Introduction to Special Issue on “Collecting, Collections, and Collectors”

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The contributors to this special issue of *Ming Qing Yanjiu* have brought together diverse and original scholarship on various aspects of our topic that reflects upon the complexity of collecting as a concerted social act. Broadly defined as the selective acquisition and maintenance of an interrelated set of objects, collecting has long played a prominent role in different strata of society across time and cultures.¹

In the introduction to their edited volume on *Cultures of Collecting* John Elsner and Roger Cardinal identify “[the] urge to erect a permanent complete system against the destructiveness of time” as one of the most compelling incentives for collecting.² Thus, in keeping, maintaining, and safeguarding objects that carry multiple meanings—personal, historical, social, political, cultural, or other—while simultaneously ascribing a certain value and a biographical dimension to these objects based on historic and/or social contingency,³ the collector functions as a transmitter of material evidence of human creative and mimetic acts.⁴ The fruit of these acts might eventually feature in a catalogue or an inventory of a given collection that provides information about the objects collected. However inchoate and vestigial, the practice of recording a collection’s contents evidently points to an intent not only to itemize, but

¹ Belk 1994: 318.

² Elsner and Cardinal 1994: 1.

³ Kopytoff 1986.

⁴ Adorno 1970.

also to categorize and classify the collected objects. Accordingly, Elsner and Cardinal state that

Collecting is classification lived [...]. The history of collecting is thus the narrative of how human beings have striven to accommodate, to appropriate and to extend the taxonomies and systems of knowledge they have inherited.⁵

Collecting, therefore, expatiates on the collector's endeavour of ordering the world and the objects he collects. Accordingly, collecting can be regarded as a cultural system that produces and maintains its very prerogative: handing down knowledge and preserving its physical remnants as tangible proof of a past that may function as a model for the present and the future.⁶

Objects imbued with meaning—ascribed by individuals as well as social groups and institutions—thus become *documents* that need to be contextualized, properly 'read', interpreted, and understood as would be the case with any written historical record. Therefore, object-related knowledge or 'material literacy', that is, the capacity to thoroughly contextualize and interpret an object,⁷ as well as its distribution through objects is, of course, closely linked to the material aspects of memory culture and its inherent interpretations of the past. Following Maurice Halbwachs (1877–1945) and his concept of collective memory, collecting and the objects themselves not only pertain to individual memories or a personally charged motivation for collecting, but also to a collective public sphere of collecting cultures that is best exemplified by modern museum collections.⁸ As such, museums function both as repositories of material culture and related systems of knowledge as well as (new and artificial, yet essential) frames of reference for the objects they house. Museum collections and other publicly accessible collections in general thus function as archives of cultural memories that may be shared among social groups.⁹ Museums preserve and disseminate knowledge that goes beyond the materiality of the collected objects, pointing to their inherent faculties of representing and evoking collectively shared memories.

Not only does the idea of preserving and safeguarding objects as mementos and tokens of the past lie at the very core of the concept of collecting, it

5 Elsner and Cardinal 1994: 2.

6 Baudrillard 1994: 7–24.

7 Grimberg 2019a: 25.

8 Halbwachs 1952.

9 Pearce 2017; Greenhill 1992.

also permeates into the fundamental rationale for collecting as a social act. Collecting as a means of communicating status, power, wealth, or intellectual and moral refinement, correlates with different types and modes of collecting that reflect upon various tiers of social networks, traditions, and cultural expectations, which in turn generate a plethora of possible specifics that address some of the fundamental problems of collecting. Among others, these problems include questions of the practice and policy of collecting; historical and social changes in collecting and collecting practices; categorization and classification issues; the problem of private versus public collections; the business of collecting and aspects of consumerism and commodification; legal aspects of acquisition, ownership, and disposition of collectibles; the problem of identifying particular collectors and/or collections and questions of provenance; problems of value, authenticity, and authentication of objects; the scope and quality of collecting networks; inventories, catalogues, connoisseurial manuals, and antiquarian scholarship; and so forth. This (incomplete) list points to the multifaceted, allotropic nature of collecting and its underlying social, cultural, and historical implications, which allow for the collector and the student of collecting and collections alike to gauge related phenomena not merely as effusions of incidental cultural production or as derivatives of human civilisation, but, rather, as extensions of men's appropriation and ordering of the material world.

When reflecting on the history of collecting, collections, and collectors—and antiquarian interests in general—in late imperial China, one can identify a rather large number of noticeable examples that shape our understanding of how collectors and collections formed part of the empire's social, cultural, economic, and historical fabric.¹⁰ In late imperial China—from the beginning of the Song 宋 (960–1276) to the end of the Qing 清 dynasty (1644–1911)—collecting ancient artefacts and *objets d'art* became both a scholarly occupation that relates to the educative capacities of collecting, and a pastime of the elite that informed an extensive corpus of connoisseurial literature and helped to form networks of collectors, artists, and merchants.¹¹ Qing Emperor Qianlong 乾隆 (1736–1796)—alongside Emperor Huizong 徽宗 (1100–1126) of the Northern Song 北宋 (960–1127) and a distinct group of affluent 'private' collectors from the Song to the late Qing period—makes for one of the most avid and prolific collectors in Chinese history.¹² The first Chinese collector to aspire to a universal, if not global, collection, Emperor Qianlong not only assembled a

¹⁰ Buckley-Ebrey 2008, 2014; Grimberg 2020.

¹¹ Grimberg 2019b.

¹² Grimberg 2020: 11–16.

premier collection of Chinese antique objects ranging from bronzes and jades from the Shang 商 (1600–1045 BCE) and Zhou 周 (1045–256 BCE) periods, Han 漢 (206 BCE–220 CE) lacquerware, ceramics and porcelain from the Tang 唐 (618–906) to the Ming 明 (1368–1644) dynasty, and paintings and calligraphies from fifteen centuries of Chinese art history, to exquisite furniture, carpets, and jewellery, he also systematically collected objects and curios from Japan, India, Persia, the Ottoman Empire, and Europe. For the emperor, collecting ‘exotic’ objects from all over the world was not only a mere demonstration of wealth and (possibly) good taste, it was also seen as proof of Qianlong’s universal and supreme authority over “all under heaven” (*tian xia* 天下), accentuating his significance in sponsoring and collecting the arts while simultaneously indicating his prerogative of cultural sovereignty.¹³ With regard to ‘foreign’ objects, Qianlong’s collecting practices warrant a closer—yet cursory—look at the way artefacts circulated on the Eurasian continent during the eighteenth century.

Although there has been cultural contact and economic exchange between China and the ‘West’ since Roman times (and possibly even earlier in the wake of the campaigns of Alexander the Great to the east),¹⁴ images, both literally and figuratively, and objects and the perceptions of the entities concerned have only gradually evolved into a set of more mature notions of alterity and/or congruency since the late sixteenth century. The circulation of ideas, images, texts, and objects between China and Europe and the collecting of these things was first brought about by the intense translation efforts of Jesuit missionaries like Matteo Ricci (1552–1610), Johann Adam Schall von Bell (1529–1666), or Ferdinand Verbiest (1623–1688) who served as intermediaries between these two distant worlds. Initially, the Chinese Classics, the writings of Confucius and his disciples, were translated into Latin and sent to Rome. Later, large quantities of artefacts and artworks followed, which together with the available texts would shape the perception of China in the West for centuries to come. To a lesser extent, this was also true in the reverse, as Jesuit missionaries held important positions at the Chinese court as physicians, mathematicians, astronomers, engineers, and artists and introduced European artworks, crafts, mechanical devices, and technical instruments to China.¹⁵

The increasing mobility of objects and the growing awareness and knowledge of China, of its philosophy, culture, institutions, and arts in Europe that owe to the groundbreaking works of Athanasius Kircher (*China Illustrata*,

13 Demattè 2011; Ledderose 1977: 1632–1637.

14 Nickel 2013.

15 Hsia 2009: 47f; Millar 2007; Waley-Cohen 1993: 1525–1544.

1667), Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (*Novissima Sinica*, 1697), or Jean-Baptiste Du Halde (*Description géographique, historique, chronologique, politique et physique de l'empire de la Chine et de la Tartarie chinoise*, 1735) coincided with a tidal wave of Occidentalism (*Xifang re* 西方熱) that engulfed the arts and collecting at the Chinese court under Emperor Qianlong since the first half of the eighteenth century.¹⁶ Not unlike its Western counterpart—the craze for *Chinoiserie* at courts in France, Germany, Austria, and Russia—Chinese appropriations of European art were only approximations of a perceived set of images, aesthetic categories, and artistic traditions and expressions that were part of the scarce information about Europe and its cultures available in China at the time.

As mentioned earlier, Emperor Qianlong boasts a well-deserved reputation as one of the most important collectors and patrons of the arts in Chinese history. Additionally, he is the first pre-modern Chinese collector to substantially collect Western art and artefacts. He, indeed, was an avid collector of telescopes, automatons, clocks, and other mechanical devices, but also of European enamel and glass works, ceramics, silverware, and paintings. Exchange with the nations of the West and the cultures of the Chinese periphery led to an unprecedented influx of foreign objects to China during his reign.¹⁷ A distinct strain of European influence can be identified in the court's commissioning of ceramics, paintings, and other objects with regard to their shape, colouring, and motifs. We find painted medallions with pastoral scenes—a particular favourite of the emperor—and depictions of religious scenes that surely remained hermetic to the emperor's interpretations as well as to the unsuspecting artists and craftsmen of the imperial workshops, yet they may have pleased the emperor aesthetically. Moreover, we find European-style paintings depicting court ladies in domestic settings, mounted cavaliers and hunting parties as well as still lifes and genre paintings that were incorporated into the imperial collections.¹⁸

One figure that was particularly influential during the first half of Emperor Qianlong's reign was Milan-born Jesuit missionary and painter Giuseppe Castiglione (1688–1766), who joined the court in Beijing in 1714 during the reign of Emperor Kangxi 康熙 (1662–1722), Qianlong's grandfather. While Castiglione was originally employed to copy paintings from the imperial collections, he soon gained a more prominent position during the reign of Emperor

16 Holzwarth 2005: 42–44; Ho and Bronson 2004; Elliott 2009; Berliner 2010; Kleutghen 2014: 117–135.

17 Mungello 2012: 67–79.

18 Wang 2014: 379–394.

Yongzheng 雍正 (1723–1735), Qianlong's father, and was promoted to the rank of imperial court painter sometime after Qianlong ascended the throne in 1736. Castiglione worked with Chinese assistants to create a synthesis of European methods and traditional Chinese media and formats. He, together with his fellow Jesuits Jean-Dennis Attiret (1702–1768), Ignatius Sichelbarth (1708–1780), and Louis de Poirot (1735–1813), accounted for the majority of paintings of the emperor and his court during much of his reign.¹⁹ Qianlong, who regarded the detailed, naturalistic style of European painting as a means of propagating the magnificence of his reign, was a particularly strong proponent of this mixing of Eastern and Western artistic styles that is simultaneously reflected in his collections.

The craze for all things Western at Emperor Qianlong's court reached its apogee with the construction of the Mansions of the Western Ocean (*Xiyang lou* 西洋楼), buildings in contemporary European style, on the grounds of the Garden of Perfect Brightness (*Yuanmingyuan* 圓明園) in the vicinity of Beijing. It was a complex of buildings, water fountains, labyrinths, and gardens, all within a vast parkland of over seven hectares. The buildings were designed and emblazoned with European-style murals and paintings by Castiglione and his colleagues who drew their inspiration primarily from Italian and French models.²⁰ Additionally, the buildings were adorned with collections of precious objects of European provenance. Based on French and Italian baroque models, the palace of Versailles, the Grand Trianon, and the palace and gardens of the Kings of Naples and Sicily in Caserta were the inspirations for the construction of Qianlong's 'Western Paradise'.²¹

In the course of growing colonial, commercial, and missionary interests in the Far East since the second half of the sixteenth century, collecting Chinese objects in Europe, on the other hand, can be regarded as both a demonstration of the wealth and power of the collector and their cultural and political prowess as well as an expression of a newly emerged interest in the allocation of knowledge and learning. Accordingly, we find a similar fascination with a fairly unknown, exotic culture that was predominantly experienced through images and objects at the other end of the Eurasian continent. The *Chinoiserie* of the eighteenth century and the fascination with Chinese porcelain, furniture, tea, silk, and other products that were in great demand at European courts, together with the sympathetic reception of Chinese philosophy, literature, and arts by such prominent figures of the day as Johann Wolfgang Goethe (1749–1832),

19 Kwok 1998; Musillo 2016: 70–87; Doniselli 2016.

20 Finlay 2007: 159–193.

21 Thomas 2009: 115–143.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834), Jean-Antoine Watteau (1684–1721), John Cozens (1752–1797), and even Thomas Chippendale (1718–1779), who made a fortune profiting from the new China-fashion in furniture and decorating, were eventually driven and fuelled by the images and objects that were perceived and recontextualized by members of the European elite. Consequentially, we find architecture *à la chinoise* in palaces and buildings like Versailles, the ‘Chinese Palace’ in Palermo commissioned by Ferdinand III of Sicily (1751–1825), the ‘Chinese Village’ at Tsarskoje Selo commissioned by Catherine the Great of Russia (1729–1796), the ‘Chinese Pagoda’ at Kew Gardens in London, the ‘Chinese Palace’ at Pillnitz Castle in Dresden, or the ‘Chinese House’ in the park of Sanssouci, Potsdam, as well as collections of Chinese objects, for example ceramics and porcelain, of which we find two of the world’s largest collections outside of China in the Topkapı Palace in Istanbul and in the Zwinger in Dresden.²²

Objects that functioned as vehicles for the diffusion of artistic and aesthetic concepts as well as religious and political propositions predominantly effected the intercultural flow of exchange between China and the West since the late sixteenth century, reaching its height during the reign of Emperor Qianlong. With regard to their iconology and inherent qualities, these objects were, of course, transformed, altered, and recontextualized according to the respective recipient’s interpretational ken as well as their social, cultural, and material literacy. These objects, however open to interpretation and appropriation, account for a temporary rapprochement of the two distant alterities—China and the ‘West’—by partially overcoming the barriers of otherness by means of a common interest in the material evidence of cultural production, eventually playing a decisive part in the development of a global culture of collecting that began to form a century later and that lasts to the present day.

The articles in this issue of *Ming Qing Yanjiu* on “Collecting, Collections, and Collectors” study collecting and collections of Chinese objects both in China and the ‘West’ from a range of different perspectives, employing a variety of methodologies and materials. In his article on the “*Siku quanshu* 四庫全書 and its Organization”, Stefano Gandolfo “explores the link between the collection of knowledge and its organization in the high Qing by working through the historical, social, and cultural factors that informed the order of the *Complete Writings*”. While Dennis Joseph analyses the “Role of Donations in Building Local School Book Collections in the Ming Dynasty”, Quincy Ngan elaborates on the collecting of “Azurite Blue and Malachite Green as Curios and Medicines in Late Imperial China”, examining the collecting and connoisseurship of rocks

22 Impey 1977; Jarry 1981; Krahll and Erbahar 1986.

as ecofacts among scholars since the Song dynasty. Zhang Yu's paper, "Literati Connoisseurship of *Tanci Flower Registers* in Late Qing Shanghai", examines the so-called "*tanci flower registers* (*huapu* 花譜) that ranked and catalogued female *tanci* performers" of the correspondent opera, "treat[ing] the writing of flower registers as an act of collecting". In her paper, "Orphan(ed) Scroll: Contextualizing a late Qing Object in a Slovenian Museum", Helena Motoh focuses on the "methodological problem of contextualizing museum objects" of unknown provenance based on a case study of a "late nineteenth-century Jesuit missionary scroll from Shanghai".

Due to the amount of excellent submissions that we received answering our call for papers, the editors have decided to publish two issues of *Ming Qing Yanjiu* in 2020 dedicated to the topic of "Collecting, Collections, and Collectors" with the second issue expected to be published in the autumn of this year.

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