

## Archive—Document—Object: Xuande *lu* in Paper and Bronze

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The bronzes of early China, especially the ritual vessels of the Shang and Zhou, are among the most familiar examples of East Asian metalwork. Splendid examples fill museums and they remain key sources for understanding ancient history. Copper and its alloys continued to be used for a diverse array of purposes throughout Chinese history, from weapons to farm implements to money to religious icons. With a few exceptions, however, these later uses of copper have received less attention, being seen as more mundane or less technically accomplished than their ancient predecessors. Among the exceptions are Xuande *lu* 宣德鑪, incense burners named for the court of the fourth emperor of the Ming dynasty, Xuanzong 明宣宗 (r. 1425–35), under whom they were supposedly cast. This attribution is typically part of the vessels themselves, in the form of a seal-like mark on their base stating that they were “made in the Xuande era of the Great Ming” (*Da Ming Xuande nian zhi* 大明宣德年製), but this claim, like much that has been said about the Xuande *lu*, is suspect. Collectors have expressed doubt about the authenticity of particular incense burners since the later Ming, often opining that the majority of those available on the market were later fakes, but there is a surprising lack of evidence that *any* such vessels were made under Xuanzong. Nonetheless, Xuande *lu* became extremely desirable by the late Ming and have remained so ever since; some now fetch millions of dollars at auction. Meanwhile, more modest copies, with little or not pretense of authenticity, were widespread, used as household décor or on temple altar tables. They also permeated the imagination, appearing frequently in fiction and drama as a category the reader was expected to recognize.

For the past two centuries, the principal textual source for understanding the production of the Xuande *lu* was a body of material purportedly issued by the early Ming state that document

the impetus and execution of a project to cast thousands of these vessels for use at court and in various other official locations. This corpus, published in various recensions under various titles, has in my view been conclusively proven to be forged, probably first century of the Qing period. It is not the purpose of this essay to relitigate the charges against these documents, a case that has met and surpassed the standard of reasonable doubt. Rather, the focus is on understanding how these materials were received and propagated in their time, and how they work to establish a history for and give value to the thousands of Xuande censers that were in circulation in their time and since. I would like to pay attention to the form and function of these documents in relation to the vessels, to understand how they came to function as evidence establishing a persuasive picture of their form and meaning for collectors since the eighteenth century. To do so, I will show how the texts that constitute these books relate to one another—turning a disparate assemblage into a book—we well as to the historical setting they claim as the source and the set of objects that they serve to authenticate. In doing so, I draw on a body of scholarship on the history of information and information management practices, in particular on how claims are established by *documents*, textual or otherwise. Some of this draws on ideas expressed into a forthcoming volume that is part of a trend in the humanities to incorporate the insights of information studies, a body of scholarship itself informed by a broad range of disciplines.<sup>1</sup>

The Xuande documents, along with some paratexts, appeared in a few different versions. Among these, the best-known is the *Xuande dingyi pu* 宣德鼎彝譜, or *Register of vessels of the Xuande period*, an eight-juan book collected into the eighteenth-century imperial library *Siku quanshu*, Complete treasury of the Four Categories. It became a standard for assessing incense burners because it presents a list of the objects, their names, dimensions, number produced, and intended site of use—in the palace, in offices in the capital and provinces, and in a few other key

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<sup>1</sup> See the following forthcoming works: Jack Wei Chen et al., eds., *Literary Information in China: A History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021); cf. Ann Blair et al., eds., *Information: A Historical Companion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021); Eric Hayot, Anatoly Detwyler, and Lea Pao, eds., *Information: A Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021).

ritual sites. It also provides the historical conditions that led to the casting of the vessels, a full accounting of the materials used, and some details about the purpose behind them.

Such information is rarely available for Ming decorative objects, so it makes the *Xuande lu* quite special: they have a provenance that can be tied to unusually specific historical dates and individual historical actors—ones of very high status, the emperor, his top officials, and his best artisans. It describes a project undertaken in 1428 to cast thousands of incense burners, initiated by the emperor and carried out by his highest ministers. As mentioned above, however, this provenance is spurious. The main argument against the reliability of the text is the abundance of anachronism: some of the people described as involved in making the vessels, and the documents themselves, were dead at the time, others were not yet born or were still infants. There are references to institutions that would only be founded a century later, and quotations from books likewise written a hundred years in the future. Along with the lack of corroboration in other contemporary sources, these issues make it impossible that anything like the current Register could have existed in the Xuande period, and scholars have been adding to the list of flaws since Paul Pelliot first pointed some out in 1936.<sup>2</sup>

What has not been sufficiently explored, in my view, is why the *Register* appeared when it did or why it took the form it did. Nor, if these flaws are so glaring, is it apparent why it was so convincing for so long (and into the present, with some collectors and curators still relying on the Register and ignoring, sometimes willfully, the arguments against it). The answers to these questions, I have found, have to do with the contexts in which the *Register* appeared and in which it was received. These, I am convinced, are specific to the mid-eighteenth century and to the intellectual concerns of that time. Earlier scholarship has attributed the core of the *Register* to the late Ming or more vaguely to the seventeenth century. I find that it makes much more sense as

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<sup>2</sup> See Paul Pelliot, “Le Prétendu Album de Porcelaines de Hiang Yuan-Pien,” *T’oung Pao* 32, no. 1 (1936): 15–58; Lu Pengliang 陆鹏亮, “Xuanlu bianyi” 宣炉辨疑, *Wenwu* 文物, no. 7 (2008): 64–76+92; Bruce Rusk, “Artifacts of Authentication: People Making Texts Making Things in Ming-Qing China,” in *Antiquarianism and Intellectual Life in Europe and China, 1500–1800*, ed. Peter N. Miller and François Louis, Cultural Histories of the Material World (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012), 180–204; Pengliang Lu, “Xuande Bronzes: A Legend Re-Examined,” *Arts of Asia* 44, no. 6 (November 2014): 90–100.

an eighteenth-century work, and moreover there is no witness to the text before the 1730s. There are a number of ways in which the *Register* reflects an eighteenth-century setting. For example, it represents the Xuande court as the focus of an imagined maritime network, consistent with a memory of the voyages of Zheng He to the Southern and Western Oceans.<sup>3</sup> However, this vision is refracted through a Qing lens. The main impetus to the casting project is a gift of copper from Siam, with which the Ming indeed had tributary and trade relations, but other ingredients are described as *yang* 洋, imported from overseas, a term that only became current in the late Ming and very widespread in the Qing; one ingredient comes from Holland, a country with which the Xuande court had no contact, in part because it did not yet exist (it only became a separate state in 1579). But the more fundamental and interesting questions are epistemological and ontological: what explicit and implicit truth-claims do the documents make, and what categories of being does it envisage?

Most particularly, I read the *Register* as reflecting a particular way in which a document can serve as evidence, one that was not impossible before the Qing but that Qing institutions and scholarly practice tended to emphasize and promote. Here I use the word *document* in a particular way, derived from work on documentality by theorists of information and library studies. This view is in a lineage inspired by the French bibliographer Suzanne Briet. She famously defined a document as an information-bearing thing that serves “the ends of representing, of reconstituting, or of proving a physical or intellectual phenomenon.”<sup>4</sup> Obviously, a book in a library can be a document. So can a file in the records of an institution. But so, she points out, can a stone in a mineralogical collection or a living creature in a zoo. So a plant in the wild is, normally, just a plant. But collected as a sample by a botanist and stored in a museum, it becomes a document. Briet draws out the example of an antelope placed in a zoo, where it becomes a document for study by zoologists. In its lifetime a variety of ancillary documents can

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<sup>3</sup> The literature on Zheng He’s voyages is extensive; on later recollections and imaginings, see Roderich Ptak and Claudine Salmon, eds., *Zheng He: images & perceptions = Bilder & Wahrnehmungen*, South China and maritime Asia 15 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> Suzanne Briet, “Suzanne Briet’s *What Is Documentation?*,” in *What Is Documentation?: English Translation of the Classic French Text*, ed. Ronald E. Day, trans. Laurent Martinet and Hermina G.B. Anghelescu (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2006), 10.

be produced by its presence: measurements, written accounts, photographs, sound recordings. In death, its body, prepared by taxidermists, can turn into a document in a museum (and today samples of its cells, and in particular of its DNA, would also be collected, analyzed, and stored).<sup>5</sup> These documents do their work not only from their raw materiality but also on the basis of their place in the organizational structures in which they are embedded. Each of these giraffe examples is only a functional document if it is identifiable with labels, catalogues, location, and other information. Being a document depends on having a place in an archival structure. This placement may be very literal—a book on a library shelf, placed in a standardized order—or less so—a book read with certain generic expectations, inferred from its physical form, second-hand claims about it, and so forth.

The same is no less true of things whose informational nature is more evident such as documents in the more conventional sense, written words on a material substrate. What is perhaps less evident is that these all factors work together in the establishment of claims to truth, meaning, and value. This is nowhere clearer than in the case of provenance, in which historical documentation grounds claims about a cultural artifact—its date of production, its maker, its connection with now-inaccessible times and places, and its very identity. That much is definitional and self-evident. But the relationship is mutual: a provenance without an object is a *non sequitur*, because the provenance, and the documents that contain and produce it, require the artifact if they are to be a provenance at all. Otherwise, they are hypotheticals at best, if not outright lies. Hence artifact and provenance (which may not be textual, it can include images, samples, and other traces) depend on one another. Indeed they are co-creating; without this relationship, we would have a thing that is not yet an artifact and another thing that is not yet a document. Moreover, this is not a simple binary pairing but one node in a much larger network. The provenance document has its own provenance, established in relation to other documents. A document considered unreliable cannot be strong proof of claims about the origins of the objects it points at. For example, an old label on an artifact in a museum collection could be strong evidence that it had entered the collection at a certain time. But that label is a material

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

object about which claims can be asserted and tested. So if, for example, the paper the label is written on is of a later date—a question that can be tested by comparison with other documents, such as paper samples and other labels in the same collection—it loses value as support for the original claim.

This situation is one that a modern-day curator at a museum could plausibly encounter. They would likely have a range of documentary sources to consult: labels, ledgers, photographs, correspondence, item records with measurements, just concerning the objects in their own collection. These could be in paper or electronic form. The curator could also turn to scholarly publications, auction catalogues, and similar records at other museums to document the object's earlier history or its relationship to other artifacts. They would be relying on a huge apparatus of record-keeping, classification, organization, storage, and ongoing maintenance.

There were no museums in Ming-Qing China, exactly, but there were institutions and practices with some comparable functions. Art collections and libraries, of course. But also archives. The word “archive” and its European cognates translates nicely into modern Chinese as *dang'an* 檔案, and has many related terms using the core morpheme *dang*, such as *wendang* 文檔, *dangzi* 檔子, and *dangce* 檔冊. These words are so familiar that many Chinese speakers are unaware that they derive from a Manchu source, the word *dangse*, which was transliterated into Chinese as *dangzi* and was subsequently reanalyzed as deriving from a root *dang*. In fact these words are unattested in Ming and earlier sources, where the word *dang* appears, very rarely, and with other meanings unrelated to record-keeping.<sup>6</sup> This point is a matter of some contention, but the one Ming example that has been suggested of *dang*, specifically *wendang* 文檔, in the sense of “document” is tenuous, it relies on the deciphering of a messily-written character and the absence of any other witnesses, either in real usage or lexicographically, convinces me that the word was not part of the Ming lexicon, or of Chinese in any earlier period.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Devin Fitzgerald, “Between Paper and Wood, or the Manchu Invention of the *Dang'an*,” *Saksaba: A Journal of Manchu Studies* 13 (2015), <http://hdl.handle.net>.

<sup>7</sup> The passage in question, from a draft *Shilu* 實錄 of the Hongwu reign, is reproduced in *Zhongguo di-yi lishi dang'anguan* 中国第一历史档案馆 and *Liaoning sheng dang'anguan* 辽宁省档案馆, *Zhongguo Mingdai dang'an zonghui* 中国明代档案总汇 (Guilin: Guangxi shifan daxue chubanshe, 2000), vol. 101, p.

This etymology suggests that archives were particularly important to even pre-Qing Manchu governance, and this is borne out by the maturity of Qing record-keeping institutions, which were even more elaborate than their Ming predecessors. More importantly, for our purposes, it suggests something that I find prominent in Qing ways of talking about the past: the reference to the archive as a reliable source of documentation, of evidence. Certainly historians in earlier periods used what we would call archives, sometimes quite extensively. But that does not mean that they highlighted that use or “showed their work.” We are trained, as post-Rankean historians, to see primary sources as the closest we can get to “ground truth” about the past, and wherever possible to reach behind digests and secondary sources to the “raw” documents behind them. But why assume that all modes of scholarship worked this way? Could it not be more persuasive, in some settings, to rely where possible on a revered authority, and only check “the archive” to fill in gaps?

If this highly idealized contrast is valid, I would posit, though I welcome disagreement on this point, that at least certain kinds of discourse about the past in the Qing falls more on the “reference the archive” end of the spectrum than their counterparts in earlier periods. One effect of this fondness for archives is an interest in reproducing archival material in print, a practice that was more widespread in the Qing than the Ming. Consider books like *Zhubi yuzhi* 硃批諭旨, a collection of the Yongzheng emperor’s responses to memorials, begun in the Yongzheng era but printed on under Qianlong. Certainly collections of memorials had been printed in earlier dynasties, but this collection creates the visual impression of replicating an original document, albeit in a “cleaned-up” form: it retains the layout of interlinear and other comments by the emperor, using red ink to distinguish them. Although it is a printed book, the reader encounters it much as a historian would encounter an archive, an effect that is highlighted by its table of contents, which is organized into “boxes” and “booklets” (*han* 函 and *ce* 冊) rather than

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474. The cursive handwriting is difficult to make out, the provenance of the document is uncertain, and the word does not appear in other copies of the *Shilu*.

“chapters” (*juan* 卷). Thus a reader of *Zhupi yuzhi* is eavesdropping on a historical dialogue, rather than being spoken to directly by an authority, though of course the voice in red is authoritative.<sup>8</sup>

The Xuande *Register* draws on the same rhetorical forces, with its assertion that it is presenting the traces of a historical drama among living people that the reader must, to some extent, reconstruct for themselves. It is akin to the device of the epistolary novel, which plays on the limited window on reality offered by the form of the letter, and what Marco Codebò calls the “dossier novel,” which turns the authority of the archive to its own fictional ends.<sup>9</sup> That involves putting the “raw” documents, in whatever form they took in their original context, into one that fits the model of the published book. Returning to Briet’s idea of “document” as something serving as both current and potential future evidence for an argument, and integrated into a system of classification and preservation. For example, a legal document is removed from one functional role in a case that has been closed, though it can remain alive as a precedent, or a piece of evidence, in future cases. We saw some of the work involved in turning a living thing, a flower or a giraffe, into a document. And as we saw, records needs keeping and metadata needs recording: date, location, species, etc. Think of all the work that natural history museum does to prepare the body of a living thing for long-term storage or display. Plants are pressed and dried. Insects are dried and pinned. Mammals and birds are gutted and stuffed, then posed. Sometimes their innards are pickled in formaldehyde. All of this can happen, in its own way, when a living, working document passes from one archival mode, that of the active bureaucratic file, to another, that of the historical source. I think this is a useful model for looking at what happened with the Xuande *Register*, or rather what it presents as having happened, since it is an invention, like a taxidermy creature that was never alive.

Before moving on the case of Xuande *lu*, to illustrate the processes under discussion I’d like to go through a similar, parallel example of a genuine Ming document that became a Qing book. The Ming official Yan Song and his son Yan Shifan were cashiered by the Jiajing emperor in the

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<sup>8</sup> Yongzheng 雍正, *Zhupi yuzhi* 硃批諭旨, ed. Ortai 鄂爾泰, 1738.

<sup>9</sup> Marco Codebò, “The Dossier Novel: (Post)Modern Fiction and the Discourse of the Archive,” *InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies* 3, no. 1 (August 3, 2007), <https://escholarship.org>.



1560s, and his property was confiscated by the state. Very unusually, a full inventory of this property survives. As far as I know, it is the only extant document of this sort from the Ming, though there are summaries of others. It was reprinted in the 1770s in the famous collectanea *Zhibuzuzhai congsbu* produced by the salt merchant and bibliophile Bao Tingbo, under the title *Tianshui bingshan lu*. It is a long, long list of the vast wealth of the Yans, going on for several hundred pages—the first category, gold, goes on for several pages.<sup>10</sup> It resembles the *Xuande Register* in that it was a bureaucratic document that came to serve as a guide for connoisseurs—in fact it seems to have done so almost immediately, since Wen Jia, of the renowned Wen clan of artists and writers, wrote an annotated selection of paintings and calligraphy from Yan Song's holdings. Wen was seconded from a minor educational post to spend three months in 1565 going through the paintings and calligraphy that had been confiscated from Yan Song's multiple residences in Jiangxi, where the bulk of his property was located.

The text that Wen Jia produced was not, according to Wen's own view, something for external distribution. According to a colophon dated three years later, in early 1569, Wen took the draft out of storage and reworked it for publication:

At the time, I created a rough catalogue to submit, but did not have time for a detailed analysis. The other day I happened to come across it while tidying up an old book chest, so I copied it out again, reorganizing it somewhat and adding annotations here and there, that it might be passed on to aficionados by their bright windows and unsullied tables. As I reread it, my reverie takes me back into the presence of those masterpieces.<sup>11</sup>

當時漫記數目以呈，不暇詳別。今日偶理舊篋得之，重錄一過，稍為區分隨筆箋記一二，傳諸好事明窗淨几。時一展閱，恍然神遊於金蹠玉躡間也。

This is a fairly conventional trope for a preface to a scholarly work, but it contains an important distinction: the work to be presented to outsiders is more systematic than its

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<sup>10</sup> *Tianshui bingshan lu* 天水冰山錄, *Zhibuzuzhai congsbu* 知不足齋叢書 14, n.d.

<sup>11</sup> Wen Jia 文嘉, "Qianshan shuhua ji" 鈐山堂書畫記, in *Tianshui bingshan lu*, *Qianshantang shuhua ji biaojiao* 天水冰山錄. 鈐山堂書畫記標校, ed. Li Liang 李亮 and Zhang Pengcheng 張鵬程, vol. 1 (Xi'an: San Qin chubanshe, 2017), 680.

predecessor and contains more scholarly analysis. Fortunately for us, it seems that both the original legal documents and Wen Jia's revised version circulated in the late Ming. Without going into great detail, I want to point out a couple of differences that suggest what happened in the late Ming when a legal document transitioned to become a different kind of document, a book.

I'll briefly summarize the differences between what I'll call the inventory—part of the material compiled by local officials as part of the legal proceedings—and what I'll call the catalogue, the version that Wen Jia had revised. First, the inventory has no single title and no author, only section headings and a list of officials responsible. Wen Jia gave the catalogue a title, one that sounds like a work of connoisseurship rather than part of a criminal case, and he claimed sole authorship. He refined the organization to serve a new purpose, making it easier to find a particular work by both format and period. He also cut out items other than painting and calligraphy, which had been included in the earlier version. This made his book into a more coherent, focused whole. Implicitly, he was claiming that his processed version was more useful, and more appropriate for distribution, than the raw archival document would have been.

It is not clear how the list was distributed early on—whether it was printed, for example. But it quickly had the effect that Wen Jia wished for: contemporaries incorporated it into works of on painting and calligraphy, and praised it as “essential.”<sup>12</sup> However, the massive Ming collection of writing on painting and calligraphy *Shanbu wang* 珊瑚網 (The coral net) seems to have drawn on the draft, not the version that Wen Jia revised.<sup>13</sup> *The Coral Net* is divided into two equal parts, on calligraphy and painting respectively, and it seems that parts of a single source was allocated these two sections, in *juan* 22 and 47, respectively. Both are divided into only two headings, based on format: scrolls vs album leaves. It also includes, in the calligraphy section, a summary of the other confiscated items. *The Coral Net* gives it no overall title, just listing the inventories (*ji*

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<sup>12</sup> Zhang Yingwen (fl. late 16<sup>th</sup> / early 17<sup>th</sup> c.) writes, Wen Jia's record of the paintings and calligraphy of the Yans, etc., are indispensable for scholars inquiring into the past. 文嘉嚴氏書畫記等書，皆考古之士不可缺者也。Zhang Yingwen 張應文, *Qingmi cang* 清祕藏, Wenyuan ge Siku quanshu (Taipei: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1983), 2.18a.

<sup>13</sup> See the extensive discussion in Li Liang 李亮 and Zhang Pengcheng 張鵬程, eds., *Tianshui bingshan lu*, *Qianshantang shubujia biao* 天水冰山錄. 鈐山堂書畫記標校 (Xi'an: San Qin chubanshe, 2017), vol. 1.

籍) by category. At the end of the painting section, there is a count of the works listed and the names of the officials responsible are detailed:

The preceding list of scrolls and albums make a combined total of 3,201 scrolls and volumes. Paintings and calligraphy of the Yan clan of Fenyi, Yuanzhou, in Nanchang inventoried by Jiangyou Education Intendant He Tang, Qingjiang county magistrate Liao Wenguang, and Jishui county instructor Wen Jia.<sup>14</sup>

The edited version, by contrast, has a more hierarchical arrangement, with groupings by period and some notes on individual pieces. More importantly, it has two things that the *Coral Net* version lacks: a title and an author. The title is *Qianshan tang shubua ji* 鈐山堂書畫記, a conventional name that obscures the origin of the content in legal proceedings. The author is Wen Jia, who obscures the role of his fellow officials in the process. This book appeared in *Zhibuzuzhai congshu* immediately after the much longer inventory *Tianshui bingshan lu*, which lists *all* the property confiscated from the Yans, not just paintings and calligraphy. And this document went through a similar process to become the book as which it exists today. It acquired a title, literally “The iceberg melting under the waters of Heaven,” added in the early Qing by one of the collectors through whose hands it passed. And it acquired an author, of sorts. Some catalogues list it under “Anonymous,” the placeholder for a person who must be thought of but cannot be identified. Others attribute it to Zhou Shilin, an otherwise unidentified figure whom the publisher Bao Tingbo makes very clear was not the writer of the base text but the one who cleaned up an old, printed document and gave it a title. This tenuous attribution contradicted all conventional understandings of authorship, but it was apparently important that this document have the appropriate metadata, author and title. Similarly, it is a huge book—about 250 pages and four and a half volumes in the *Zhibuzuzhai* printing—but not divided into *juan*, or chapters, since presumably the original was not either. Hence later catalogues list it as a single *juan*, since that too is a vital piece of metadata in traditional bibliography—even though that single *juan* is about 250 pages long and takes up five bound volumes!

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<sup>14</sup> Wang Luoyu 汪碩玉, *Shanbu wang* 珊瑚網, *Wenyuan ge Siku quanshu* (Taipei: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1983), 47.53b. Cf. 22.61a-64a and 47.36b-53b.

Another, related text underwent a similar change: a portion of the inventory, mainly covering decorative objects and other precious goods, circulated separately under the title *Fenyi qingwan ji*, or *Inventory of baubles from Fenyi*, Fenyi being the hometown of Yan Song. A copy of this book was received by the editors of the *Complete writings of the Four Treasuries*, *Siku quanshu*, which they chose to list but not copy (that is, put into the *cunmu* 存目). However, in listing the book they changed its title, replacing *ji*, inventory, with *pu* 譜, Register.

This change fit with another bibliographic decision by the *Siku* editors: they had to place the book, whatever they chose to call it, into their *Sibu*, Four Categories, classification scheme. They decided to place it under *pulu* 譜錄, registers, in the Masters (*zibu* 子部), in a subcategory on Implements (*qimu* 器物). This put it alongside other works listing antiques and other collectibles; the broader *pulu* included works on art, natural objects such as stones and plants, and other objects of aesthetic appreciation. Had Yan Song's property not been of such art historical interest—had it all been farm fields, bullion, and other commodities—the documents would surely have been placed elsewhere, if they were considered at all. The more logical home for such a book would be under history, *shibu* 史部, perhaps under biography or under law, as a record of a legal case. The editors' choice represents how the text was likely *used*, especially in the Qing. Its original nature as a legal document was not erased, but was subsumed under its new function.

The question of what such documents should be treated as books, and thus become part of the *Siku quanshu*, was discussed explicitly in the formulation of the project. In a 1773 memorial, Xiong Xuepeng 熊學鵬 (d. 1779) argued that *tupu* (charts and diagrams) should be included, since this category included many systematic studies by important scholars, though not everything that could be considered a chart or list was worthy of inclusion; Qianlong agreed to this view.<sup>15</sup>

Just as Wen Jia turned his legal document into a book, only three years after it was first written, the *Siku* editors did the same with this list. They received a manuscript document

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<sup>15</sup> Xiong Xuepeng 熊學鵬, "Guangxi xunfu Xiong Xuepeng zou chaming shi wu tupu jinshi deng shu zhe" 廣西巡撫熊學鵬奏查明實無圖譜金石等書折, in *Zuanxiu Siku quanshu dang'an* 纂修四庫全書檔案, ed. Zhongguo di-yi lishi dang'anguan 中國第一歷史檔案館, vol. 1, 2 vols., Qingdai dang'an shiliao 清代檔案史料 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1997), 172–75 (Qianlong 38/10/25).

bearing the title ending in *ji*, inventory. To fit it into the paradigm of the *Siku* project as a library, they changed that to *pu*. The original description of its length was in bibliometric terms, using *ce*, volumes, which they reframe in bibliographic terms of chapters, *juan*. Finally, They classified the book under *pulu*, a novel heading pioneered by the *Siku* project.

Far from incidentally, this document came to the *Siku* compilers from Wang Qishu, a writer and collector who like Bao Tingbo became extremely wealthy as a salt merchant. He also knew his way around the *pu* genre, having authored several of them, including a famous collection of seals and what amounted to illustrated catalogues of his own collections inkstones, of ink, of vases, and of bronze vessels. In fact he may have authored more *pu* titles than anyone else in the Qing, certainly on a broader range of topics. Yulian Wu has described Wang's catalogues as "two-dimensional museums."<sup>16</sup> She has shown that the salt merchants' collecting was part of a complex relationship with the Qianlong court in which artifacts and information flowed in both directions, with merchants sending books and other valuables to court, or even processing custom orders, and in turn receiving prestigious imperial gifts and connections with powerful people. Wang Qishu's catalogue of bronze vessels, all created or usable as incense burners, *Feiyun tang dinglu pu* 飛鴻堂鼎鑪譜, may be the oldest surviving book to illustrate a set of Xuande-type censers. However, it does not label them as such, just treating them as material and aesthetic objects without discussion of their historical background or even their markings. The result is an oddly sterile presentation.<sup>17</sup>

The inventory of Yan Song's property was part of this repertoire of cultural practices: the catalogue of a famous collection could be a valuable tool of authentication and appraisal as well as a model for classification, and it became part of Wang's enormous donation of books to the *Siku* project. Similarly, the Xuande Register that was copied into the *Siku quanshu*, the *diben*, was

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<sup>16</sup> Yulian Wu, *Luxurious Networks: Salt Merchants, Status, and Statecraft in Eighteenth-Century China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016), 107.

<sup>17</sup> Wang Qishu 汪啓淑, *Feibongtang dinglupu* 飛鴻堂鼎鑪譜, *Xuxiu Siku quanshu* 續修四庫全書 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1995); Wang's most famous catalogue, of seals, is *Feibongtang yinpu* 飛鴻堂印譜 (1736–1795); his other catalogues are *Feibongtang pingpu* 飛鴻堂瓶譜, *Xuxiu Siku quanshu* 續修四庫全書 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1995); *Feibongtang mopu* 飛鴻堂墨譜, *Xuxiu Siku quanshu* 續修四庫全書 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1995); *Feibongtang yanpu* 飛鴻堂硯譜, *Xuxiu Siku quanshu* 續修四庫全書 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1995).

donated by Bao Shigong, the son of the salt merchant and publisher Bao Tingbo who produced the *Zhibuzuzhai congshu* with the full Yan Song inventory, *Tianshui bingshan lu*. In fact all of the Bao family's donations came under the name of the son, though the father was clearly behind it—in fact they were the largest donors to the *Siku*. So this material was travelling in a very particular social circle.

The book the *Siku* compilers received was a complex assemblage. Its eight *juan* contained material dated to the third year of the Xuande period, 1428, but also several paratexts from later in the Ming. The main body of the *Register* consists of a series of dated official documents from various officials in the capital bureaucracy and responses from the Xuande emperor. I won't go through them all here, but let me summarize some key points:

- The emperor is inspired by a tributary gift of precious copper from Siam to have it turned into a series of incense burners
- He calls on his officials to propose designs and a work plan
- They do some research and submit such a plan, which details the vessels to be created for each location: their number, design, dimensions, and finish
- The emperor approves the plan, but only after specifying reductions in the materials to be used
- The amended plan is carried out and the vessels are cast
- After it is all done, in the ninth month, the eminent official Yang Rong wrote a preface

This last detail is vital. Without the preface, we might imagine a paper trail scattered across files in various offices and archives, one that a diligent historian might be able to reconstruct. With it, we have a book. In fact the preface attributed to Yang Rong is full of mellifluous, grandiose platitudes and says almost nothing concrete about the project, but it serves to give the whole collection an identity.

So do two other features, a title and an author. The latter is given as “Lü Zhen et al.” (Lü Zhen *deng* 吕震等). Lü who signed some of the documents as Minister of Rites, Libu shangshu.

Incidentally, this is one of the giveaways that the book is a forgery: Lü had died in 1426, so he could not have been involved in this project in 1428. As with the inventory of Yan Song's property, the idea of an "author" here is largely the result of bibliographic necessity: it is a collection of documents by many different people, and no individual is identified as having assembled or edited them. This makes sense for such state documents, but doesn't fit the paradigm of the book collection, or the Four Treasuries. Its entries requires certain metadata, so it had to be created.

The second feature, the title, marks this book, like the list of Yan Song's property that made it into the Siku's *cunmu*, as a *pu*, a register. This category, *pulu*, was as mentioned first established as a distinct bibliographic heading by the *Siku* editors, but as Martina Siebert has argued it was a distinct tradition of writing for centuries before that, and by the late Qing thousands of titles had appeared that fit this model. Writers and bibliographers had long seen the links among works of this broad type and used a basic set of techniques to organize their content, whether it was about art, plants, animals, or food.<sup>18</sup>

However, this genre—and I would argue all genres—is as much a way of reading as a way of writing, a set of paradigms for interpretation as a set of patterns for creation. Hence even a document that does not fit the usual model of a purpose-built study of a subset of the world's myriad things can function as one if need be. The *Siku* editors in fact acknowledged some of this complexity in their *tiyao* (abstract) on the book. In the *Siku quanshu zongmu tiyao* entry we read:

Compiled from memorials and rescripts from the Xuande era by Minister of Rites Lü Zhen and others. Preceded by a preface by Grand Secretary Yang Rong, labeled as "composed on imperial command." Followed by a colophon of the *jiawan* year of Jiajing (1534) by Wen Peng, claiming that it came from the household of Yu Qian, that in the Xuande period the eunuch Wu Cheng had overseen the casting and had compiled an

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<sup>18</sup> Martina Siebert, "Consuming and Possessing Things on Paper: Examples from Late Imperial China's Natural Studies," in *Living the Good Life: Consumption in the Qing and Ottoman Empires of the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Elif Akçetin and Suraiya Faroqhi (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 384–408; see also Martina Siebert, *Pulu: "Abhandlungen und Auflistungen" zu materieller Kultur und Naturkunde im traditionellen China* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2006).

illustrated register along with Lü Zhen and others which was presented for imperial inspection, and there were no copies in circulation. In the Zhengtong era Yu Qian (1398–1457) was a sacrificial official in the Ministry of Rites and obtained a duplicate copy from Wu Cheng. Wen Peng, in turn, copied it from the descendants of Yu Qian, Jia and Gui. Most likely, when the book was originally written, it was only for submission to the throne and was not disseminated. That is why it began to circulate only in the middle of the Jiajing period.<sup>19</sup>

明宣德中禮部尚書呂震等奉敕編次前有華蓋殿大學士楊榮序。亦題奉敕恭撰。後有嘉靖甲午文彭跋。稱出自于謙家。宣德中有太監吳誠。司鑄冶之事。與呂震等彙著圖譜。進呈尚方。世無傳本。謙於正統中。為禮部祠曹。從誠得其副本。彭復從謙諸孫假歸鈔之。蓋當時作此書。祇以進御。未嘗頒行。故至敬靖中。始流傳於世也。

This account of the book's provenance not only explains why a copy found its way into the hands of the editors, but also why it is a book at all—and perhaps why it should be treated as reliable, even though it was unattested for a long time. As this summary suggests, the paratexts (all of them forged, I remind you) create a story of a secret document that made its way out of the palace, in this case through the hands of two Ming men still famous in the Qing: the upstanding official Yu Qian—who was cashiered and executed soon after the Zhengtong period but posthumously rehabilitated—and the colophon by Wen Peng—the older brother of Wen Jia, the appraiser of Yan Song's collection.

The *tiyao* ends with another account of the origin of the *Register* from a different source: the editors quote the well-known scholar Hang Shijun 杭世駿 (1695–1773), whose works had recently been published and were cited several times elsewhere by the *Siku* compilers.

In Hang Shijun's *Collection from the hall of discoursing on antiquity* there is a “Colophon on the *Register of vessels from the Xuande era*,” which says, “This is an archival document from the

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<sup>19</sup> “Tiyao,” Lü Zhen 呂震, *Xuande dingyi pu* 宣德鼎彝譜, Wenyuange Siku quanshu 文淵閣四庫全書 (Taipei: Taiwan shangwu yinshuguan, 1983).



third year of the Xuande reign. It was copied out by Censor Nian Xiyao of Liaoyang from the Board, and he adapted the words “Censers and Vessels” from Xuanzong’s rescript [for the title]. This was devised by Mr. Nian and is not an original feature.”<sup>20</sup>

杭世駿《道古堂集》有〈書宣德彝器譜後〉一篇，曰此明宣德三年工部檔案也，遼陽年中丞希堯從部錄出。以宣宗諭旨中有鑪、鼎、彝、器字，遂摘用之，係年氏所定，非實事也。

Here, Hang Shijun explicitly calls the *Register* an “archival document,” using the Qing neologism *dang’an*, and gives it a provenance that emphasizes that aspect: it was copied straight from the old files of the Ministry of Works by Nian Xiyao 年希堯 (1671–1738), a bondservant bannerman who was a trusted official of the Kangxi and Yongzheng emperors and who was closely involved in the production and assessment of luxury goods for the court, both in the capital and at the imperial kilns of Jingdezhen. Nian could well have had an interest in a text like this, though there is no evidence that he was aware of it. Hang Shijun, writing around 1740, recognized some of the same issues as the *Siku* editors did: how to make an archival document serve as a book, and in particular as a *pu*. He gave it a provenance, and accounted for its title: Nian Xiyao had devised it based on the content and a selection of words from the Xuande emperor.

The *Siku* editors noted the incompatibility of this account with the book they had, and explain this as the result of Hang Shijun having worked with a defective copy and having obtained his copy, directly or indirectly, from Nian Xiyao. They were somewhat mistaken about the reasons for the divergence: Hang Shijun was working with a different text, a three-*juan* book that went under the title *Xuande yiqi pu* and that overlapped with the eight-*juan* one that entered the *Siku* but was also substantially different. For example, rather than the inconveniently-deceased Lü Zhen, it had as the Minister of Rites the conveniently nonexistent Lü Tang.

These differences all point to an underlying similarity: the need to justify the existence, and reliability, of the text. And the *Siku* editors were notoriously concerned with textual authenticity;

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<sup>20</sup> “Tiyao 提要,” *ibid.*; cf. Hang Shijun 杭世駿, *Daogutang quanji* 道古堂全集 (Hangzhou: Wang shi Zhenqitang, 1888), 28.11a-12a.

their bibliographic work became a standard starting point for research on the Chinese textual tradition, and in general they had a good nose for problematic material. That makes this book particularly noteworthy because its provenance is false, an attempt by parties unknown to game the system. The success of the forgers—despite the many anachronism that scholars have pointed out—indicates that their approach succeeded, and was appealing and convincing enough to Qing readers that, so far as I know, none questioned it. However, the *Siku* editors were concerned with making their account of the book’s origin consistent with the available evidence, as reflected by a noteworthy detail: I have quoted the version of the *tiyao* that appears in the published *Siku quanshu zongmu tiyao*, but that is not the only one. Of the original seven copies of the *Siku quanshu*, four survive in whole or part, and we have access to the *tiyao* for the *Register* from all of these.

They differ in an important way: the quote from Hang Shijun is present in the Wenyuange version originally in Beijing and now in Taipei at the National Palace Museum, but it is missing from the Wensuge, Wenlange, and Wenjinge copies. (As a reminder, seven copies of the *Siku quanshu* were made, initially four for palaces in Northern China, then three more for the South, where they were somewhat more accessible to scholars.) A copy of the *tiyao* abstract was also made for the Inner Palace, *neifu*, and that copy includes the quotation from Hang Shijun. There are in fact significant differences among the various *Siku* versions of the *Register*, but here let us focus on the *tiyao*. What stands out about this emendation of the *tiyao* is its date: it was updated in 1788, at the very end of the *Siku* project.

This makes it very much an outlier, one of the very last *tiyao* by date, especially if we exclude “imperial productions,” works either authored or edited by Qing emperors, including Qianlong, or commissioned by them. It seems that the editors put the final touches on many of these at the last minute (Figure 1).<sup>21</sup> So getting the background to the *Register* right was unusually important.

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<sup>21</sup> Dates of the *tiyao* were compiled with a search of an electronic edition of the *Siku quanshu*, and the dates of 3,331 *tiyao* were identified, which is slightly less than the 3,593 total titles. R. Kent Guy, *The Emperor’s Four Treasuries: Scholars and the State in the Late Ch’ien-Lung Era* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 1987), 1.

“Imperial” works were identified by authorship and by the appearance in the title of keywords marking an imperial connection (e.g., *yuzhuan* 御纂, *yuzhi* 御製, Huang Qing 皇清).

Why? The text need to have its own provenance in order to provide, in turn, provenance, to other things. In this case, Xuande censers were not only widely collected across the Qing empire, the emperor himself had many, as see in paintings such as *Shiyi shi'er* 是一是二.<sup>22</sup>

The *Siku* editors are explicit about this function and derive the *Register's* value from precisely this function. They summarize chapter-by-chapter the book's content, and move from that to pointing out its utility. I'll pick up the summary with the last three chapters:

*Juan* six, seven, and eight all detail the designations of the vessels: such a location, such a vessel, based on such an ancient model, all recording with precision the description, measurements, and design. Already in the Ming Xuande *lu* were widely forged, and this book makes such fine distinctions with such exactitude that it can be relied upon for appraising them, making it a valuable resource for expanding one's elegant taste.<sup>23</sup>

六、七、八卷，通為詳釋鼎彝名義。凡某所某器倣古某式，皆疏其事實尺寸制度，一一具載之。宣爐在明世已多偽製，此本辨析極精，可據以鑒別，頗足資博雅之助。

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<sup>22</sup> On this set of paintings, see for example Kristina Kleutghen, "One or Two, Repictured," *Archives of Asian Art* 62, no. 1 (2012): 25–46.

<sup>23</sup> "Tiyao," Lü Zhen, *Xuande dingyi pu*.

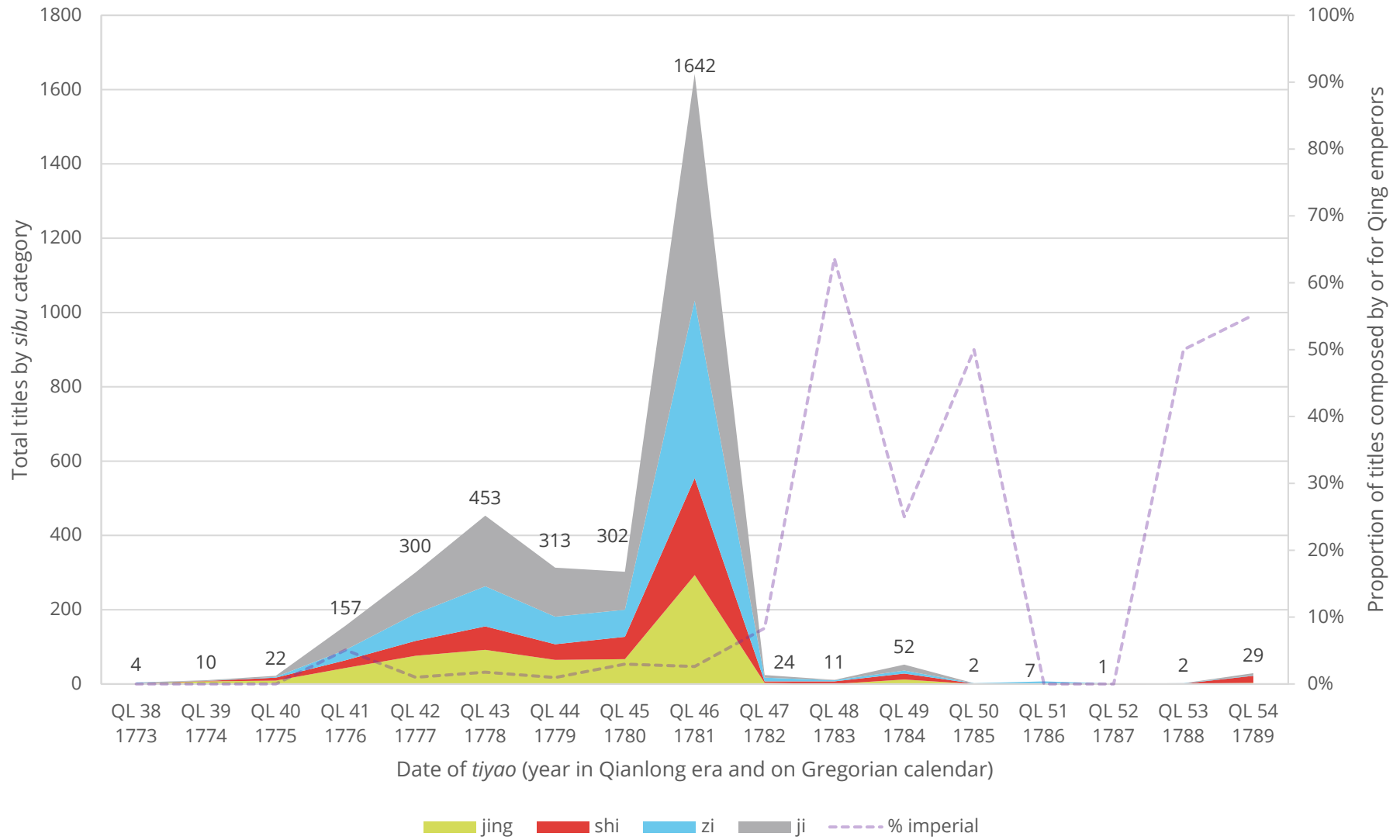


Figure 1 Titles in Wenyuan ge Siku quanshu by category & date of tiyao

To do these wonderful things, the *Register* had to relate to other objects, by pointing to them establishing relationships between them and the past, and between these objects and others (such as fakes). But it in turn had to be established as an object, to be documented. It needed to be endowed with appropriate metadata—title, author, bibliographic classification—and to have a provenance of its own. Perhaps because of its safe position in the *Siku quanshu*, advertised widely to even those who could not access the collection itself by the separate dissemination of the metadata via the *tijao* which were published with the general catalogue. This is highlighted by the common practice in later Qing publishing of including the *tijao* as a paratext when printing a work. The conclusions of the *Siku* editors were sometimes questioned, especially on rarified matters of philological scholarship, but in the general publishing world they were a strong positive marker. The *Register* had truly become a book and remains so to this day.

Once the *Register* was established as a trustworthy document, it could in turn be used to test the trustworthiness of artifacts in the world outside it. Connoisseurs have made it the starting point for understanding the history of Xuande incense burners and for identifying whether a particular vessel could be an original. Ultimately, it has not resolved anything. Collectors debate endlessly which pieces are genuinely from the Xuande period. And increasingly we have come to realize that the answer may be *none*: the Beijing Palace Museum recently catalogued all of its Xuande incense burners and its curators concluded that not a single one could be identified with confidence as genuinely from the Xuande court—this even though they did not question the *Register's* account, and rejected or ignored doubts about its authenticity.

Most collectors now seem to accept this aporia and to seek out what they consider to be reliably late Ming or early Qing vessels—the very fakes that the *Siku* editors hoped that the *Register* would help guard against. So the objects and the books remain locked in a web of documentary relations, relations that are always being reconfigured. Sometimes that reconfiguration is the result of new objects, new texts; sometimes it is new modes of documentality. Archivalness was a new, or at least newly valorized, documentary status in the Qing, one that shaped bureaucratic practice, scholarship, and publishing. Since then, we have found new kinds of documentary relations, such as the scientific sample (for instance when we

perform a fluorescence analysis of the composition of a vessel's alloy) or the archeological stratum. Existing things offer up new information as we relate to them in new ways, just as new meanings emerge from new readings of texts.

The Qing archival mode, I would suggest, is one that lets us see the document as both thing and information. And as a Ming historian I find very impressionistically that it's apt to describe Qing governance practice as even more reliant on archives than the Ming. For example, we have seen the inventory of Yan Song, the notoriously corrupt mid-Ming official. If he had a counterpart in the Qing, it was Hešen 和珅 (1750–1799), the favourite of the latter part of Qianlong's reign, who skyrocketed from a barely-educated bodyguard to the most powerful official in the bureaucracy. He became massively wealthy, like Yan Song, from a variety of corrupt practices, as well as imperial largesse. And like Yan Song, he was cashiered, in his case almost immediately after the death of Qianlong in 1799. His property was confiscated and inventoried (a practice that had become almost routine, and systematized, in the Qianlong reign), and his massive wealth was predictably compared to Yan's. But there is one striking difference: among the vast properties Hešen owned was a unique establishment: a "private archive" of 730 bays (*jian* 間). This is as large as his main mansion, so it must have been a huge structure, and of course any historian would be excited to see what it contained or even to know what became of its contents.<sup>24</sup>

At the same time, we still partially inhabit it today, as scholars who often rely on the monuments of Qing scholarship—not just the huge volume of philological and historical work they wrote, but the very categories in which they worked.

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<sup>24</sup> Zhou Shouchang 周壽昌, *Siyitang rizi* 思益堂日札, 1888, 4.10a-11b.

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