To Collect and to Order: the *Siku quanshu* 四庫全書 and its Organization

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Abstract

Collecting and hoarding are distinguished by order. An agglomeration of objects is defined by chaos while a collection comes into being through its organization. The largest collection of texts undertaken in Chinese dynastic history, the *Complete Writings of the Four Repositories* (*Siku quanshu* 四庫全書), is the high point of late imperial compilation projects (*congshu* 叢書). While much scholarship has been devoted to explaining the criteria of inclusion, the question of order remains largely unexplored. In this article, I investigate the link between the collection of knowledge and its organization in the high Qing. Specifically, I explore the poetic understanding of knowledge, the intellectual, non-political purposes behind the collection and its fundamental principle of order. I end this essay offering some remarks on the nature of the *Complete Writings*, high Qing scholarship, and contemporary attitudes towards classification.

Keywords

Siku quanshu – bibliographic collections – *congshu* – knowledge organization

1 Introduction

Categories create collections. Without them, there is merely accumulation. Classification is an essential—if often overlooked—component of collections because it ensures that objects are searchable, findable, and retrievable. Without classification, a collection ceases to fulfil its fundamental functions and chaos ensues. In the Chinese context, text collections have had a pre-eminent position, channelling, consolidating, or challenging received frames

of knowledge. The *Complete Writings of the Four Repositories* (*Siku quanshu* 四庫全書) towers as the largest and most complex text collection project (*congshu* 叢書) in Chinese dynastic history. While much scholarship has been devoted to explaining the criteria of inclusion, the question of order has remained marginal. This article explores the link between the collection of knowledge and its organization in the high Qing by working through the socio-cultural and intellectual (non-political) factors that informed the order of the *Complete Writings*.

By any measure, the collection was enormous. Almost three and a half thousand texts were copied in full, producing a master anthology so large that it effectively functioned as a library necessitating its own physical structure. Sponsored by the Qianlong 乾隆 emperor (1736–1796), the collection aimed to commemorate the greatness of all amassed knowledge while also capturing its most essential elements.

The immensity of the collection meant that the project could only be carried out collectively through the mechanisms of a highly effective and sophisticated bureaucracy. Scholars at the highest levels of imperial institutions and beyond deliberated on the fundamental aspects of the project. Their shared notion of knowledge and its order were the precondition which allowed for the production of such a collection. This article is about the shared substratum of explicit and implicit assumptions, attitudes, and values held by the people behind the project—collectively identified as the editors, collators, or makers of the *Complete Writings*—which underlie its formation.

The compilation was organized on the basis of the long-standing fourfold (*sibu* 四部) order of knowledge which divided texts into four main divisions: Classics (*jing* 經), Records (*shi* 史), Masters (*zi* 子), and Collections (*ji* 集). The fourfold order was not blindly adopted and, as Section 2 shows, alternative models were considered in the collection's embryonic stages. When the fourfold order was accepted, organizational issues were reworked and the overall order was refined by introducing a three-tier partition: the four main divisions (*bu* 部) were comprised of a total of forty-four sections (*lei* 類) made up of seventy groups (*shu* 屬) (Figure 1).

Much scholarship has been devoted to the *Complete Writings*. Its scholarly achievements and sustained cultural significance—it is on permanent display at the National Palace Museum in Taipei—have made it an object of study worthy of its own scholarly field (*siku xue* 四庫學).¹ Nonetheless, its classification remains poorly understood for two reasons. First, most scholarship construes classification decisions—indeed *all* decisions—through a political

1 Huang Aiping 黃愛平 2013.

prism. The order was chosen because of its putative conformity to 'Confucian orthodoxy' enhancing the legitimacy of the ruling Manchu dynasty. Ideology, politics, and power were, according to this view, the be-all and end-all of the *Complete Writings*.² Second, the order of the compilation has been perceived through the lens of modern classification practices. Most scholars—including those writing in Chinese—have persistently understood the collection as

Classics 經

Book of Changes 易
 Book of Documents 書
 Book of Odes 詩
 Book of Rites 禮
 The Zhouli 周禮
 The Yili 儀禮
 The Liji 禮記
 Comprehensive Meaning of the Three Rites
 三禮總義
 Comprehensive Treatises on the Rites 通禮
 Miscellaneous Texts on the Rites 雜禮書
 Spring and Autumn Annals 春秋
 Book of Filial Piety 孝經
 Comprehensive Meaning of the Five Classics
 五經總義
 Four Books 四書
 Book of Music 樂
 Philology 小學
 Exegesis 訓詁
 Lexicography 字書
 Phonology 韻書

Records 史

Official Records 正史
 Annals 編年
 Records of the Origins and Effects of Events
 紀事本末
 Separate Records 別史
 Miscellaneous Records 雜史
 Edicts and Memorials 詔令奏議
 Edicts 詔令
 Memorials 奏議

Biographies 傳記

Sages 聖賢
 Eminent Figures 名人
 Comprehensive Biographies 總錄
 Miscellaneous Biographies 雜錄
 Record Collations 史鈔
 Records of Non-dynastic States 載記
 Chronology 時令
 Topography 地理
 Imperial Abodes 宮殿
 General Gazetteers 總志
 Cities, Prefectures, and Counties 都會郡縣
 Waterways 河渠
 Borders 邊防
 Natural Features 山水
 Ancient Ruins 古跡
 Miscellaneous Chronicles 雜記
 Travel Chronicles 游記
 External Chronicles 外記
 Official Positions 職官
 Administrative Systems 官制
 Administrative Apothegms 官箴
 Writings on Governance 政書
 General Administration 通制
 Ritual Administration 禮制
 State Figures 邦計
 Military Governance 軍政
 Legal Codes 法令
 Engineering Standards 考工
 Bibliographies 目錄
 Texts 經籍
 Bronze and Stones Inscriptions 金石
 Records Criticism 史評

2 Yao Mingda 姚名達 2011 [1936] was the first to characterize the fourfold division as the 'orthodox' system with clear sociopolitical ramifications. Later scholarship has followed him almost without exception: Fu Xuanzong 傅璇琮 and Xie Zhuohua 謝灼華 2001; Yu Jiaxi 余嘉錫 2004; Sima Chaojun 司馬朝軍 2005. For a Marxist-nationalist perspective see Wang Zhongmin 王重民 1984: 226 who argues that the project was a tool for Manchu domination aimed to exterminate Han national thinking (燒盡殺絕有民族思想). Also see Guy 1987.

Masters 子	Miscellaneous Investigations 雜品
Confucians 儒家	Miscellaneous Compilations 雜纂
Militarists 兵家	Miscellaneous Collations 雜編
Legalists 法家	Encyclopedias 類書
Agriculturists 農家	Lesser Sayings 小說家
Medicinal Schools 醫家	Miscellaneous Affairs 雜事
Astronomical and Counting Methods 天文算法	Oddities and Hearsay 異聞
Astronomical Observations 推步	Trivial Sayings 瑣語
Mathematical Texts 算書	Buddhists 釋家
Divinatory Arts 術數	Daoists 道家
Cosmogony 數學	
Prognostication 占候	Collections 集
Residences and Tombs 相宅相墓	Elegies of Chu 楚辭
Divination 占卜	Separate Collections 別集
Fate and Physiognomy 命書相書	Han to Five Dynasties 漢至五代
Yinyang and Five Phases 陰陽五行	Northern Song 北宋建隆至靖康
Creative Arts 藝術	Southern Song 南宋建炎至德佑
Calligraphy and Painting 書畫	Jin and Yuan 金至元
Musical Scores 琴譜	Ming 明洪武至崇禎
Seal Carving and Engraving 篆刻	Qing 清
Miscellaneous Crafts 雜技	Comprehensive Collections 總集
Treatises 譜錄	Literary Criticism 詩文評
Tools and Objects 器物	Songs and Drama 詞曲
Food and Drink 飲饌	Song Collections 詞集
Flora and Fauna 草木禽魚	Song Selections 詞選
Miscellaneous Schools and Writers 雜家	Verse Novels 詞話
Miscellaneous Theories 雜學	Collections of Ci Poems 詞譜詞韻
Miscellaneous Authentications 雜考	Southern and Northern Drama 南北曲
Miscellaneous Commentaries 雜說	

FIGURE 1 The order of the *Complete Writings of the Four Repositories*.

CREATED BY THE AUTHOR.

mired by “mutually conflicting [categorizations and] contradictions” (扞格和矛盾), lamenting its “relative disorder and lack of a fixed principle” (相當紊亂, 沒有一定規格).³ These two biases have severely hampered our understanding of the *Complete Writings*. Sections 1 and 3 show how different cultural and cognitive conceptions of classification yield substantially different models of order. Section 2 demonstrates how appeals to political explanations cannot give a convincing account of the collection’s organization.

3 Jiang Yuanqing 蔣元晴 1965: 115; Sima Chaojun 司馬朝軍 2004: 165, respectively. For more examples, see Zhang Fufeng 張傳峰 2007: 304–310; Chen Shangjun 陳尚君 and Zhang Jinyao 張金耀 2008: 19–21.

This article approaches the question of textual collection and knowledge organization ‘from the ground up’ and ‘on their own terms’. Joachim Kurtz has advocated for a “de-modernised” Sinology that aims to

understand the implicit and explicit criteria of validity, veracity, credibility, coherence, relevance, [and] applicability [...] in these fields [education, law, *canonical studies*, historiography] [...] and record and define [their] terms, or metalanguages.⁴

He equates such a method with a need “to reverse the conventional perspective and try to reconstitute concrete modes of knowledge production and their underlying rules ‘from the ground up.’”⁵ Similarly, Benjamin Elman has argued for the necessity of exploring “Chinese interests [...] as they articulated and practiced them *on their own terms* rather than speculate why they did not accomplish what the Europeans did.”⁶ This requires us to “acknowledge that as yet we do not have appropriate categories of learning that resemble pre-modern Chinese frames” of knowledge and that we will have “to extend our own understanding and make room for [...] pre-modern Chinese frames.”⁷

Investigating the order of the *Complete Writings* sheds light on the collection, the society which produced it, as well as our own assumptions about classification. Late imperial China was a knowledge society *par excellence* and examining the high Qing through the question of knowledge organization yields new questions about its intellectual and social history. Following Peter Burke’s call to de-parochialize our understanding of knowledge societies, a non-teleological alternative to a singular and progress-bound conception of Knowledge is vital.⁸ Appreciating how knowledge in different contexts has been conceptualized, broken down, held apart, and brought together is essential in providing such an alternative.

Knowledge comes in various forms but it always functions as a nexus between world and society. How we perceive and classify natural objects determines how we order society and behave in it. Conversely, sociocultural

⁴ Kurtz 2011: 363–364 (emphasis added).

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Elman 2005: xxvi (emphasis added).

⁷ Elman 2004: 26.

⁸ Burke 2016: 5.

structures frame how we perceive the world. Knowledge and its organization play a mediating, dynamic role between our conceptions of the world and our actions within society.

This article follows the tripartite structure of world, knowledge, and society. In Section 1, I show how the antecedent poetic understanding of knowledge as water inflects the order of the *Complete Writings*. I provide an account of its impact on classification and briefly sketch its historical origins and development. By way of comparison to the western notion of knowledge as tree, I tease out the properties and cultural specificity of each system. In Section 2, I explore the intellectual, non-political purposes behind the collection because any bibliographic arrangement fulfils a certain set of purposes which determine its structure. I provide a short overview of past bibliographic classifications and their impact on the editors' scholarly objectives and show how the order of the *Complete Writings* was envisioned as an advising guide to scholarship. In Section 3, I identify the ascribed socio-scholarly function of texts as the fundamental principle of order and outline the different ways in which it is expressed. I conclude by showing how the high Qing conception of order differs from Aristotelian and Wittgensteinian notions of classification. I conclude with some remarks on the nature of the *Complete Writings*, high Qing scholarship, and contemporary attitudes towards classification. I explore these points by drawing from the compilers' annotations to bibliographic sections; historical documents recording the formation of the compilation; relevant philosophical and historical texts; as well as the rich secondary literature on the *Complete Writings*.

2 Poetics: Knowledge as Water

The *Complete Writings* has been extensively studied and yet it is remarkable how some of its most fundamental aspects remain unexplored. The names of the halls housing the collection are among these blind spots. These are:

The Literary Abyss Library (*Wenyuan ge* 文淵閣)
 The Literary Source Library (*Wenyuan ge* 文源閣)
 The Literary Ford Library (*Wenjin ge* 文津閣)
 The Literary Upstream Library (*Wensu ge* 文溯閣)

The first graph *wen* 文—meaning 'literature' but also 'erudition', 'learning', 'de-meanour', and 'knowledge'—is followed by a graph denoting a water-related feature. The final graph *ge* 閣 denotes the physical edifice of a library hall.

Since the first and third graphs are the same and the middle graphs are all tied to water, the names strike an elegant symmetry, hard to render in English. Contemporary scholarship has treated the names as an expression of superstition wrapped in literary language. Water was chosen for its apotropaic function to protect books from fire, their perennial foe, and different water elements exhibited the makers' literary acuity.⁹ But, is this all that there is to the names or did the compilers have more meaningful reasons to choose water-related terms?

The 1980s marked a revolution in cognitive linguistics. Lakoff and Johnson's seminal book *Metaphors We Live By* offered a strikingly different conception of metaphor.¹⁰ For them, metaphor is not merely an aspect of language but rather an aspect of thought, and abstract notions such as time, reason, virtue, argument, and emotions are metaphorically conceived in terms of concrete objects. "Don't waste my time", for example, reflects how time is conceived as a resource. "She defended her argument", "He attacked her position", and "She won the debate", reveal how argument is structured in terms of war. *Metaphors We Live By* generated a flurry of scholarship that collected further evidence, refined the theory, and expanded its methodology.¹¹ Much scholarship has been geared towards showing how conceptual metaphors are found in all languages and societies and a small yet increasing literature exists for pre-modern Chinese texts.¹² While the notion of conceptual metaphor as a culturally neutral, universal mechanism of cognition is problematic, it remains useful in its suggestion that meaning is articulated on the basis of imagistic, poetic, and pre-reflective conceptions of concrete objects.¹³

9 Liu 1997: 125–134 presents this view in great detail. Liu Qiang 劉蔷 1998 explains that the four library names are based on a widespread belief in the apotropaic function of water. For more on the library halls, see Wang Yi 王穎 2003; Wang Zhiwang 王智汪 2008; Huang Aiping 2010; Tong Zhenglun 童正倫 2012.

10 Lakoff and Johnson 2003 [1980].

11 Developments are fast-paced and conceptual metaphor theory has evolved and become more sophisticated over the years, see Lakoff 1987; Ortony 1993; Fauconnier 1997; Fauconnier and Turner 2003; Trim 2007; Glucksberg 2008; Steen 2011; Kövecses 2013; Gibbs 2015.

12 For the relationship between metaphors and cultures, see Yu 1998; Kövecses 2005; Diaz-Vera 2015. For pre-modern Chinese texts, see Allan 1997; Min 2001; Chen and Holt 2002; He Liye 何麗野 2003; Reding 2004; Chong 2006; Cline 2008; Giblett 2009; Wu Yameng 吳雅萌 2011; Lu 2012; Bao 2015; Harrison 2015; Wu Zhongsheng 吳中勝 2016; as well as Slingerland 2003, 2004a, 2004b, 2005, 2011, 2017.

13 Gandolfo 2019.

In western societies, knowledge has historically been conceptualized as a tree.¹⁴ The Biblical Tree of Knowledge and the various manifestations of this notion have been, according to several cultural theorists, foundational to ‘western’ civilisation.¹⁵ The idea that knowledge is organized in branches is so engrained that the expression does not even strike us as metaphorical. In the frontispiece of the 1780 edition of the Enlightenment *Encyclopédie*, the Tree of Knowledge is rendered in all its glory and conceptual specificity (Figure 2). The large branches, *Philosophy*, *History*, and *Poetry*, lie at the lowest end and carry all other smaller branches, creating a hierarchical nesting order. The structure of trees is imposed onto knowledge with binary divisions resulting in the placement of different branches of learning farther apart from each other. Knowledge as a tree is not a helpful illustration but rather, as evinced by its schematized form (Figure 3), fundamental in how the order of knowledge is conceptualized.¹⁶

Conceptions of knowledge in pre-modern China were significantly different. The term *zhi* 知 is the standard translation for knowledge but its semantic range covers ‘realization’, ‘perception’, and ‘wisdom’. In pre-modern Chinese, the distinction between knowledge and wisdom was blurred and the near-homophonous graph *zhi* 智, reserved in modern Chinese for wisdom, was used interchangeably with *zhi* 知. Barry Allen stresses this link by holding that knowledge in the Chinese setting “poses questions about point and value”.¹⁷ Ancient Chinese thinkers did not aim to deploy formal definitions of ‘knowledge’ or elucidate its relationship to the senses, mind, or reality. Instead, as Allen points out, Chinese texts pondered on “what makes knowledge wise and worth pursuing? What is the relationship to other values—good government, say, or ritual, or war?”¹⁸ Allen treats the relationship between *zhi* and *sheng* 聖, sagacity, as foundational in classical China suggesting that

penetrating the subtle—seeing a lot in little things [and] *discerning the concordant and contrary*—knowing the resonance among things, and how to amplify or dampen emerging tendencies [...] is the ecumenical

14 Gontier 2011; Lima 2015.

15 Trees have been praised and abhorred for their durability and pervasiveness, see Deleuze and Guattari 1988; Pothos and Wills 2011: 244.

16 As noted, Figures 2 and 3 are downloaded from <https://encyclopedia.uchicago.edu/content>. The website allows the user to zoom in to see them clearly and appreciate their beauty.

17 Allen 2015: 3.

18 Ibid.

FIGURE 2 “Explication détaillée du système des Connaissances Humaines tirée du Discours Préliminaire du Tome I. de l’Encyclopédie Publiée par Mr. Diderot et Mr. d’Alembert à Paris pour Servir à l’Usage de l’Arbre Encyclopédique”. ARTFL ENCYCLOPÉDIE PROJECT, UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO, DOWNLOADED FROM [HTTPS://ENCYCLOPEDIA.UCHICAGO.EDU/CONTENT/ARBRE-G%C3%A9n%C3%A9alogique](https://encyclopedia.uchicago.edu/content/ARBRE-G%C3%A9n%C3%A9alogique) (ACCESSED 12 APRIL 2019).

understanding of sage knowledge in the Chinese tradition; it is not strictly universal—there are exceptions—but it is the leading idea.¹⁹

In the quest for sagacious knowledge, *wen* 文, erudition and demeanour, plays a crucial role. Even though different philosophical traditions have distinct notions of sagacity, *wen* functions as a minimal common denominator. As previously noted, the term has a broad semantic field and for this reason can be regarded as the manifestation of *zhi*—namely, that which has been apprehended. In the form of text, *wen* is the material manifestation of *zhi*; in the form of demeanour, *wen* is its physical embodiment. *Wen* captures *zhi* and transmits it through language and action.

The conceptual links between *zhi*, *sheng*, and *wen* are not accidental. The terms are related because they are based on the same conceptual imagery. In *The Way of Water and Sprouts of Virtue*, Sarah Allan shows that *dao* 道—the fundamental pattern of change in the world—is metaphorically grounded on water.²⁰ Texts across traditions refer to the flow of *dao*, its spontaneous twists and turns, its abysmal and primordial quality, its pure, all-encompassing nature, and its ability to create and sustain life. Knowing *dao* and putting it into practice is structured on water and time and again a wide range of texts refer to the ocean-like wisdom of the sages, their capacity to extract ethical insights from water and structure their actions on the free and easy flow of a river. *Dao* is conceived in water terms and so too are the knowledge, sagacity, erudition and demeanour that come with it.

The library records of the *Complete Writings* build on the conception of knowledge as water. The *Record of the Literary Ford Library* (*Wenjinge ji* 文津閣記) states that “water is used as a metaphor to understand knowledge” (以水喻文) and explains the structural similarities between the four main divisions and the four water elements of the library names.²¹ The meaning of the names, the record notes, is established on water, locating their signification not on *wen*, the *prima facie* conceptually rich term, but rather on the seemingly innocuous ‘water’.²²

The primary similarity between water and knowledge lies in the order of the four main divisions. The Classics are the source (*yuan* 源) from which all other *streams* of knowledge flow out.²³ With the Classics as the source of all

19 Ibid. For more on the notion of ‘knowledge’ in classical Chinese texts, see Birdwhistell 1984; Zhang 2002.

20 Allan 1997.

21 *Zuanxiu siku quanshu dang'an* 纂修四庫全書檔案 (henceforth *Zuanxiu*), 2.2724–2725.

22 *Zuanxiu*, 2.2724.

23 *Zuanxiu*, 2.2722.

knowledge, the water structure confers a clear hierarchy to the organization. The Classics are at the top—conceptually and in the order of the collection—and the emanating streams flow out in a ranked sequence: the Records are the main current (*liu* 流), the Masters are the tributaries (*zhi* 支), and the Collections are the smaller brooks and runnels (*pai* 派).²⁴ Each division is more important than the one that follows it. The source itself is understood as the abyss (*yuan* 淵)—a reference to *dao*—guaranteeing the ceaseless flow of all other streams.²⁵ The implication is that Classics are the direct manifestation of *dao* and that the farther down in the order, the farther away one is from *dao*. Placing the Classics as the source of knowledge was a way to enshrine their intellectual pre-eminence. But it was also a recognition of their significance in the historical development of learning. It was an act that simultaneously reflected as well as consolidated their significance in the generation of knowledge as it had flowed over the millennia.

Having established this premise, the rationale linking water to the order of knowledge takes an interesting turn, revealing a deep concern for tracing knowledge back to its source.²⁶ The way upstream is not simple to find: one first needs to know (*zhi* 知) the location of the fords—the conceptual links which allow one to cross from one side to the other and move up to the source. There are many paths, and, the editors caution, without knowledge of the fords one will inevitably be lost.²⁷

But while the movement upstream was essential in the conception of knowledge as water, so was the natural downward flow of a river towards the sea. Representing the collective wisdom of the sages, the sea symbolized the purpose of the acquisition of knowledge.²⁸ One did not learn merely to become more knowledgeable but rather to become wiser, to reach closer to the ethical and political ideals set by the sages of antiquity.²⁹ Entering in the right stream of knowledge—and that was guaranteed by the editors' careful selection of texts—ensured the natural flow towards sagacious knowledge. What this conception of knowledge meant in practice was that as long as one kept

24 Ibid.

25 Zuanxiu, 2.2723.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.

28 Most notably in *Mengzi* 孟子: "Therefore, one who has contemplated the sea, finds it difficult to think of other waters, and one who has wandered within the gates of the sages, finds it difficult to think of the words of others" (故觀於海者難為水遊於聖人之門者難為言). In *Siku quanshu: Mengzi zhushu*, (13 *xia* 下), (henceforth SKQS; in parenthesis is the original *juan* 卷 number).

29 Allen 2015: 3. In the context of the *Complete Writings*, see Guy 1987: 57.

oneself in the streams of knowledge—which, make no mistake, required endless effort—one would naturally come closer to the sages' ideal. Sagacious knowledge was not something one willed into action but rather something which emanated by its own accord.

To drive the point home that knowledge is structurally similar to water, the rationale concludes with a rhetorical question: “with the essence-and-function of water being such, could the essence-and-function of knowledge (*wen*) alone not be like this” (水之體用如是文之體用顧獨不如是也)?³⁰ Far from being apotropaic, aesthetic, or trivial, the library names embody an essential element of the collection.

The compilers were not the first to use the language of water to conceptualize the order of knowledge. The *Annals of the Former Han* (*Qianhan ji* 前漢紀) note that Liu Xiang 劉向—composer of the *Seven Epitomes* (*Qiliu* 七略), the first formal classification of knowledge—canonized and collated classical texts into nine streams (*jiuliu* 九流).³¹ In the *Writings of the Sui* (*Sui shu* 隨書), compiled in the early seventh century, water imagery was extended to discuss the source and flow (*yuanliu* 源流) of a particular stream of learning. In his magnum opus, *Record of Continuities* (*Tongzhi* 通志), the Song dynasty scholar and master bibliographer, Zheng Qiao 鄭樵, argued that by examining the texts of a period one could know the source and flow of its scholarship.³² Bibliographic entries in the *Catalogue of the Hall of a Thousand Acres* (*Qianqing tang shumu* 千頃堂書目), privately compiled in the seventeenth century, employ the language of source and flow to refer to smaller and larger streams of learning such as the source and flow of the *Book of Changes* (*易學源流*)³³ or the study of the classics (*經術源流*).³⁴ By the late imperial period, knowledge as water had found its way into the titles of texts indicating how deeply and widely the imagery was absorbed into scholarly practice—the Qing dynasty *Treatise on the Source and Flow of Medicinal Studies* (*Yixue yuanliu lun* 醫學源流論) and the *Imperially Sponsored Study on the Source and Flow of Manchuria* (*Qinding manzhou yuanliu kao* 欽定滿洲源流考) are two illustrations among many.³⁵

30 Zuanxiu, 2.2725. For more on essence and function, see Cheng 2002; Cua 2003.

31 SKQS: *Bianian lei: Qianhan ji* 前漢紀, (25).

32 SKQS: *Bieshi lei: Tongzhi* 通志, (71).

33 SKQS: *Mulu lei: Qianqing tang shumu* 千頃堂書目, (1).

34 SKQS: *Qianqing tang shumu*, (3).

35 Both were included in the *Complete Writings*: SKQS: *Yijia lei: Yixue yuanliu lun* 醫學源流論; SKQS: *Dili lei: Duhui junxian shu: Qinding manzhou yuanliu kao* 欽定滿洲源流考. There were about a dozen texts with similar water-related titles included in the *Complete Writings*, suggesting that the total number of such texts must have been considerably higher.

What distinguishes the *Complete Writings* from past instantiations of the water as knowledge framework is the deliberate and explicit connection between the two.³⁶ The compilers were not unconsciously employing a deep-rooted cultural frame. By naming it and drawing attention to it, they were bringing it to the surface. Their use of the water structure was a mindful, second-order application of the concept which drew from and expounded on its inheritance. There was, of course, no necessity that required the *Complete Writings* to be premised on water just as there was none for the *Encyclopédie* to be premised on trees and, in both contexts, knowledge was conceptualized in multiple ways.³⁷ Nonetheless, it is the case that a leading conception of the order of knowledge developed, matured, and consolidated in water and tree terms.

Despite their differences, the *Complete Writings* and the *Encyclopédie* reflect the same attitude towards classification: both assume their validity and make the case for it by putting it into practice—a position which can be described as *taxonomical realism*. In the *Encyclopédie*, ‘organizing knowledge’ is dividing it in ever smaller branches; in the *Complete Writings*, ‘organizing knowledge’ is ordering its streams and tracing its flow. Even though trees favour binary divisions and water allows for flexibility and continuity, they both ‘perform’

36 Zuanxiu, 2.2724–5.

37 In China, alternative metaphors such as mirrors, lamps, and plants were used in part to structure conceptions of knowledge. For more on these metaphors, see Lai 1979; Oshima 1983; Allan 1997: 93–122; Liu Yi 劉藝 2004; Chen Lisheng 陳立勝 2005, 2009; Bao 2015; Han Yue 韓玥 2017. Tree metaphors also existed in pre-modern Chinese bibliographic texts but did not have the enduring salience and pervasiveness that the water metaphor did, see Storch 2014: 11. Similarly, in western European discourses, mirrors informed the construction of knowledge or ideas pertaining to it (such as apprehension, the mind, or cognition); see Cline 2008. Water also played a role in the construction of knowledge: see Quint 1983: 21–42 for a presentation of the language of ‘tracing the source’ during the Renaissance. For more on the historical roots of vegetative metaphors for knowledge and beyond, see Ladner 1983: 727–763. Other metaphors have been employed in describing and conceptualizing knowledge in the western world. Burke 2000: 86 traces the origins of the language around the different ‘fields’ of knowledge. Wellmon 2015: 84 discusses how maps became a metaphor to understand knowledge. Wilson-Lee 2018: 276–277 shows how territorial metaphors for knowledge were, with the rise of modern empires from the fifteenth century onwards, tied to imperial projects of expansion and control. Historically, however, no metaphor has come close to competing with the grip of trees in structuring the order of knowledge. Only very recently have alternative metaphorical models for knowledge organization arisen with the most successful ones being the web and the rhizome. For more, see Coyne 2008; Robinson and Maguire 2010; Mazzochi 2013; Hansson 2013.

what they state, implicitly yet powerfully affirming the validity of their own knowledge order.³⁸

3 Purposes: the *Complete Writings* in History

In early January 1773, Zhu Yun 朱筠, the Anhui education commissioner, submitted to the throne a proposal for a massive bibliographic collection. The proposal was unusual because education commissioners only used the imperial memorial system to submit lists of successful examination candidates.³⁹ Zhu Yun's proposal was particularly odd because, even though responding to an imperial edict, it was directly addressed to the Qianlong emperor.⁴⁰ Despite its irregularity, the proposal was admitted and carefully reviewed because, after all, Zhu Yun was one of the most prominent scholars at the time and his proposal was significant and exciting.⁴¹

Yet Zhu Yun's memorial stands out for another reason, overlooked by the scholarship. In his proposal, Zhu Yun explicitly raised the question of the collection's organization stating that it could be arranged according to the sevenfold organization of the *Qilüe* or the fourfold division of the *sibu*.⁴² This seemingly innocuous option, however, has major implications for how we understand the *Complete Writings* and its purposes. The possibility of following different ordering systems highlights the fact that, in its embryonic stages, the *Complete Writings* was not tied to any one organizing system.

The suggestion to employ the *Qilüe* was radical for it would constitute nothing short of a sweeping rearrangement. Befitting its original Han dynasty context—or rather the goals of Han imperial scholars—the *Qilüe* order had been abandoned for almost fifteen hundred years.⁴³ And arguably for good reason, since, among several issues, the *Qilüe* did not have a special section for historical texts but gave outsized importance to the militarist school which had long faded. Proposing to revive such an outdated system must have appeared bold as well as mind-boggling to many high Qing scholars.⁴⁴

38 For more on text performativity in the Chinese context, see Meyer 2012.

39 Guy 1987: 57.

40 *Zuanxiu*, 1.20–21.

41 For more on Zhu Yun, see Hummel 1991: 198–199. For more on the operations of the Qianlong court, see Bartlett 1991.

42 *Zuanxiu*, 1.20–21.

43 For more on the *Qilüe*, its use, and survival, see Lee 2016.

44 Luo Mengzhen 羅孟楨 1986: 164. Other scholars such as Zhang Xuecheng 章學誠 and Qian Daxin 錢大昕 argued for the revival of the *Qilüe* yet both eventually dropped or

Zhu Yun's proposal was a product of Han learning (*Hanxue* 漢學), a scholarly movement which had effectively merged with evidential studies (*kaozhengxue* 考證學), after about two centuries of fermentation, experimentation, and consolidation.⁴⁵ Han learning aimed to recover and reconstruct the past using—in modern diction—*philological* tools and draw from Han dynasty scholarship, ideas, and institutions to expunge the additions and alterations of later scholars. Han learning was diametrically opposite to the more speculative, subjective—and *philosophical*—understanding of classical texts which was associated with the scholars of the Song, known as Song learning (*Songxue* 宋學). The evolving relationship between these two approaches to the sagely past was one of the fundamental features of the Qing intellectual landscape.⁴⁶

Beyond Zhu Yun's proposal to revive the *Qilüe*, there was a plethora of organizing systems. During the Song and Ming dynasties private and imperial collections employed orders that differed significantly from the fourfold division. In the thirteenth century, Zheng Qiao marked a first by developing a systematic theory of bibliography, its methods, and purposes.⁴⁷ He also harshly criticized the *sibu* and *Qilüe* and deployed an innovative three-tiered system with twelve main divisions and over five hundred sub- and sub-sub-categories.⁴⁸ During the Ming dynasty, the renowned scholar and bibliographer, Jiao Hong 焦竑, in the *Bibliographic Treatise* (*jingjizhi* 經籍志) chapter of *Records of the State* (*Guoshi* 國史), adopted Zheng Qiao's division but also incorporated the main bibliographic development of his era which saw the displacement of the classics from their top position by the writings of emperors of the ruling dynasty.⁴⁹ The bibliographic landscape of the six centuries prior to the compilation of the *Complete Writings* was defined by plurality and cross-pollination reflecting the vibrant and robust scholarly culture of late imperial China. The fourfold order

changed their views. Naito Konan 內藤湖南 1970: 432–437 argues that Zhang Xuecheng realized that his ideas were practically unrealizable. Elman 1984: 73, 165 presents Qian Daxin's position but concludes that Qian following Zhang “admitted that Liu Xin's categories [i.e. the *Qilüe*] were no longer appropriate for modern cataloguing.”

45 Han learning was a regional, sub-branch of evidential scholarship. In time, however, Han learning came to be used metonymically for the entirety of the new philological movement. For more on regional differences, see Elman 1984; Rowe 2001: 114, 126–133. Japanese scholarship has produced exceptional research examining the birth and development of evidential scholarship; among these, see Yamanoi Yū 山井湧 1980; Hamaguchi Fujio 濱口富士雄 1994; Kinoshita Tetsuya 木下鉄矢 1996.

46 For more on the differences between Han and Song learning, see Elman 1983.

47 For Zheng Qiao's position in the history of bibliography, see Kuang 1991; Yuan Xueliang 袁學良 2002: 153–156.

48 Zheng Qiao, *Tongzhi*, 2.1805. Also see Yuan Xueliang 2002: 156–160.

49 Jiao Hong, *Jingjizhi*, 3.2. Also see Yuan Xueliang 2002: 100–103.

was a staple of late imperial scholarship but it existed in a competitive and syncretic environment whereby its eventual adoption in the *Complete Writings* cannot be treated as a foregone conclusion.⁵⁰

And yet most scholarship has overlooked the alternatives at hand, assuming the fourfold order was chosen because it embodied orthodox practice.⁵¹ However, it is far from obvious why the fourfold division, enshrined in the Tang, would be considered more orthodox than the *Qilüe* of the Han. Invoking 'orthodoxy' without explaining its antecedent factors of formation is meaningless. More crucially, sociopolitical considerations did not exhaust the makers' array of concerns. A strict political reading fails to take note of its scholarly dimensions and a theoretical layer must be added to account for the adoption of the fourfold order vis-à-vis the collection's purposes. What did the makers think the *Complete Writings* should achieve and why was the fourfold division—and not its alternatives—deemed better at realizing these goals? To answer this, we first need to establish who the envisioned user was.

Nominally, the collection was intended for the Qianlong emperor and his successors. By association, a small group of elite imperial scholars would also presumably have access to it. However, the answer is complicated by the participation of the larger scholarly community, which points towards a broader conception of its use. Zhu Yun's memorial shows how non-imperial scholars influenced the formation of the collection from its earliest stages. The contribution of book-owning families who submitted their rare books for transcription and the eventual decision to produce three copies of the collection as a reward came to underscore the collection's public character.

The nature of collecting itself paved the way for the idea to disseminate the *Complete Writings*. The very basic purpose of amassing, reproducing, and publishing texts in one master anthology sanctioned the public orientation of the project from its inception. Calls for the formation of a Confucian Canon (*ruzang* 儒藏)—which would stand as an equal to its Buddhist and Daoist counterparts—were intensifying. In the Qianlong era, Zhou Yongnian 周永年 argued that the fundamental purposes of such a project would not only be the preservation and transmission of texts but, more importantly, the enrichment of scholarly pursuits and the improvement of imperial governance.⁵² This idea resonated in the imperial edict of 1772, where the Qianlong emperor called

50 Xu Shiyong 許世瑛 1982: 206; Lai Xinxia 來新夏 2013: 232.

51 Much scholarship on the *Complete Writings*, even though detailed, does not mention the choice of using the fourfold division. For example, Guy 1987; Liu 1997; Huang Aiping 1989; Sima Chaojun 司馬朝軍 2004; Zhang Fufeng 張傳峰 2007; Chen Xiaohua 陳曉華 2008; Guo Bogong 郭伯恭 2010. See fn. 2 for scholarship invoking 'orthodoxy'.

52 Wang Guoqiang 王國強 2008: 209.

for the collection of texts which clarified the essentials of governance or illuminated human nature and the morals of the world.⁵³ Similarly, in his proposal, Zhu Yun argued for the need to outline the sages' vision in the effort to restore antiquity.⁵⁴

By undertaking a task of such monumental proportions, the makers of the *Complete Writings* must have felt—indeed *known*—that their work would be used and commented on by later scholars, just as they had done with their predecessors. The sustained use of the *Complete Writings* as a reference tool to this day highlights its intellectual achievements as a piece of publicly accessible scholarship. The intergenerational—indeed inter-epochal—aspect of the collection underscores its public orientation and the fact that its intended users were scholars across space and time.

The collection was envisioned not only as public but also ecumenical. The introductory preface to the Classics reveals a conciliatory stance between Han and Song learning.⁵⁵ These were not two traditions to be pitted against each other but rather, recognizing their strengths and weaknesses, to be synthesized into a balanced approach, dissipating their differences. This new attitude, the editors argued, was necessary to bring forth the *public* principle and expunge the biases of individual minds in order to illuminate the meaning of the classics.⁵⁶ Adopting the order of the Han dynasty *Qilüe* would have signalled a total victory for Han learning and failed to uphold the synthetic, public, and ecumenical spirit of the collection. The fourfold order did not have particular associations with either tradition. More importantly, however, since it had been broadly used in late imperial collections, it remained one of the most recognized systems whose internal logic was arguably known to the widest cross-section of scholars.⁵⁷ Beyond the issue of obsolescence, the exclusion of the

53 Zuanxiu, 1.2.

54 Guy 1987: 57.

55 *Qinding siku quanshu zongmu* 欽定四庫全書總目: *Jingbu zongxu* 經部總敘. All citations from the *Qinding siku quanshu zongmu* (henceforth SKQSZM) are listed under the name of their respective section. In parenthesis, when needed, is the original *juan* number. This inclusive spirit is also clearly present in the general introduction of the *Confucians* (*rujia* 儒家) section. For a listing of more examples, see Liu Fengqiang 劉風強 2015: 155–158.

56 SKQSZM: *Jingbu zongxu*.

57 Inami Ryochi 井波陸一 2003: 46–47. From the Song up until the early Qing, the fourfold division was still extensively—but not exclusively—used in both official and private bibliographic projects. For example, the mid-eleventh century *Comprehensive Catalogue of Sublime Literature* (*Chongwen zongmu* 崇文總目) and the bibliographic treatises (*yiwen-zhi*) of the *Records of the Song* (*Songshi* 宋史) and the *Records of the Ming* (*Mingshi* 明史) of the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries respectively were all organized using the

Qiliu was premised on grounds of public and ecumenical accessibility, rather than orthodoxy and legitimacy.

The rejection of the more detailed orders of the Song and Ming dynasties was premised on different grounds which, however, remained within the bounds of scholarly deliberation. In the introductory *Guidelines for Readers* (*fanli* 凡例), the editors provide a telling—and rather negative—evaluation of Jiao Hong's division. The main objection is that it has too many items, making it overloaded.⁵⁸ The subdividing streams employed in sections such as philology, geography, biographies, genealogies, and the arts, among others, are too numerous and the general structure ultimately leads to confusion.⁵⁹ Instead, they argue that the divisions used in the *Complete Writings*—which are fewer in number and less detailed—not only offer an orderly arrangement but also facilitate readers with searching through the catalogue. Compared to Jiao Hong's division, the *Complete Writings*, by deleting and merging different sections, had dispensed with trivial minutiae.⁶⁰ The compilers were responding to what appeared to them as *taxonomical hypertrophy*, the debilitating explosion of categories that renders classification meaningless (for using ten categories to organize ten objects amounts to not organizing them at all).⁶¹ In their eyes, classification orders such as Jiao Hong's had too many divisions which needed to be simplified. It was for this reason, and not because of orthodoxy or legitimacy, that they were rejected.

With criticizing such ordering systems, the compilers were challenging a conception of bibliographic order which had emerged with the writings of Zheng Qiao. Zheng Qiao prized division as a form of clarity, arguing that increasing granularity made the meaning of scholarship self-evident.⁶² It is for this reason that he was opposed to the practice of critical introductions.⁶³ There was no need to explain the content of any one text since the clarity of the division would provide enough information. His critique against critical

fourfold division. Furthermore, private collections such as the twelfth-century *Records on Reading of the Prefectural Hall* (*Junzhai dushu zhi* 郡齋讀書志), the *Catalogue of the Hall of Retirement* (*Suichutang shumu* 遂初堂書目), and the *Annotated Bibliography of the Hall of Rectitude* (*Zhizhai shulu jieti* 直齋書錄解題) also employed the fourfold division. In short, the fourfold organization by the time of the compilation of the *Complete Writings* had been neither the only, unchanging, mummified way of organizing libraries nor a lifeless, distant memory that had to be revived.

58 SKQSZM: *Fanli* 凡例, article 5.

59 Ibid.

60 Ibid.

61 Owen 2007: 1392–1393.

62 Zheng Qiao, *Tongzhi*, 2.1806.

63 *Tongzhi*, 2.1818.

prefaces underscores his stance towards bibliographic divisions as having a primarily descriptive (and not evaluative) purpose. Extending the water conceptual metaphor, we can think of Zheng Qiao's conception of classification as a precise and exhaustive *descriptive map* delineating the streams of knowledge.

The editors heavily criticized Zheng Qiao. Critical prefaces were good bibliographic practice not only because they allowed readers to understand texts at a glance but also because they guided them through their strengths and weaknesses.⁶⁴ By the Qianlong era, the streams of learning had become so numerous and the quantity of texts so large that scholars felt drowned in a deep ocean.⁶⁵ The purpose of the *Complete Writings* was not to provide a detailed, informational overview of knowledge. Rather, it was to act as an *advising guide* helping scholars move from any one stream of learning (or text, allusion, or idea) to the source of knowledge.⁶⁶ The division of the *Complete Writings* had all of the necessary information to reach the source—everything else was superfluous or, even worse, dangerous. The most precise map is not the easiest to use and the most detailed division—let alone one without critical remarks—is not the best at guiding one's study.

The differences between the two conceptions did not mean that precision was not part of the theoretical purposes of the *Complete Writings*. The compilers did value detail, which is why the collection was the first—and only—official bibliography to employ a three-tiered division, implicitly paying tribute to Zheng Qiao's innovation. The makers of the *Complete Writings* did not have an 'ideological', predetermined stance towards past bibliographies but rather retained a subtle and complex position willing to adopt and adapt what they considered valuable. Preservation of orthodox bibliographic practice was not a priority. A public and ecumenical order which cohered with the intellectual landscape and could act as an advising guide through the streams of knowledge was far more important.

4 Principles: the Functions of Knowledge

Exceptio probat regulam in casibus non exceptis.

The exception confirms the rule in cases not excepted.

CICERO

64 *Zuanxiu*, 1.54.

65 *Ibid.*

66 Lee 2016 also reads the *Qilüe* as an advising guide.

To categorize is human and yet—or rather, therefore—what categorization is remains highly contested.⁶⁷ Identified by many cognitive scientists as the most basic phenomenon of cognition, categorization has been tackled by philosophers, psychologists, anthropologists, library and information scientists, and beyond.⁶⁸ Two positions dominate the spectrum of views across fields: the classical ‘Aristotelian’ and the revisionist ‘Wittgensteinian’ theories.⁶⁹

In the classical view, categories are groups of objects possessing the same individually necessary and jointly sufficient properties.⁷⁰ Mammals, prime numbers, and bachelors are good examples of classically conceived categories since membership can be easily established through asking a series of yes/no questions (is the person male? is he an adult? has he never married?). Categories are thus clearly defined, mutually exclusive, and totally exhaustive.⁷¹ Wittgenstein, on the other hand, proposed that the meaning of a word is determined by its use but that given the breadth of uses of any given word, it is impossible to fix its meaning. His famous example on the impossibility of defining the word ‘game’ revealed the cracks of the classical conception of categories. Wittgenstein proposed that the only way a category could be formed is through a set of likely features of *family resemblance*. Just as members of a family share only a handful of traits so too do members of a category.⁷² Belonging in a category is a matter of degree. Dogs, rather than snakes, are a better fit to the category of pets just as couches, rather than radios, are a better fit to the category of furniture. In this model, categories are fuzzy and overlapping.

In the preface to the *Miscellaneous Schools and Writers* (*zajia* 雜家) section, the editors state that it consists of texts which cannot form a group of their own.⁷³ They trace the origins of this problem to the fact that, with the

67 Cohen and Lefebvre 2005: 2 refer to the ‘plethora’ of concepts deployed to understand categorization. For example, see Neisser 1987: 1; Kwasnik 2000: 3; Bless 2004: 52; Harnad 2005: 40; Mai 2011: 711.

68 The significance of categorization in these fields is perhaps one of the few points of general agreement, see Estes 1994: 4; Cohen and Lefebvre 2005: 2.

69 Sneath and Sokal 1973: 20–21 were the first, to the best of my knowledge, to articulate the two positions as forming a clear polarity. They did not term them ‘Aristotelian’ and ‘Wittgensteinian’ but rather ‘monothetic’ and ‘polythetic’ which they borrow from Jones 2005 [1970]: 575. On the other hand, the philosophical links between these positions and the two thinkers is broadly undisputed; see Aristotle 1938; Wittgenstein 1967.

70 For more on classically conceived categories, see Murphy and Koskella 2010: 28–29; Cruse 2011: 67. Also see Laughlin 1993: 19, 23 on anthropologists’ assumptions that all categories have to be classically conceived.

71 Murphy and Koskella 2010: 28–29.

72 Wittgenstein 1967: 32.

73 SKQSZM: *Zajia lei yi* 雜家類一, (117).

collapse of the Zhou dynasty, hundreds of schools competed against each other, each establishing its own writings and scholarly lineage.⁷⁴ The problem of miscellaneous-ness (*za* 雜) arose because in later times many of these teachings were not reproduced, resulting in breaks in their transmission and the impossibility of recording them in a simple and unequivocal way.⁷⁵ The comprehensiveness of the group is not attributed to heterogeneity of subject matter—in fact, content is not even mentioned. Rather, socio-historical factors affecting textual production, transmission, and reception generated this chequered group of texts.

Despite the obstacles, the compilers devised a detailed sixfold division of the *Miscellaneous Schools and Writers* whereby texts were organized not on the basis of their subject matter or stylistic conventions but rather of their ascribed *function*—for what end and how texts were to be used. Bibliographic subgroups were premised on whether texts were employed to establish sayings, authenticate claims, provide commentaries bringing together exegetical accounts, investigate the principles of objects, topically organize texts of the past, or collate together various writings.⁷⁶ What the *Miscellaneous Schools and Writers* lacked of its own, the editors managed to impose by creating a structure where the ascribed function of texts guided the way in which they were grouped together and held apart.

The problem was also present in the *Miscellaneous Records* (*zashi* 雜史). Again, the compilers remark that the texts are disparate and numerous, making it difficult to order them.⁷⁷ But the *Miscellaneous Records* have a common feature in that they either include the development of a specific event but do not provide information about an entire era, or merely narrate hearsay from one period and only from one writer's private accounts.⁷⁸ The partial and often unreliable collection of sources was perceived as the defining criterion distinguishing the *Miscellaneous Records* from the *Official Records* and the *Separate Records* (*zhengshi* 正史 and *bieshi* 別史, respectively).⁷⁹ The material factors of textual production are placed centre stage in the conceptualization of bibliographic order. Features above and beyond subject matter or stylistic conventions were at the heart of the formation of the *Miscellaneous Records*.

The conception of miscellaneous groups and the solutions given to the problems they posed reflects the general rationale of the order of knowledge:

74 Ibid.

75 Ibid.

76 Ibid.

77 SKQSZM: *Zashi lei yi* 雜史類一, (51).

78 Ibid.

79 Ibid.

socio-historical features determining the production, transmission, reception, and ultimately *use* of texts determined the formation of bibliographic groups. The order of knowledge took into serious consideration *extra-textual* features in the formation of bibliographic categories.⁸⁰ How a text was believed to have been composed, what kinds of sources it employed, how it was handed down from one generation to the next, and in what ways it could be put to function for the purposes of scholarship and governance were definitive in the formation of order.

These features are unrelated to the 'inherent' *intra-textual* properties of texts—such as content, style, genre, or disciplinary identity—which have by and large been the determinants of modern bibliographic orders and mistakenly extended to the *Complete Writings*. The way in which a text was classified depended on how it was envisioned to be employed. And how a text was employed was informed by the ways in which it was produced, transmitted, and received. The conceptualization of order did not depend on information found *within* texts but rather on information *about* them.

The construction of bibliographic categories followed the principle of socio-scholarly function. For example, the editors note that the *Edicts and Memorials* (*zhaoling fengyi* 詔令奏議) section was in past compilations placed at the end of the Collections.⁸¹ They explain, however, that in the *Complete Writings* the section has been placed in the Records where they can provide clear testimony to the section. Furthermore, they note that the way in which the *Edicts and Memorials* is divided into its components is done with the intention of facilitating their reciprocal examination with other historical sources.⁸² The same rationale is seen in the *Book of Rites* (*li* 禮) section, which is divided into six groups chronologically arranged in order to allow for the comparison and examination of the source and flow of each group.⁸³ And exactly the same justification is provided in the *Lesser Sayings* (*xiaoshuo* 小說) section, which divided texts into three streams.⁸⁴ The reason these three groups are established, the editors note, is so that the diverging flow of the *Lesser Sayings* can be traced, showing how the execution of specific scholarly tasks was instrumental to the construction of bibliographic divisions.⁸⁵ Bibliographic categories were

80 The practice of including 'extra-textual' features in the formation of bibliographic groups seems to predate the *Complete Writings* and, following Nicoll-Johnson 2017: 108, can be found in the bibliographic arrangements of the Han and the Sui.

81 SKQSZM: *Zhaoling zouyi lei yi* 詔令奏議類一, (55).

82 Ibid.

83 SKQSZM: *Li lei yi* 禮類一, (19).

84 SKQZM: *Xiaoshuojia lei yi* 小說家類一, (140).

85 Ibid.

established and positioned on the basis of their ascribed scholarly function, their capacity to assist in the execution of fundamental scholarly tasks.

The Masters preface opens with a general remark on the included texts' scholarly function that beyond the Six Classics, all texts which establish theories (*lishuo* 立說) belong to the Masters.⁸⁶ Yet, the preface proceeds to order the sections of the Masters on the basis of their relevance to governance and the first six sections are grouped together on the basis of their significance in this regard. The *Confucians* (*rujia* 儒家) are placed first and are followed by the *Militarists* (*bingjia* 兵家) and the *Legalists* (*fajia* 法家) whose knowledge was deemed essential to good governance.⁸⁷ The *Agriculturalists* (*nongjia* 農家), *Medicinal Schools* (*yijia* 醫家), and *Astronomical and Counting Methods* (*tianwen suanfa* 天文算法) come next since these are vital to people's survival.⁸⁸ These six sections are tied to the effective administration of the empire and their sequence mirrors their (ascribed) necessity in governance.

They are followed by two sections from which the lesser *daos*—skills or methods—can be observed, namely the *Divinatory Arts* (*shushu* 術數) and the *Creative Arts* (*yishu* 藝術).⁸⁹ The next group, composed of four sections, constitute comprehensive resources for consultation. Their sequence—*Treatises* (*pulu* 譜錄), *Miscellaneous Schools and Writers*, *Encyclopedias* (*leishu* 類書), and finally the *Lesser Sayings*—was intended to capture their value. The final group are the external teachings (*waixue* 外學), placing the *Buddhists* (*shijia* 釋家) and *Daoists* (*daoia* 道家) texts last.⁹⁰

The pattern reveals the collection's worldly orientation and its intended purpose to serve as a guide to governance. Identifying sections as tied to ruling—and placing them first—reflects the compilers' understanding of texts relative to their social function in attaining sociopolitical goals. Artistic refinement, broad erudition, and 'external' (non-Confucian) cultivation were perceived as secondary to the state-oriented rationale of Confucian praxis.

The two-legged conception of order—social and scholarly function—was conceptualized as a unity. In the Masters preface, the editors remark that a scholar can uphold the rights and wrongs of the world by examining the principles in the Classics and can understand past and present successes and failures by studying the subtleties of the Records.⁹¹ The texts of the great Confucian scholars—and arguably, by extension but to a lesser degree, the texts in the

86 SKQSZM: *Zibu zongxu* 子部總敘, (91).

87 Ibid.

88 Ibid.

89 Ibid.

90 Ibid.

91 Ibid.

Masters at large—illuminate *dao* and establish sayings which can function as comprehensive reference to the Classics and Records.⁹² This summary overview of the ascribed use of the texts shows how socio-scholarly function was thought of as one: a learned scholar became effective in his administrative duties through scholarship and a successful official expanded his knowledge through enacting the teachings of the sages. Texts were placed together and held apart based on how they were to be used by scholar-officials to attain intellectual as well as administrative objectives.

The significance of the socio-scholarly function as an organizing principle is highlighted by the prominence of hierarchical order. Time and again, the compilers separated texts which they understood to be on some level similar on the grounds that they were sufficiently distinct in their value. This is most acute in the Classics, where it is almost by definition true that texts which cohere with those of the other three sections are placed here solely on the basis of their significance. But the rationale extended to all kinds of writings: texts on different kinds of music, poetry, or even agricultural products, were ordered based on the ascribed value of their topics.⁹³

It is not surprising that the *Complete Writings* had a hierarchical order. This is not because its makers were profoundly concerned with upholding ‘orthodoxy’. Rather, it is because all knowledge organization structures have an in-built concern for value, whether acknowledged or not.⁹⁴ The influence of hierarchical thinking has not been as overt in early modern and modern western projects because their concern with ‘unearthing’ shared properties between texts gave them a sense of objectivity, allegedly free of normative judgement. As Wilson-Lee has noted, however, the order in which humans took precedence over animals, men over women, and Europeans over others reinforced the belief that these hierarchies were natural and inevitable.⁹⁵

There is no doubt that the editors of the *Complete Writings* carried their own biases. They certainly believed in the correctness of their division but not because they held it as an objective and factual description of the knowledge universe but rather because it provided an appropriate guide through it. Bibliographic groups were not a vehicle to capture internal properties that

92 Ibid.

93 For example, texts on bell-pipes from antiquity were placed in the Classics but other kinds of music were dispersed in the Masters and Collections; poetry from antiquity and in particular the *Eulogies of Chu* (*chuci* 楚辭) were given a special position in the Collections; and texts on tea—which was considered a luxury and not as essential as grain staples—were placed further down in the Masters than writings on agriculture.

94 Appadurai 1988.

95 Wilson-Lee 2018: 169.

texts putatively possessed but rather structures which assisted in learning and carrying out the knowledge encoded in them. The relation between users and texts—society and knowledge—thus emerges as the cornerstone of the bibliographic order.

Despite their differences, the Aristotelian and Wittgensteinian models conceptualize categories in terms of properties, placing exclusive focus on *what objects are*. Organizing in terms of function, however, constitutes a different mode of organization. Failing to recognize this fact is what makes it hard to understand—let alone appreciate—the knowledge structure of the *Complete Writings*.

Think of a toolbox. Inside there are nails, bolts, screws, and tools of different kinds. The Aristotelian and Wittgensteinian would organize the toolbox by considering the properties of tools: the former would place identical tools together in ever smaller categories, while the later would put similar tools in nearby compartments. The *Complete Writings* way, however, would examine how different tools are *used*—for what kinds of purposes—and place tools used together in the same section. It would examine how frequently tools are used and how important they are for different kinds of jobs. If some tools are used more often than others they will be placed not only together but at a point where they can be more easily accessed. Similarly, if certain tools are infrequently used or have a very limited function they will be placed deeper inside the box.

A function-oriented toolbox may appear messy to the untrained eye. To the person using the toolbox, however, there is a well-defined rationale. In the same way, the *Complete Writings* which might *prima facie* appear to be lacking a clear order is in fact sensible for its makers and intended users. The reason why the *Complete Writings* may appear haphazard today has to do with the fact that the kinds of questions professionalized, modern university academics try to answer are different from those of eighteenth-century scholars in China. The properties-based and function-oriented ways of organizing toolboxes, libraries, or the world create vastly different arrangements. Taking the *Complete Writings* seriously as a scholarly project offers a comprehensive and systematic conception of order which challenges—and therefore has the potential to enrich—modern conceptions of collecting and organizing knowledge.

5 Conclusion

The *Complete Writings* would not be the collection it is were it not for its organization. Without a clear classification, it would only be an accumulation

of writings and would not achieve any of its purposes, from the simple task of allowing users to locate texts to the more complex goal of acting as an advising guide. Given its capacity to define what is important and unimportant, the collection was no doubt an exhibition of imperial power.⁹⁶ However, as I have suggested throughout this article, the collection was also—and perhaps just as much, if not more—an exploration of the nature of knowledge and its relationship to systematic classification. Boosting scholarship, refining its methods, and improving its categorical structure were unmistakably essential to the project.

The question of order within the *Complete Writings* opens up a new way of exploring the nature of collecting in late imperial China. The late Ming and high Qing saw an outburst in the publication of collections: content varied from dreams to sutras and publication was both imperially sponsored and privately financed for an expanding market.⁹⁷ While contemporary scholarship has taken note of this veritable explosion, the question of how these collections were organized has remained marginal. Yet, as this article has shown, exploring the classification of any one collection offers insights into a far broader set of issues, from perceptions of the natural world to the configuration of social structures. Exploring the order of knowledge can bring us closer to the lived reality of scholars in the late imperial era since, as the celebrated scholar Wang Mingsheng 王鳴盛 held, “in learning, bibliographic studies are of outmost importance and it is necessary to apply oneself here first in order to be able to find one’s way” (目錄之學學中第一要事必從此問塗方能得其門而入).⁹⁸ The history of classification practices can illuminate the more generalized passion for collecting, the interplay between imperial and private collections, and the role collections had in consolidating or challenging received frames of knowledge.

Chinese classification practices constitute an untapped pool of experience for contemporary collections, exposing deep-rooted assumptions and suggesting alternative ways of collecting and organizing. Our conceptions of post-disciplinary arrangements of knowledge, the effects of digital media on classification, and the rise of information and data management only stand to benefit from exploring and integrating the organizing methods, aims, and conclusions of late imperial collections. No matter where or when, collecting has been tantamount to ordering. This simple fact, which reflects our shared

96 Guy 1987: 78.

97 Feuerwerker 1976: 32; Elliot 2009: 118, 164. Also, see Inaba Ichiro 稲葉一郎 2006: 702, 750 for the importance of imperially sponsored projects. See Chen 2008 for his encyclopedia of dreams.

98 Quoted in Wilkinson 2015: 936.

need to make sense of the world, points towards the possibility of enacting a new and equitable dialogue across cultures.

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