauty and usefulness, bringing the contents of books in harmony with the way they are looked at and touched by the reader.

Just like Shen Congwen, who was attracted to the Southwestern ethnic culture and ancient artifacts, Morris developed strong ties to two cultures that are either temporally or spatially removed from the here and now: apart from medieval arts, he was also an ardent advocate of Nordic cultures. He learnt Germanic languages, and published translations of \textit{The Saga of Gunnlaug Worm-Tongue}, \textit{Grettis Saga}, the \textit{Story of the Volsungs and Niblungs}, and \textit{Three Northern Love Stories}. His novels \textit{The Wood Beyond the World} and \textit{The Well at the World’s End} are early examples of fantasy literature, whereas \textit{News from Nowhere} has strong leaning towards socialism.

In time, Morris also formulated his own theory of art, especially concerning its decorative branch. In \textit{The Decorative Arts, Their Relation to Modern Life and Progress: An Address Delivered before the Trades’ Guild of Learning},\footnote{William Morris, \textit{The Decorative Arts, Their Relation to Modern Life and Progress: An Address Delivered before the Trades’ Guild of Learning} (London: Ellis and White, 1878).} he presents the following point,

\textit{everything made by man’s hands has a form, which must be either beautiful or ugly; [...] Now it is one of the chief uses of decoration, the chief part of its alliance with nature, that it has to sharpen our dulled senses in this matter: for this end are those wonders of intricate patterns interwoven, those strange forms invented, that men have so long delighted in: forms and intricacies that do not necessarily imitate nature, but in which the hand of the craftsman is guided to work in the way that she does, till the web, the cup, or the knife, look as natural, nay as lovely, as the green field, the river bank, or the mountain flint. [...] To give people}
pleasure in the things they must perforce use, that is one great office of decoration; to give people pleasure in the things they must perforce make, that is the other use of it.  

The use of decorative art is therefore bidirectional: it helps us appreciate the beauty of our surroundings more sensitively, and also directs us to produce, to make artifacts that respond to nature positively and creatively.

Out of this idea are derived a further premise, and an objection. Because of its intimate relation to everyday life of all people, decorative arts become a vehicle for historic authenticity, of the details about what truly has happened:

So strong is the bond between history and decoration, that in the practice of the latter we cannot, if we would, wholly shake off the influence of past times over what we do at present. I do not think it is too much to say that no man, however original he may be, can sit down today and draw the ornament of a cloth, or the form of an ordinary vessel or piece of furniture, that will be other than a development or a degradation of forms used hundreds of years ago; and these, too, very often, forms that once had a serious meaning, though they are now become little more than a habit of the hand; forms that were once perhaps the mysterious symbols of worships and beliefs now little remembered or wholly forgotten.

So decorations are not just the background, the superfluous additions, but the concrete embodiment of the elusive history of thinking, imagination, and memory itself. What we lack is a proper hermeneutics of decoration that can help us recover the forgotten, and our task ought to be to develop such a hermeneutics through careful study of decorations.

However, no matter how one stresses the link between decorative arts and working people, its very production requires much more time, energy and skill than working people can afford. Thus naturally comes the objection that Morris’s artistic vision caters to the wealthy and leisurely, rather than for the masses. Morris preemptively refutes this premise by reminding his

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459 Morris, The Decorative Arts, 5.
460 Morris, The Decorative Arts, 8.
audience that all the elaborate, luxurious and “wasteful” arts that once decorated the violence and arrogance of tyrants were never created by the tyrants themselves, but without exception by the common working people. That is why decorative arts are especially useful “at a time when we so long to know the reality of all that has happened, and are to be put off no longer with the dull records of the battles and intrigues of kings and scoundrels.”

If one still thought that paying too much attention to the decoration of books and patterns of textile is politically regressive, Morris refuted this by his action: he took the admirable and logically inevitable next step from theory to practice, and actually became a socialist activist. Most notable in this aspect of his career is his co-founding, with Eleanor Marx, the youngest daughter of Karl Marx, of the Socialist League (UK, 1885), a radical workers organization that advocated “Revolutionary International Socialism” in response to the fact that the society was split in two classes - one that possesses wealth and one that produces it.

3.4. The Politics and Aesthetics of the Handicraft

Morris died in 1896. His life spans the period immediately following the height of the Industrial Revolution, but his ideas reach well beyond that period, exercising crucial influences on applied and decorative arts, and shaping the way they participate in politics and social reform programs. One notable example is the Bauhaus school of design, which originated in Germany and dominated many parts of the world throughout the twentieth century. Its founder Walter Gropius’s proclamation of intention for the Bauhaus is clearly an echo of Morris:

Architects, sculptors, painters, we must all turn to the crafts. Art is not a “profession.” There is no essential difference between the artist and the craftsman. The artist is an exalted

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461 Morris, The Decorative Arts, 9.
craftsmen. [...] Let us create a new guild of craftsmen, without the class distinctions which raise an arrogant barrier between craftsman and artist.463

Although Gropius himself was not so politically oriented, the Bauhaus movement did manage to inspire a number of utopian, left-leaning projects that emphasize minimalist function as both an architectural style and a way of life, such as the Isokon Building in London.464 This can be considered a distant refraction of Morris’s (and Ruskin’s) similarly utopian vision that sought to combine handicrafts and labor with a certain way of organizing social relations.

These idealistic visions would have fitted very well in Mao’s communist China. But the Arts and Crafts Movement and its offspring did not find their way into that part of the world, which is precisely why Shen Congwen, who had similar ideas, was so ahead of the time in his immediate surroundings, and so isolated in his attempts to single-handedly reverse the hierarchy in material culture. Shen stressed that his goal was to gradually shift the focus of art history to the achievements of the working people:

Up to now, fine arts education still focuses on the feudalist literati paintings, and ignores ancient working people’s achievements, creations and inventions in arts. I spend some efforts on them, and gain a bit of commonsensical knowledge. Since I am working for the new National Museum of History, it is not incorrect for me to systematically pay attention to ancient working people’s achievements in applied arts.465

Shen referred to the literati painting tradition as the opposite of the handicraft arts created by the common working people. Generally speaking, the literati paintings represent the taste of the leisure class who do not have to participate in labor. Its aesthetic is one of serene detachment and disinterested contemplation of nature. This echoes the kind of Dutch still life paintings that

463 Quoted from MacCarthy, Morris, 605.
Schopenhauer embraces; for him (and Wang Guowei) they represent the ideal art that delivers the viewer from worldly desires and pains. Ultimately one may detect in such an aesthetic the Kantian idea of free beauty, as opposed to adherent beauty:

In the judging of a free beauty (according to the mere form) the judgment of taste is pure. There is presupposed no concept of any purpose, for which the manifold should serve the given Object, and which therefore is to be represented therein. By such a concept the freedom of the Imagination which disports itself in the contemplation of the figure would be only limited.

But human beauty (i.e. of a man, a woman, or a child), the beauty of a horse, or a building (be it church, palace, arsenal, or summer-house) presupposes a concept of the purpose which determines what the thing is to be, and consequently a concept of its perfection; it is therefore adherent beauty. Now as the combination of the Pleasant (in sensation) with Beauty, which properly is only concerned with form, is a hindrance to the purity of the judgment of taste; so also is its purity injured by the combination with Beauty of the Good (viz. that manifold which is good for the thing itself in accordance with its purpose).\textsuperscript{466}

Here we find Shen and Morris positioning themselves opposite Kant. Whereas Kant valorizes the pure taste of free beauty, and sees the purposefulness of adherent beauty as a compromise, hindrance or even injury to the former, Shen and Morris consider the usefulness of an object an integral part of ideal beauty. Function should be in harmony with aesthetic agreeableness. Beautiful objects do not exist in the realm of idealistic abstraction, but in mundane everyday life, as real objects crafted by the human hand. In this way they might not be perfectly made; the hand can never attain the impeccable purity the mind envisions. But it is in the hand’s direct engagement with the raw material of the object that humanity attains a fully developed balance between the intellectual, the emotional and the corporeal.

Most importantly, objects are beautiful because they have been used daily, and bear blemishes that are signs of this human engagement. Rather than symbols of the transcendent,

they are witnesses to history, to common people’s happiness and sorrow; they forge a most intimate connection with real people’s lives, record them, and retell them to posterity. Or, in David Wang’s words, Shen’s research on material culture, especially clothing, expresses such a view: “history becomes meaningful where the passage of time is being sensed; and the passage of time manifests itself where gaps in the representational system surface and signs of tailoring - designing, cutting, suturing - come into view.”

But both Shen and Morris find themselves fighting on two fronts. Apart from the conceptualization of beauty as being detached and abstract, there is another argument that became powerful and popular after the rise of proletariat revolution. It finds its classic expression in Walter Benjamin’s influential essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproducibility.” In this piece, Benjamin observes that modern mechanical reproduction destroys the uniqueness of an artwork, its semi-religious, cultic “aura.” In so doing, mechanical reproduction also enables art to increase its exhibition value by a multiplied presence. The new art that emphasizes exhibition value is ideal for accommodating a distracted audience, because “the masses seek distraction whereas [traditional] art demands concentration from the spectator.” Therefore, the enhanced presence of art through reproduction gives it more power to mobilize the viewers to serve political goals:

for the first time in world history, mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual. To an ever greater degree the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility. [...] But the instant the criterion of


authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice – politics.\textsuperscript{470}

In this essay, Benjamin’s focus is on photography and film. But if we apply his argument to a general consideration of art, then what he leaves out in the account of the destruction of artworks’ “aura” is the fate of the handicraft, the other victim of mechanical reproduction. Now that the hand is replaced by the machine, the tactile interaction between the craftsman and the material is no longer necessary or even possible, and the process of alienation of humans from natural materials ensues.

On the other hand, the application of art to politics, with the help of mechanical reproduction, would very easily let art lapse into propaganda. Even if propaganda serves revolutionary purposes, it is nonetheless undercut by the alienation that takes place in the process.

Here we see a dilemma in the politics of aesthetics that is difficult to resolve by itself: the emphasis on the handicraft as the preserver of balanced humanity is paled in the face of revolutionary propaganda. As a revolutionary reaction against industrialization, the handicraft now turns out to be the inefficient and regressive opposite of revolution itself. Shen’s and Morris’s visions thus find no place in a progressive agenda, in which the rough, unelaborate, simplistic art and literature were considered genuinely revolutionary because 1) they had the raw propagandistic power; 2) they were created by unskillful, amateur workers or farmers, as if this would justify their inferior quality and enhance their political authenticity. On the other hand, the delicately crafted artworks were considered signs of the corrupted ruling class, regardless of the fact that they were created by the working people.

This was what Shen experienced during the turbulent revolutionary years of the People’s Republic. His research on material culture, the great achievements of the common people, was

\textsuperscript{470} Benjamin, “The Work of Art,” 224.
mostly ignored by others who were preoccupied with proletarian revolution. When his work did
draw attention, it was ironically because of a total lack of understanding of its real meaning. An
incident not long before the onset of the Cultural Revolution exemplifies the extreme degree of
intellectual disability and passive acceptance of brainwashing. When the initial version of *A
History of Chinese Costumes* was about to be published, a meeting was held to discuss the
book’s content. At the time, Mao was criticizing the fact that “emperors, kings, generals and
ministers, literati and beautiful women were dominating the theater stage.” Therefore the
editorial team decided that the book focused too much on the luxurious clothing of the ruling
class, and had to be withdrawn for revision to highlight the role of the working people.471 These
people in the editorial team certainly did not read Morris’s persuasive but ultimately rather
commonsensical argument:

> Nor must you forget that when men say popes, kings, and emperors built such and such
buildings, it is a mere way of speaking. You look in your history-books to see who built
Westminster Abbey, who built St. Sophia at Constantinople, and they tell you Henry III.,
Justinian the Emperor. Did they? or, rather, men like you and me, handicraftsmen, who have
left no names behind them, nothing but their work?472

In this regard, a connection also exists between Shen’s study of material culture and his
previous literary works. A large part of his fiction focuses upon the life of common people of
rural China, the same people who create the wondrous material culture. But even that did not
guaranteed acceptance by a propagandistic standard. Although he stopped publishing literary
works, he was initially very reluctant to give up. The new mass movements of the People’s
Republic, especially the Land Reform movement, fascinated and inspired him, and he made
several failed attempts to write about it. At the same time, he paid attention to how other writers


were describing it. In a letter to his son that he wrote on the way to a village where the Land
Reform movement was underway, Shen says the following: “if in the countryside, I recover my
ability to write, and resume writing, it must be very different from the past. Because I have
fundamentally changed. You all like Zhao Shuli, then let father write more [stories] about Li
Youcai for you!” 473

Zhao Shuli was a farmer-turned writer specializing in stories about rural life. His *Li Youcai
Banhua* was representative of the proletarian literature favored by the Communist government; it
described rural life with very colloquial language, which made it easily accessible to the masses.
Although in accordance with the ideological line set out in Mao’s *Yanan Talk*, it simplified and
beatified the extremely complex and oftentimes not so rosy picture of communist land reform. In
another letter, Shen briefly hinted at his dissatisfaction with Zhao Shuli: “as to the novels about
land reform that you are reading, their description of events are too simplistic. Here the
happenings in a tiny village contain many stories like Li Youcai’s, and some other more
important ones...” 474

Shen eventually did not produce anything significant in literature, and only “silently” lived
on for another four decades. But if we consider these utterances in his family letters, it is clear
that his shift to material culture was neither an abandonment of his literary ideals, nor a negation
of them. He was pursuing the same ideal, only through different means: an appraisal of the
material culture created by the common people was a continuation of his literary depiction of
them. And most importantly, the modest but dedicated and ingenious handicraft defied
propagandistic simplification and politicization. The already discussed essay “Abstract Lyricism”
is prefaced by two poetic lines, which sum up the kernel of Shen’s lifelong pursuit. These lines

473 Shen, *Quanji*, vol. 19, 126.
474 Shen, *Quanji*, vol. 19, 250.
eventually become his epitaph: “To think according to the self, [one] can understand ‘self.’ To think according to the self, [one] can get to know ‘the human’.”475 Behind all these utterances was Shen’s ideal of a real, complex, uncorrupted humanity.

Although fiction was for him something of the past, occasionally events in his life turned out to assume a more absurd face than fiction would have. The absurdity was enhanced by a sense of irony, as if fate was making fun of his pain, his passion, and his achievement. It was Guo Moruo who penned the relentless “A Rebutal to Reactionary Literature and Art” that effectively ended Shen’s literary career in 1949. Fifteen years later, it was that same Guo Moruo, now President of the Chinese Academy of Science, who wrote a terse and disengaged preface for A Study of Ancient Chinese Costumes, the crowning achievement of the latter half of Shen’s life.476

But if this is truly an irony, the embarrassment does not belong to Shen.

475 Shen, Quanji, vol. 16, 527.

Conclusion

This dissertation follows the lives of four very different collectors, which span most of China’s turbulent twentieth century. All four of them had other identities, such as minister, historian, archeologist, philologist, writer, painter and museum researcher. In comparison with these public roles, collecting seems to be too private to have any real significance. But I demonstrate that collecting was actually an important part of their intellectual life. It was a method, a way of thinking, a cultural technique, and an attitude towards both the present and the past. Their engagements in collecting have exposed some important issues concerning Chinese views toward history and culture. I summarize them as three sets of oppositions: between playfulness and seriousness, between forgetting and recollecting, and between materiality and the cultural act of inscribing. Some of the aspects reflected in these oppositions are universal, but others are uniquely Chinese.

Concerning the first opposition, I would like to return to a statement I quote briefly in the introduction. It comes from the section entitled “On Connoisseurship, Collecting, Purchase, Search, Reading and Appreciation” of the first history of Chinese painting, the ten-volume *Famous Paintings of All Generations* 歷代名畫記. Its author is the Tang Dynasty Zhang Yanyuan 張彥遠 (815-907), himself a painter and prominent collector. In this section, Zhang describes his addiction to collecting in a way that epitomizes many collectors’ attitudes - or at least their rhetoric, and I quote the statement in full:

> Since youth, I have been collecting lost [artworks], appreciating, playing with, framing and ordering them. Whenever I acquire a scroll or a hanging piece, I would spend days carefully and diligently mending it, mounting it and playing with it, to the degree that I would sell clothes and reduce spending on food. My wife, children and servants would laugh at me. Someone says, “you spend the whole day doing useless things, what is the use of that?” To
which I sigh and answer, “Yet if I do not do that which is useless, how can I take pleasure in this life which does have a limit?” Therefore, my hobby deepens and becomes close to an addiction. In every idle morning, [I sit] by a window opening to bamboos, in a studio surrounded by pines; at such moments, the status of a prince become trivial to me, and material needs become tiring. There are no more superfluous burdens beside my own body. Only calligraphies and paintings, only they, still hold my emotion, and are what I cannot forget. [Standing in front of the paintings,] I’m sometimes at a loss and forget words; at other times I happily contemplate and read them.

And we all know the rest - this “useless” addiction resulted in a foundational text in the history of Chinese painting. To some degree, this statement echoes what all four collectors said about themselves. In the second chapter on Lu Xun in particular, I discuss the concept of “playing” 玩 being a hedonistic way of engaging objects that seeks only pleasure and shuns any serious moral meaning. It also reminds us of Balzac’s description of the Parisian collectors being shabby, absent-minded, disinterested and passionate at the same time. I hope that after reading the four chapters, none of my readers would be cheated by this rhetorical trick into believing that these people were anything but serious.

So why do collectors constantly resort to this self-derogative rhetoric? Why do they feel compelled to brand a serious endeavor as trivial, then defend it? An easy answer would be that such rhetoric is both a form of self-fashioning and a convenient excuse for a slightly quirky tendency toward obsessive-compulsive disorder. This excuse is convenient also because it is not so easy to explain to others what the collector is really looking for in the objects. And this is what I will now try to explain: ultimately, the original manuscripts, the oracle bones the Shang Kings consulted before a hunt, the two-thousand-year-old seal once owned by a Qin Dynasty general, the real masterpiece of a great Tang painter, the clothes from a Han tomb, the little silver fish made by a tearful young silversmith - the material existence of these objects themselves are

477 Zhang Yanyuan, Lidai Minghua Ji 歷代名畫記 (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 2002), 133.
not what the collector wants. Rather, it is the sensations, feelings and lived experiences from the distant and not-so-distant past testified by and residing in these objects. As Huang Binhong puts it, ancient artifacts are where the spirits of the ancients reside. The collector seizes the “residence” in the hope of grabbing the spirit. The obsession with the original, the Urtext, the authentic, the firsthand, is nothing more than a longing for immediacy between now and past, and between here and yonder. Knowing that immediacy can never be achieved, collectors go for the second best, the least mediated - the original objects. But here lies the greatest paradox: these sensations, feelings and experiences are essentially intangible, unpreservable and unrepeatable. The original objects are the only graspable material witnesses that can prove to people of today what had happened before. (Most tellingly, the masterpieces from the past are sometimes called “famous traces” 名跡 in Chinese.) But a witness is different from what is being witnessed, and even the most original and authentic objects are merely witnesses. They saw what had happened, but they cannot tell; even when someone retells it through them, that same event and its sensations can never be enlivened again.

Therefore, the collector is heroically engaged in a project that is predestined to fail, namely to retrieve that which is irretrievable, and reenact that which is already permanently lost the moment it happens. In this sense, the collector is a Don Quixote futilely fighting his enemy, who is forgetfulness. To collect is to refuse oblivion by desperately piling one material evidence upon another. Knowing that this is futile, the collector also has to admit that he or she is indeed idiosyncratic and laughable, and so they hide themselves, together with their desperate longing, behind playfulness.

Like most cultures, China has spent a great amount of resources on remembering and recollecting the past. However, the result seems ambivalent. In his insightful essay “The Chinese
Attitude towards the Past,” Simon Leys notes something that he finds peculiar about China, what he calls “spiritual presence and physical absence of the past”:

The presence of the past is constantly felt in China. Sometimes it is found in the most unexpected places, where it hits the visitor with added intensity: movie-theatre posters, advertisements for washing machines, televisions or toothpaste displayed along the streets are expressed in a written language that has remained practically unchanged for the last two thousand years. [...]

Yet, at the same time, the paradox is that the very past which seems to penetrate everything, and to manifest itself with such surprising vigor, is also strangely evading our physical grasp. This same China which is loaded with so much history and so many memories is also oddly deprived of ancient monuments. In the Chinese landscape, there is a material absence of the past that can be most disconcerting for cultivated Western travellers - especially if they approach China with the criteria and standards that are naturally developed in a European environment. [...] Thus, the past which continues to animate Chinese life in so many striking, unexpected or subtle ways, seems to inhabit the people rather than the bricks and stones. The Chinese past is both spiritually active and physically invisible.478

One of the truly insightful point in these passages is Ryckmans’ observation that the past of China is preserved in its written language.479 Ryckmans proceeds to remark that the written language has dominated the Chinese obsession with the past (a point I briefly quote in the introduction):

traditionally, Chinese aesthetes, connoisseurs and collectors were exclusively interested in calligraphy and painting; later on, their interest also extended to bronzes and to a few other categories of antiques. However, we must immediately observe that painting is in fact an extension of calligraphy - or at least, that it had first to adopt the instruments and techniques of calligraphy before it could attract the attention of the aesthetes. As to the bronzes, their value was directly dependent upon whether they carried epigraphs. In conclusion, it would not be an excessive simplification to state that, in China, the taste for antiques has always remained closely - if not exclusively - related to the prestige of the written word.480

479 In fact the written Chinese has undergone tremendous changes, except that it remains a relatively stable and legible system.
Here Ryckmans touches upon one of the central themes that have been repeatedly brought up in this dissertation. Luo Zhenyu’s and Wang Guowei’s study of the oracle bones had to do with the historic, political and religious origins of the Chinese script, manifested in the act of carving, whereas Huang Binhong’s fusion of ancient seal carving, calligraphy and landscape brushwork was based on an aesthetic inspired by the Chinese script’s varied forms of materiality and hybrid origins. Lu Xun’s peculiar act of transcribing and editing foregrounds a text’s contingent and unstable existence by allowing different versions of manuscripts to fight against each other, thus highlighting precisely the same intricate, inseparable entanglement between the written semiotic system and the material medium. Shen Congwen went in the opposite direction, examining the uninscribed objects and turning them back into a kind of wordless language. In all these cases, inscriptions and the uninscribed objects compete against each other to become a reliable witness of the past and an authoritative token of memory. These are exactly the two roles that entitle them to become collectables. For these collectors, on the one hand, to write is to avoid oblivion; on the other hand, words tell lies, while objects do not lie, but neither do they speak. Playing with words and objects are for them two paths for an never-ending quest towards the unmediated true circumstances of past. They will never reach their destination, but they do not have any better choice.

Thus the opposition between forgetting and recollecting leads to an opposition in the Chinese practice of collecting, particularly intense in comparison with other cultures, between inscription and (uninscribed-)materiality. It would be an exaggeration to say that uninscribed objects were ignored in Chinese cultural history, but this is precisely where the importance of collecting becomes apparent: uninscribed objects had been lavishly designed, ingeniously crafted, lovingly (or otherwise) used, carefully recorded and studied, but they were rarely collected. As the
introduction argues, collecting is a very conscious and deliberate action that bestows symbolic values to objects, brings them out of their original context, and re-enforces or creates a spatial or temporal distance in between. In Chinese history, the highest status of the collectable is assigned to objects that carried inscriptions. One reason for this emphasis has to do with the uninterrupted centuries-long prominence of the Chinese writing system in historical thinking; they result in an obsession with Jin Shi Xue, the paleographic and philological study of metal and stone inscriptions, which in turn overshadows the appreciation of uninscribed objects.

In the light of the cases discussed in these chapters, I replace Ryckmans’ “written word” with “inscription,” because the latter has a broader and more accurate grasp of what is at stake. The verb “to scribe” indicates the primordial act of writing as using a tool to carve symbols, patterns or images on hard surfaces. This meaning has been preserved, among other cases, in the English words “script,” “scripture,” “scratch,” “transcribe,” “scribe,” “scivener,” and in the German words “Schreiber” (writer, clerk), “Schrift” (script), and “Schriftsteller” (author). And it is not accidental that “Schreiber” means both a writer in a neutral sense and a clerk, who serves a power system. Most tellingly, a historian is also called a scribe, someone who writes, but also narrates, constructs and determines systems of value and power.

In Chinese, a word has a similar group of related meanings as the verb “scribe” and the noun “script,” but the difference is also significant. It is “Wen” 文 as in, for instance, “Wenhua” 文化 (culture, civilization) and “Wenwu” 文物 (ancient artifacts). Its primary meanings include civilization, literature, literariness, literacy, and especially writings, but not the spoken language. Also, because pictograms were one of the origins of the Chinese characters, in the very beginning the boundary between writing and drawing was almost nonexistent, and still remains subtle. This is reflected in another character 紋, cognate to 文 and pronounced the same. With
the help of the added radical 纟 meaning weaving, silk and clothing, 紋 denotes patterns, decorations, grains; it can mean natural patterns or carved/woven ones. So when we talk about the Chinese written language, we are already within the overlapping territory between sign and image, and between language and materiality.

This unique interrelation informed and dictated debates in early twentieth century about abolishing the Chinese script for its inefficiency, which I briefly discuss in the third chapter in connection to the prominent scholar-revolutionary Zhang Taiyan, co-contributor to the same Journal of National Essence with Huang Binhong. He taught Lu Xun classical philology while in exile in Japan, and mocked his political enemy Luo Zhenyu’s work on the oracle bones as forgery. As an accomplished philologist, Zhang Taiyan wrote a treatise on literature from the perspective of philology. In it he puts great emphasis on the importance of the primordial quality of the script as carvings: “What is literature (Wen Xue 文學)? To write characters on bamboo and silk is called Wen. Its structuring method and form are called Xue (study).”\(^{481}\) He then quotes the classic of philology, Explaining Graphs and Analyzing Characters, as saying that “Wen means crossing carved strokes; its shape imitates the crossing pattern.”\(^{482}\) Zhang analyzes several characters cognate to Wen to show that this original quality of the Chinese script gradually develops into a concept similar to Belles-lettres, with aesthetic considerations overshadowing the plain nature of carving. He concludes thus: “all Belles-lettres is Wen, but not all Wen is Belles-lettres. Therefore, to discuss literature, we should use the study of the script rather than aesthetics as the standard.”\(^{483}\) In other words, Zhang considered the Chinese script as the foundation of Chinese culture, and promoted a literary revivalism of the past, an insistence upon remembering

\(^{481}\) Zhang Taiyan, Guogu Lunheng 国故论衡 (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 2003), 49.

\(^{482}\) Ibid.

\(^{483}\) Zhang, Guogu, 50.
and recollecting, based on the preservation of the script. In a lecture delivered to Chinese students in Tokyo, he reminds his audience that preserving the Chinese script and its philology is of utmost importance, because it is the first step in reviving its culture, which will then help preserve the Chinese race.  

As such, Zhang stood on the opposite side of script reform from his one-time disciple Lu Xun, who promoted Romanization and the abolition of the Chinese script as part of early twentieth century literary revolution. With its iconoclastic attitude toward the past, this revolution was a project about renewal through forgetting, which aimed at picking up with and fitting into world cultures. Chinese script therefore occupied a central position in the battle between recollecting and forgetting: as a tool of remembrance, the script was seen as either the burden or the gift of millennia of cultural memory. Whether to get rid of this burden or the cherish this gift defines the different positions of the revolutionaries and the conservatists.

The materiality of *Wen* is distinct from the orality of *language*, indicated by its etymological link to the tongue. And *Wen* as a tool of remembering and recollecting becomes a defining factor in the collecting of ancient artifacts in China. This is also demonstrated in the Chinese phrase for ancient artifacts, “Wen Wu,” with “Wu” meaning object. It can be translated as “cultural objects,” but a more literal translation would be “inscribed objects.”

Although few native Chinese speakers would think of “inscribed objects” when they use the word “Wen Wu,” the literal translation reveals a lot of hidden truth. There is an expectation that an object of significance has to bear some form of human intervention. And a simple marker, a decoration, or even a symbol is not sufficient for this intervention; rather, it has to be an inscription, a writing, a message. By the same token, the uninscribed artifact occupies an

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awkward space between culture and nature, seeming to lack certain qualities indispensible for it to belong to either realm. Therefore, inscribing on an object is the crucial step that brings it from nature into culture.

Furthermore, the content of the inscription has to do with the object’s originally function: initially a stele, a piece of animal bone, a turtle shell, a piece of metal, a bronze object were all treated as *media* for the recording of history. These materials were chosen primarily because of their durability. But at some point they acquired cultural meanings of their own, and the inscription became part of these objects’ own constitution, assisting them in securing their identities as significant or collectable, cultural objects. Once this transformative process was completed, it was no longer possible to look at a natural object naively: it either is invisible in culture (being part of nature), or needs an inscription to complete itself and have a presence in culture. Therefore, inscriptions not only bring natural objects into cultural, but also (or especially) into *history*. Or should we say, inscriptions inscribe historicity onto nature.

This transformation of natural objects into historicized and cultural artifacts is captured by Cao Xueqin in the prelude to the *Dream of the Red Chamber*, which includes an account of how a stone miraculously acquires human consciousness and emotions, and eventually becomes the protagonist of the novel. When the mythical goddess Nüwa was mending the falling sky, she made thirty-six thousand five hundred and one blocks of stone to fill the cracks. She used up thirty-six thousand five hundred ones; now useless, the odd one was thrown away. After self-cultivation, this abandoned stone acquired human consciousness, and began to lament its miserable fate. One day a Buddhist monk and a Taoist priest passed by, and sat by the stone to chat about mysterious things in heaven and wonderful things on earth. The stone became
fascinated by the earthly life, and started talking to the monk and the priest, begging them to bring it to the human world. Upon hearing this, the monk looked at the stone carefully and said:

You look like a precious object, but you still lack real value. I must engrave some characters on you so that people can see at a glance that you’re something special. Then we can take you to some civilized and prosperous realm, to a cultured family of official status, a place where flowers and willows flourish, the home of pleasure and luxury where you can settle down in comfort.\textsuperscript{485}

The monk’s words make it apparent that an inscription is \textit{expected} of a precious stone; without it the stone is incomplete. Inscriptions were indeed carved, and became the novel itself:

After no one knows how many generations or aeons, a Taoist known as Reverend Void, searching for the Way and immortality, came to Great Waste Mountain, Baseless Cliff and the foot of Blue Ridge Peak. His eye fell on the inscription on a large stone which was still discernible and he read it through. It was an account of the Stone’s rejection for repairing heaven, its transformation and conveyance to the world of men by the Buddhist of Infinite Space and the Taoist of Boundless Time, and the joys and sorrows, partings and encounters, warm and cold treatment from others it had experienced there. On its back was a Buddhist verse:

\begin{quote}
Unfit to mend the azure sky, 
I passed some years on earth to no avail; 
My life in both worlds is recorded here; 
Whom can I ask to pass on this romantic tale?
\end{quote}

There followed the name of the region where the stone fell, the place of its incarnation, and the story of its adventures including trivial family affairs and light verses written to amuse idle hours.\textsuperscript{486}

But here comes the most ingenious twist: “The dynasty, year and country’s name were, however, obliterated.”\textsuperscript{487} At the very moment when the real historicity of the inscription is about to be definitively validated, it is snatched from us. Experienced readers will instantly recognize


\textsuperscript{486} Cao, \textit{The Dream}, 3

\textsuperscript{487} \textit{Ibid.}

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this as a common devise intended to preemptively avoid the danger of political allegorization.

But here I want to suggest another level of meaning: the stone is brought from nature into culture and history; it experiences kalpas in the human world, entailing a half-fictional, half-autobiographical narrative. The trace of historicity on nature is represented by inscribing this narrative onto the stone. But by erasing the dates, this historicity is fictionalized, and paradoxically transcends specific historic details and enters into the realm of the universal and the symbolic. One can as well say that the author turns the story into one of all ages while also giving history a cyclical form.

This opening scene, which is the basis of the novel’s gargantuan narrative, conveys such a logic: the stone, itself the most primordial and nonhuman form of nature and immeasurable temporality, has been transformed first into a medium for history, and then a cultural object. Historic memory requires a durable medium as much as materiality calls for historicity to bring it into the human realm, where they also become collectables. Thus the script and the act of inscribing serve as the bridge between nature and culture/history and as means of memorialization. They are also at the heart of eclectic collecting activities.

In this sense, the practice of collecting in twentieth century China is an attempt at two goals: first, to retrieve cultural memory through preserving cultural objects; and second, to broaden the scope of culture by bringing in the uninscribed object and recognizing its own historicity. But in this process, it also redefines the content of history. These two goals collectively shape the material medium of cultural memory. It is in this context that I consider collecting - especially in the way it was practiced by the representative twentieth-century Chinese intellectuals - as a cultural technique, a concept developed by the German media theorist Siegert Bernhard. For

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him “Cultural techniques are conceived of as operative chains that precede the media concepts they generate,” and are “historically given micronetwork of technologies and techniques,” whereas Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht calls cultural techniques the “exteriority/materiality of the signifier.” According to Cornelia Vismann, “If media theory were or had a grammar, that agency would find its expression in objects claiming the grammatical subject position and cultural techniques standing in for verbs.”

Therefore, by turning natural objects into cultural objects, the practice of collecting also makes them signifiers. In Vismann’s metaphor, these material signifiers would be the grammatical subject, while with its power to order, configure and define, collecting itself occupies the position for verbs. In other words, collecting not only serves as verbs, but creates the subjects. In this process of interrogating the interrelation of textuality, inscription and materiality, collecting serves as a significant cultural technique that powerfully intervenes into not only our understanding of history, but also history itself.

489 Siegert, Cultural Techniques, 11.


491 Cornelia Vismann, “Cultural Techniques and Sovereignty,” in Theory, Culture and Society 30, no. 6 (2013), 83.
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