BOOK COLLECTING IN JIANGXI DURING THE 
SONG DYNASTY

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I. Introduction

As the study of the Chinese book expands beyond the concerns of production, technology, and bibliography, the entire subject becomes more central to the study of Chinese cultural and social history in general. Instead of asking merely how a book was produced, how its text may have changed, and what its text meant, we can also explore how it was crucial to the social reproduction of certain kinds of knowledge as well as of the holders of such knowledge. With this turn of scholarly interest to the dynamics of knowledge transmission, issues of book distribution, circulation, and consumption have naturally come to the fore. The uses that the Chinese found for books other than for reading then become vital topics of historical research. Seemingly arcane topics of libraries, book collectors, and book collecting become crucial to any discussion of how bodies of knowledge are transmitted by social groups and institutions and how an individual’s deep commitment to book learning may expand the range of his commitments beyond kinship to encompass the education of fellow learners and learning in general. In short, Chinese book history, interpreted broadly, promises to tell us much about the making and makers of China’s written traditions.

A basic part of the history of these makers is the history of book collectors.1 As conservers and transmitters of this written knowledge, they have played a vital and respected role in Chinese cultural and

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1 The act of book collecting of course does not automatically presuppose the notion of a book collector as a distinct category of person, but certainly by the Northern Song the Chinese had for this kind of person a phrase, cangshu zhi jia 藏書之家 (Chao Yuezhi, Songshan Jingyu sheng ji, 6.11a), that was linked as much to a family as to an individual. Although the collectors discussed here often relied on family resources to be a collector, the focus on book collectors as individuals is largely justified, if only because most book collections survived in a family for only one generation and rarely for more than two or three (ibid.).
social life over the past millennium. This essay on the practice of book collecting in the Gan 江 南 River Basin—that is, Jiangnanxi 江 南 西 and the western stretches of Jiangnandong 江南 東 circuits, or roughly the area of present-day Jiangxi Province—during the Song Dynasty (960–1279) will explore three questions about these conservers and transmitters of China’s written culture: Who were these book collectors? How did they collect their books? And, what were they able to do with their books? The aim is to explore some of the implications of book collecting, especially at a time like the Song when individuals or their families began in increasing numbers to form private collections away from the Buddhist temple and eventually away from the court as well. Whereas past study of the institutional history of Song Confucian learning has understandably focused on schools and the civil service examinations, the focus here will fall on certain individuals and the objects—that is, books—they collected that were basic to the operation of these Song Confucian institutions. We hope thereby to explain how Confucian scholars became central to learning and learned circles in the Yangzi Valley. Firstly, these collectors of books can be seen, individually and as a group, to have acquired collections larger, more comprehensive, and more widely dispersed than those of any rival, especially Buddhist temples and monasteries. Secondly, during the Song, especially the Southern Song, these scholars located and made use of new sources of imprints outside of court and eventually all government institutions. Thirdly, the collectors devised a variety of uses for their books, not just for the examinations or for the life of a literatus. Some went so far as to turn their collections into private academies that became local centers of learning, sometimes to satisfy the needs of general readers and sometimes to foster patron-client ties with local students in need of books and lectures.

In each of these three sections the emphasis will be on the diversity of the book collectors’ practices that put the book at the center of their cultural and at times social life. The study of such diversity has not been easy. Song and later sources mainly disclose the number of book chapters or scrolls (juan 卷) in a Jiangxi collection. Few of them explicitly describe the development of a collection. Still fewer give an account of a collector’s aim in forming these holdings. Some of these collectors, especially in the Northern Song (960–1126), kept their books outside of Jiangxi, often in the capital, and none of them has left a catalogue that survives today. In fact, the list of Song Jiangxi’s book collectors found in Table 2.1 below, though culled widely from