



ARTICLE

Guwantu: The Yongzheng Emperor's (r. 1723–1735) 'Illustrated Inventory of Ancient Playthings' (1729) and Imperial Collecting in Eighteenth Century China

Phillip Grimberg 

Centre for East Asian Studies, Heidelberg University, Heidelberg, Germany
Email: grimberg@grimberg.eu

(Received 11 October 2023; revised 12 June 2024; accepted 12 June 2024)

Abstract

This article provides a conceptual framework that fills a critical gap at the intersection of Chinese art and cultural history. It focuses on the Yongzheng emperor's 'Illustrated Inventory of Ancient Playthings' (*Guwantu*) and its significance within the context of the collecting and courtly elite culture of the High Qing. Through a comprehensive examination of scroll B/C.8–V&A of the *Guwantu* itself, as well as the relevant source material, this study elucidates the dynamics that shaped the connections between artist, collector and object in the context of the scroll. Furthermore, this contribution throws light on the multiple entangled relationships that underpinned imperial collecting practices of the period, ultimately offering new insights into the socio-cultural milieu of collectors and connoisseurs in early eighteenth-century China.

Keywords: China; court; collecting; Yongzheng; inventory; Victoria and Albert Museum

When on the third day of the sixth month of the fourth year of the Yongzheng 雍正 reign (24 June 1726) the emperor sent twenty-one objects from his art collections to the painting workshops at the Palace Board of Works of the Imperial Household Department (Neiwufu zaobanchu 內務府造辦處) for his head painter of the Oil Painting Studio (Youhuafang 油畫房), Italian Jesuit Giuseppe Castiglione (1688–1766), to produce a series of preliminary sketches of still lifes (bogu 博古, lit. 'abundance of ancient [objects]'), he was to embark on the largest documenting project of the imperial art collections in over

600 years.¹ The set of monumental handscrolls that resulted from these drafts, possibly twenty-four in total and each over 20 metres long, with the unassuming title of ‘Illustrated Inventory of Ancient Playthings’ (*Guwantu* 古玩圖) and probably painted between 1727 and 1730, are a unique visual representation of the emperor’s private art collections and of early eighteenth-century Qing courtly collecting in general.

When Aisin Gioro Yinzhen 愛新覺羅胤禛 (1678–1735) ascended the dragon throne in 1723 and became the Yongzheng emperor of the Manchu Qing dynasty (1644–1911), however, imperial patronage of the arts, antiquarian studies and collecting in China already looked back at a centuries-old tradition. Ruling in challenging times, the Yongzheng emperor consolidated his power by eliminating corruption, infighting and court factions that threatened his reign and questioned its legitimacy.² The emperor’s ‘Great Matter’, his quest for legitimacy, became one of the driving forces of much of his cultural politics during his twelve-year reign. Collecting and antiquarian studies of ancient relics that bore the biographical weight of a bygone era of ideal and virtuous rulers were regarded as potent means to obtain this goal and to assert the emperor’s prerogative of cultural hegemony.³

When the Manchu, a Tungusic people from the north-east, invaded the capital Beijing and seized power in 1644 by toppling the ruling Ming dynasty (1368–1644), they did not have an established rule of succession, and the emperor was free to choose an heir from any of his surviving sons. Therefore, after the death of an emperor power struggles were rather common. Before Prince Yinzhen became emperor, his older brother was named heir to his father’s throne. Due to his erratic behaviour, however, the Kangxi 康熙 emperor (r. 1662–1722) demoted his errant eldest son from the rank of crown prince but failed to name a new heir before he died. After his father’s death Prince Yinzhen declared himself emperor, basing his claims on his late father’s last will and testament, which named ‘the fourth son’ as his heir and successor.⁴ Yet quickly rumours spread that the new emperor had tampered with his father’s testament and therefore was illegitimate and even may have murdered his predecessor. Yongzheng was eager to suppress these allegations and refuted them publicly by publishing the ‘Record of Great Righteousness to Dispel Confusion’ (*Dayi juemi lu* 大義覺密錄,) in which he tried to clear his name from all rumours by bowing to the late

¹ First Historical Archives of China (Zhongguo diyi lishi dang’an guan 中國第一歷史檔案館) and the Museum of the Chinese University of Hong Kong (Xianggang zhongwen daxue wenwu guan 香港中文大學文物館) (eds.), *Archives of the Workshops of the Qing Imperial Household Department* (Qingong neiwufu zaobanchu dang’an 清宮內務府造辦處檔案) (Beijing, 2005), 268f.

² Madeleine Zelin, ‘The Yung-cheng Reign’, in *The Cambridge History of China*, ix, ed. Willard J. Peterson (Cambridge, 2002), 183–229; Huang Pei, *Autocracy at Work: A Study of the Yung-cheng Period, 1723–1735* (Bloomington, 1974).

³ Lothar Ledderose, ‘Some Observations on the Imperial Art Collection in China’, *Transactions of the Oriental Ceramic Society*, 43 (1978), 33–46.

⁴ Museum of the Institute of History and Philology/Academia Sinica, *Last Testament of the Emperor Kangxi* <https://museum.sinica.edu.tw/en/collection/17/item/125/> (accessed 3 May 2024).

emperor's wish to name him as his heir.⁵ This publication – an unprecedented example of public self-justification by a Chinese emperor – did not achieve its aim of eliminating any trace of doubt concerning his right to rule nor did it shut down any debates about his legitimacy. Rather, the question of legitimacy remained his Achilles' heel throughout the remainder of his reign, and in contemporary and later sources he was portrayed as a dark and gloomy figure, overshadowed by both his imposing father and his ambitious son, the future Qianlong 乾隆 emperor (r. 1736–96).⁶

Far more successful than using his coercive political powers as an absolute monarch, one way of asserting legitimacy was by patronage of the arts. The ruler as scholar – as a culturally refined 'Gentleman' (junzi 君子) who masters the Chinese classical literary and Confucian canon as well as history and the arts, calligraphy, poetry and painting in particular – is a very old trope in the Chinese tradition that goes back to the times of Confucius.⁷ During the eleventh and twelfth centuries, a mastery of old relics and antiquarian objects was added to the list of refined pursuits of a Chinese gentleman. Antiquarianism (chin. jinshixue 金石學, lit. the 'study of [inscriptions on] metal and stone') and antiquarian collecting together with the publication of catalogues (of which a large number survives until this day) flourished during the second half of the Northern Song dynasty (960–1127).⁸ Antiquarians of the period for the first time in Chinese history applied a (proto-)scientific approach to the study of ancient objects – predominantly bronze vessels of various types that were used as ritual implements from the sixteenth to the second century BCE and, to a lesser degree, other objects from later periods – as supplementary historical sources that were unspoiled by the manipulations and the errors ubiquitously found in manuscripts and other textual records of the time that, in the mind of contemporary scholars, had warped historical research for centuries. After the downfall of the dynasty in 1127 antiquarianism as a scholarly discipline disappeared for more than 500 years from Chinese intellectual discourse. It was only since the second half of the seventeenth century, when so called 'evidential scholarship' (kaozhengxue 考證學) challenged the predominantly textual approaches to the study of Chinese history, that objects and material evidence of past events came to play a prominent role in the study of history once again.⁹ One of the main objectives of the early

⁵ Jonathan D. Spence, *Treason by the Book* (New York, 2001).

⁶ Pamela Kyle Crossley, *A Translucent Mirror: History of Identity in Qing Imperial Ideology* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1999).

⁷ Ruyu Hung, 'Self-Cultivation through Art: Chinese Calligraphy and the Body', *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 53 (2021), 1–5.

⁸ Patricia Buckley-Ebrey, 'The Politics of Imperial Collecting in the Northern Song Period', in *Windows on the Chinese World: Reflections by Five Historians*, ed. Clara Wing-chung Ho (Lanham, 2009), 29–44; see also on the topic of collecting and antiquarianism during the Song period, Yunchiaoh C. Sena, *Bronze and Stone: The Cult of Antiquity in Song Dynasty China* (Seattle, 2019) as well as Hsu Ya-hwei, 'Antiquaries and Politics: Antiquarian Culture of the Northern Song, 960–1127', in *World Antiquarianism: Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Alain Schnapp (Los Angeles, 2013), 230–48.

⁹ Phillip Grimberg, 'Archaeology and Antiquarianism in China', in *Encyclopedia of Global Archaeology*, ed. Claire Smith (Cham, 2019), 1–9.

kaozheng-movement of the Ming–Qing-transition period (c. 1650–1700) was to restore the original content of the Confucian classics as a means of initiating political and technical reform, as these works were seen as sources of moral and practical guidance. As a side-effect, this ‘paradigm shift from philosophy to philology’,¹⁰ a shift from abstraction to practical scholarship, greatly benefited palaeography and philology, and hence antiquarian studies and collecting more generally.¹¹ While the *kaozheng* school of thought reached its zenith only during the Qianlong- and Jiaqing-reigns (1796–1820) of the Qing dynasty, earlier proponents of the movement such as Gu Yanwu 顧炎武 (1613–83) or Yan Ruoqu 閻若璩 (1636–1704) paved the way for a change in the methodology of scholarship in China, including inductive approaches to knowledge acquisition and the requirement for results to be supported by facts.¹²

Departing from the work of McCausland, Falkenhausen, Dematté and others, this article will argue that during the intellectual and scientific reorientation of the period the highest strata of society also devoted themselves with growing interest to the collection and documentation of antique objects. Among them was the Yongzheng emperor. Alongside famous collector and antiquarian emperor Huizong 徽宗 (r. 1101–25) of the Northern Song¹³ and his own art-savvy son, the Yongzheng emperor was one of the most prolific and knowledgeable collectors of art and antiquarian objects of the Early and High Qing.¹⁴ In keeping with the spirit of the time, he commissioned the *Guwantu* as a pictorial record of the emperor’s art collections, which reflects his keen interest in systematising his collections as well as in their historical and material value as tangible evidence of the past.

Guwantu: ‘Illustrated Inventory of Ancient Playthings’

The *Guwantu* were commissioned by the Yongzheng emperor to document visually a portion of his private collections of antiques, curios, and other, more contemporary objects. Originally painted as a set of up to twenty-four scrolls, this study focuses on scroll B/C.8–V&A, one of only two surviving examples of the *Guwantu* painted in 1729, which is kept in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London (Inv. No. E.59–1911). The other scroll dating from 1728 is currently in the possession of the British Museum, London, as part of the Percival David Foundation for Chinese Art (Inv. No. PDF, X.01). and has already been discussed in some detail by Shane McCausland.¹⁵

¹⁰ Benjamin Elman, *From Philosophy to Philology: Intellectual and Social Aspects of Change in Late Imperial China* (Cambridge, 1984).

¹¹ Michael Quirin, ‘Scholarship, Value, Method, and Hermeneutics in Kaozheng: Some Reflections on Cui Shu (1740–1816) and the Confucian Classics’, *History and Theory*, 35 (1996), 34–53.

¹² On Cho Ng, Edward Wang, *Mirroring the Past: The Writing and Use of History in Imperial China* (Honolulu, 2005), 229–31.

¹³ Patricia Buckley-Ebrey, *Accumulating Culture: The Collections of Emperor Huizong* (Seattle, 2008).

¹⁴ Regina Krahl, ‘The Yongzheng Emperor: Art Collector and Patron’, in *The Three Emperors 1662–1795*, ed. Evelyn Rawski and Jessica Rawson (2005), 240–69.

¹⁵ Shane McCausland, ‘The Emperor’s Old Toys: Rethinking the Yongzheng (1723–35) Scroll of Antiquities in the Percival David Foundation’, *Transactions of the Oriental Ceramic Society*, 66 (2002), 65–75.



Figure 1. *Guwantu* (detail) (© Victoria and Albert Museum, London).

Scroll B/C.8–V&A presents itself as a mounted hand scroll with dimensions of 64 cm × 2648 cm and depicts a total of 262 objects including the same number of racks, stands, mounts or suspensions framing and re-contextualising the objects within the collection, plus an additional fifteen cabinets and cupboards for storage (Figure 1).¹⁶

The painting was executed in ink and colour on paper in a Euro-Chinese hybrid style of painting.¹⁷ The outer wrapper of the scroll is made of green silk brocade with patterns of chrysanthemums, dragons and phoenixes, common motives in imperial imagery. On a slip of paper, we find the date and title of the scroll given as ‘Illustrated Inventory of Ancient Playthings, seventh year of Yongzheng, series xia, scroll eight’ (*Guwantu Yongzheng qi nian xia juan ba* 古玩圖雍正七年下卷八) in regular script. The seventh year of the reign of the Yongzheng emperor corresponds with the year 1729 in the Gregorian calendar, and ‘xia’ (下) refers to possibly a third set from a series of three sets in total.¹⁸

¹⁶ See on the concept of ‘framing’ Anna Grasskamp, *Objects in Frames: Displaying Foreign Collectibles in Early Modern China and Europe* (Berlin, 2019).

¹⁷ McCausland, ‘The Emperor’s Old Toys’, 65.

¹⁸ Xia 下, literally means ‘below’, ‘down’. Its opposite, shang 上, means ‘top’, ‘first’, etc. So, series Xia might refer to the second of two sets, but it might also refer to the third of three sets, if we infer that a series zhong 中, ‘middle’, ‘centre’, might well have existed too. Therefore, to designate the scroll in question as scroll No. 8 as indicated by the title of either series B, which corresponds to 中 or series C, which corresponds to 下, seems appropriate. Thus, the total number of originally existing scrolls can be estimated at up to twenty-four and the number of depicted objects at up to 6,000. This calculation results as follows: assuming that the designation 下 on the title of the scroll owned by the Victoria and Albert Museum is to be taken as the third series of a larger set, and that at least eight individual specimens are to be assigned to each series, this totals twenty-four. Assuming further that there was an equal number of objects on each of the scrolls and taking the two surviving specimens as a basis (250 and 262 objects respectively), this results in a total number of about 6,000 objects.



Figure 2. *Guwantu* (detail) (© Victoria and Albert Museum, London).

Moreover, the scroll features an ivory clasp and a strap of white and purple brocade with floral and cloud patterns. Two wooden rolling pins at the beginning and at the end of the scroll are decorated with roll ends of green dyed ivory with dragon motifs. The frontispiece is made of white paper and white silk brocade with phoenix and cloud patterns. In the two surviving copies, neither a preface or a table of contents, nor colophons or dedications have been preserved. These are likely to have been found in the lost first individual scrolls of the respective sets (Figure 2).

Organisation of the scroll

Scroll B/C.8–V&A contains a total of 262 objects, including 137 jades, 96 ceramics and porcelains, 20 bronzes, three objects made of stone, two of burlwood, one of enamel and three of undetermined material ranging in age from the Shang to the early Qing dynasty. Moreover, there are eight cabinets depicted at the end of the scroll, painted black with gold trim and tops in red lacquer with drawers with green-blue jade knobs and further storage compartments individually shaped and designed. Another seven cabinets are found in the centre of the scroll, of which four are tall, slender cabinets with doors in the lower third and white-finished, precisely fitting recesses for the respective objects in the upper part as well four lower shelves with matching compartments. All of these storage cabinets were custom-made from the ‘wood workshop’ (muzuo 木作) of the *Zaobanchu* (Figures 3 and 4).¹⁹

¹⁹ Lo Hui-chi, ‘Political Advancement and Religious Transcendence: The Yongzheng Emperor’s (1678–1735) Deployment of Portraiture’ (Ph.D. thesis, Stanford University, 2009), 126; see also Shu Lin, ‘An Examination of the Aesthetic Sensibilities of the Yongzheng Emperor in Light of the Archives of the *Zaobanchu*’, *Palace Museum Journal*, 6 (2004), 90–119.

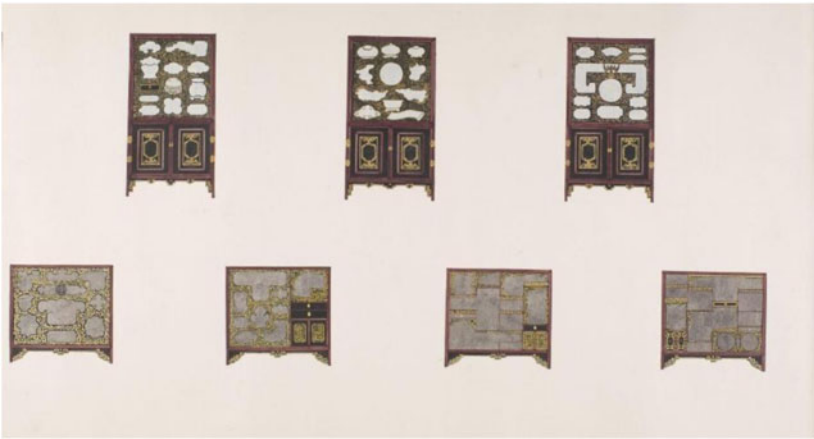


Figure 3. *Guwantu* (detail) (© Victoria and Albert Museum, London).

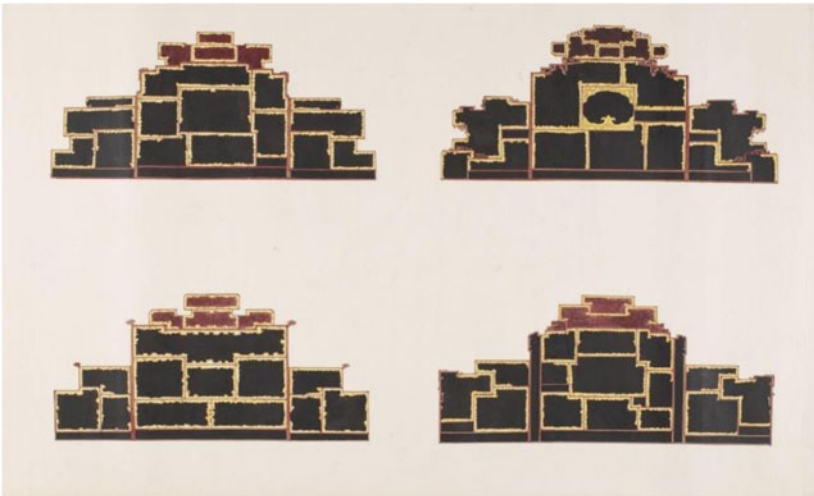


Figure 4. *Guwantu* (detail) (© Victoria and Albert Museum, London).

The organisational structure of the scroll suggests that it indeed had once been used as an inventory of some sort. As McCausland has observed for the Percival David scroll in the British Museum, the objects depicted are not arranged according to date, media, provenance or function, but according to their respective places of display within the palace halls.²⁰ This assumption is further supported by the depiction of the two sets of cabinets in the middle

²⁰ McCausland, 'The Emperor's Old Toys', 72.

and at the end of the scroll, which probably have contained the objects depicted in the preceding portion of the scroll, helping curators and custodians to find objects that the emperor wished to appreciate.

Manufacture of the scroll

As Lo Hui-chi has aptly demonstrated in her 2009 dissertation, the *Archives of the Workshops of the Qing Imperial Household Department* (Qinggong neiwufu zaobanchu dang'an 清宮內務府造辦處檔案) of the Yongzheng reign, jointly published by the First Historical Archives of China (Zhongguo diyi lishi dang'an guan 中國第一歷史檔案館) and the Museum of the Chinese University of Hong Kong (Xianggang zhongwen daxue wenwu guan 香港中文大學文物館) in 2005, represent the most extensive and reliable source on the history of the *Guwantu*, offering valuable insights into the emperor's commissions and requests to court artists and artisans and his personal involvement in the production of art at his court.²¹

The 'Imperial Workshops' (*Zaobanchu* 造辦處) exercised oversight over several offices and departments, including the 'Painting Academy Office' (*Huayuanchu* 畫院處) and the 'Hall of Fulfilled Wishes' (*Ruyiguan* 如意館), which were both in charge of court painting.²² Both offices were divided between the Forbidden City and the Yuanming Yuan summer palace in the northern vicinity of the capital and featured smaller, often specialised 'workshops for the production of paintings' (*huazuo* 畫作).²³

Giuseppe Castiglione who had come to China in 1714 and already worked as a court painter under the emperor's father, had become head of the 'Oil Painting Studio', which, together with a studio specialising in Chinese landscape painting led by Tang Dai 唐岱 (1673–1755), were the main producers of paintings for the personal use of the emperor.²⁴ On the emperor's request, the workshops collaborated on various projects. Besides Castiglione and Tang Dai, several other artists of their studios were involved in the production of paintings for the emperor, including Banda Lisha 班達里沙, Yong Tai 永泰, Ge Shu 葛署, Wang Jie 王玠 and Wang Youxue 王幼學.²⁵

The *Archives* show that the Yongzheng emperor commissioned the painting workshops of Castiglione and Tang Dai to produce sketches from objects – or, rather, object portraits – he had sent them early in his reign: between 1723 and 1727 the *Archives* record several of these requests.²⁶ The *Archives*, however, do not mention the *Guwantu* or their commission. Yet, from the available data we can infer that the *Guwantu* project must have begun sometime in 1727, the year of the emperor's last recorded commission of a set of object portraits that may

²¹ Lo Hui-chi, 'Political Advancement and Religious Transcendence', especially 60, 107, 137, 140.

²² Marco Musillo, 'Bridging Europe and China: The Professional Life of Giuseppe Castiglione (1688–1766)' (Ph.D. thesis, University of East Anglia, 2006), 35.

²³ *Archives* 5, 420.

²⁴ *Archives* 1, 185; see also Yang Xin, 'Court Painting in the Yongzheng and Qianlong Periods of the Qing Dynasty, with Reference to the Collection of the Palace Museum, Peking', in *The Elegant Brush*, ed. Ju-hsi Chou and Claudia Brown (Phoenix, 1985), 343–57.

²⁵ *Archives* 1, 164; 2, 645.

²⁶ *Archives* 1, 564, 566, 575.

have served as a draft for the emperor before he commissioned the *Guwantu*, and was finished sometime in or before 1730, when he requested painters versed in the ‘western style’ (xifang shi 西方式) to paint some more ‘ancient implements’ (guqi 古器) and produce an album for his use.²⁷ In his order he made it clear that Castiglione should not be involved.²⁸ The reason for this might have been that Castiglione himself was still involved in putting the finishing touches to the *Guwantu*, so that for this follow-up project, other trusted painters of his studio would have sufficed.

A production period of three years seems ambitious for a handful of painters to paint thousands of objects to the satisfaction of an imperial connoisseur. However, the existence of two scrolls from two different series dating from 1728 and 1729 (the V&A and BM scrolls) suggests that this assumption may well be plausible, and thus allows the set to be dated between 1727 and 1730.

Provenance

After the *Guwantu* project was finished in 1729/30, the sizable convolute of scrolls would have probably been stored on the premises of Yuanming Yuan, the emperor’s preferred residence since relocating there in 1725, and the place where he kept the bulk of his private art collections.²⁹ Yuanming Yuan, Yongzheng’s private refuge and originally a gift from his father, was to remain the main residence of successive Chinese emperors until during the reign of the Xianfeng 咸豐 emperor (1851–61) the palace was looted and ransacked by Anglo-French troops during the Second Opium War (1856–60) in October 1860. Millions of objects were either stolen or sold and found their way into collections of European aristocrats and treasure hunters, or they were destroyed on the spot and shared the fate of the palace, which was burned to the ground in 1860 and whose remains were looted and burnt down again in 1900 during the so-called Boxer Rebellion.³⁰

The Victoria and Albert Museum, which acquired the 1729 scroll in 1911, describes it in its records as a ‘painted Chinese scroll, a pictorial inventory made in 1729 of the art treasures in the Si Ling tombs (looted during the Boxer Rebellion). The scroll contains colour drawings of 262 individual objects of bronze, jade, steatite, pottery, etc., including 15 images of lacquer and inlaid cabinets. (13ft.16 × 25’’).³¹ Furthermore, the Museum’s inventory gives the inventory number (E.59–1911) and the date of accession (13 January 1911), as well as the name of the seller, Captain J. S. Rivett-Carnac, and the price of £262 10s. paid for the scroll. The artist is given as a ‘local artist’, and ‘water-colours’ are mentioned as the medium (Figure 5).

²⁷ Archives 4, 552.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Phillip Grimberg, ‘Trauma, Memory, and the Nation: The Ruinscapes of Yuanming Yuan and their Afterlife in Modern China’, in *Thinking Through Ruins*, ed. Konstantin Klein, Enass Khansa and Barbara Winckler (Berlin, 2021), 239–56.

³⁰ Geremie Barmé, ‘The Garden of Perfect Brightness: A Life in Ruins’, in *East Asian History*, 11 (1996), 111–58.

³¹ Victoria and Albert Museum, *Records of the Victoria and Albert Museum* (1911).

Registered Number.	Date of Receipt.	From whom received.	Price.	Authenticity, R.P.N. and Remarks.	Name of Artist.	Nature of Drawing or Print.	Description and Dimensions Condition.
E. 59-1911	13 Jan. 1911.	Capt. J. S. Powell - Camero.	£262. 10. 0	1910 3601 M. Inv. E. 1. D. 149. Photographed on 99 negs. 9143 - 71160	Nature's Arkiv.	Nat. - colour.	Printed Chinese scroll, a pictorial survey, made in 1729, of the treasures of art in the Si-ling tombs (located during the Boxer harassment). The scroll contains drawings in colour of 262 separate objects in bronze, jade, shalite, pottery etc., including 15 illustrations of lacquer and ivory cabinets. (13 ft. 10 x 25).

Figure 5. Records of the V&A (© Victoria and Albert Museum).

After the purchase of the scroll from Rivett-Carnac, an Indian army captain who was detached to a German army contingent of the Allied Forces during the Boxer Rebellion and a member of the family of the Rivett-Carnac baronets, descendant of James Rivett-Carnac (1774–1846), first Baronet and chairman of the East India Company from 1827 to 1838³², in January 1911, the records of the V&A identified the scroll as an inventory ‘of the art treasures in the Si Ling tombs (looted during the Boxer Rebellion)’. This attribution of the scroll as an inventory of the tomb treasures of the ‘Si Ling’, which may be identified as the ‘Qing Xiling’ 清西陵, the Western Tombs of the Qing imperial family in today’s Hebei province where the Yongzheng emperor was interred in 1735, seems reasonable enough – even though it is not an inventory of the tomb, but rather an inventory of the art collections that the emperor possessed during his lifetime. Some of the latest research on the provenance of the scroll suggests that the *Guwantu* were kept within the emperor’s burial complex Tailing 泰陵 until it was partly looted during the Boxer Uprising of 1900–1 from where they came into the possession of Rivett-Carnac and finally into that of the V&A.³³ McCausland, in his paper on the Percival David scroll, however, identified the toponym ‘Si Ling’ not as a contemporary transcription of the Chinese ‘Xiling’, but as a transcription of ‘Siling’ 思陵, the name of the tomb of the Chongzhen 崇禎 emperor (1628–44), the last of the Ming emperors, whose tomb remains unopened until this day. This assumption, therefore, seems rather implausible.³⁴

The title

The title of the scroll, *Guwantu* (古玩圖), translated here as ‘Illustrated Inventory of Ancient Playthings’, allows for several translations: ‘Chart of Old Toys’, ‘Images of Antique Knick-knacks’, ‘Scroll of Antiquities’, etc., all of which would be a possible approximation of the Chinese title that echoes a tradition of portraying antique objects and collectibles, namely *gu wan*, which dates back to the Song dynasty. However, a more detailed analysis of the title and its components will bring to light some aspects that would otherwise remain hidden in a purely inline translation of the title.

The first character of the Chinese original – 古 (*gu*) – means ‘ancient’, ‘old’, ‘antiquity’, etc. The *Shuowen Jiezi* (說文解字, lit. ‘Discussing Writing and Explaining Characters’), a palaeographic and etymological dictionary compiled by the Han-dynasty (220 BCE–206) scholar Xu Shen 許慎 (c. 58–148) explains the character as ‘[meaning] old. It derives from [the characters] ten and mouth. [It refers to] understanding the words of the elders’ (*gu ye. Cong shi kou shi qianyanzhe ye 故也從十口識前言者也*).³⁵ The Dictionary describes the meaning of 古 rather unsatisfactorily with it having the same meaning as *gu* 故, so

³² C. H. Philips and D. Philips, ‘Alphabetical List of Directors of the East India Company from 1758 to 1858’, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 73 (1941), 325–33.

³³ Ricarda Brosch, ‘Plündern in Pekings Peripherie: Die Westlichen Kaisergräber der Qing’, *Ostasiatische Zeitschrift*, 46 (2023), 20–35.

³⁴ McCausland, ‘The Emperor’s Old Toys’, 65 n. 1.

³⁵ Xu Shen, *Shuowen Jiezi* (Beijing, 1989), 375.

that here too we must look at the etymology. Unfortunately, the *Shuowen Jiezi* in a circular argument refers back to the character 古 and its meaning as 'old' as the etymological origin of 故, so that here we can only follow the explanation that the character 古 originally denoted the wise words of the forefathers, which becomes clearer when analysing its components. The lower part of the character – 口 (kou) – denotes the opening of the mouth, and hence, words uttered from it, often found in Chinese compound characters as the character's radical pointing to acts of speaking, calling, shouting, etc. The upper part of the character gu – 十 (shi) – denotes the number ten, though originally this character meant the point where east and west, north and south meet, namely the centre of the world, and hence in keeping with Chinese traditional world-views, a point of perfection. Therefore, the interpretation of the character as 'words of the elders' (qianyanzhe ye 前言者也) or words of wisdom/perfection seems plausible.

The second character of the title – 玩 (wan) – can be translated as 'toy', 'sth. used for amusement', 'curio', 'to keep sth. for entertainment', etc. The *Shuowen Jiezi* explains it as meaning 'to play with. It derives from [the character for] Jade' (nong ye cong yu 弄也從玉).³⁶ In his 1815 edition *Shuowen Jiezi zhu* (說文解字注) scholar Duan Yucai 段玉裁 (1735–1815) corrects the etymology of the character *wan* as deriving from the character *wang* 王 (meaning 'king'), rather than from the character for 'jade'.³⁷ Yet, the meaning of 'toy', 'sth. for amusement' remains the same.

The third character – 圖 (tu) – means 'diagram', 'picture', 'drawing', 'chart' or 'map'. The *Shuowen Jiezi* explains it as 'deriving from [the characters for] enclosure and granary' (cong kou cong bi 從口從囗).³⁸ The inner character 囗 (bi) of the compound character 圖 means a granary or storage for rice or grain. The idea of an enclosed granary later came to mean a map, plan or diagram of where the granaries were located. In the course of further language development from ancient to classical, later to middle Chinese and finally to modern (since the fifteenth century) and contemporary Chinese, the character 圖 has lost the reference to storage and stockpiling and simply carries the meaning of 'map', 'picture', 'chart', etc.

Following the preceding explanations, the characters in the title of the scroll warrant some further interpretation: 古 (gu) carries the weight (and the plight) of the (alleged) harmonious perfection of antiquity, where the elders, namely sage rulers and revered philosophers, uttered words of wisdom and moral clarity, therefore becoming an aesthetic category in this context rather than a simple means of temporal classification. This becomes even clearer when we consider the infatuation of Chinese scholars, officials and rulers with the term throughout centuries of Chinese history: the various *fugu* (復古, i.e. 'returning to antiquity') movements within Chinese intellectual history, the Old Text/New Text controversy about the Confucian Classics, the elite's interest in antiquarian studies since the late eleventh century, and

³⁶ Xu Shen, *Shuowen*, 42.

³⁷ Duan Yucai, *Shuowen Jiezi zhu* (Beijing, 1990), 5.

³⁸ Xu Shen, *Shuowen*, 650.

the prominent role of (ancient) history and historiography in (pre-)modern Chinese thought in general are but some examples of the significance of the concept of 古 (gu) even to this day. In the context of the *Guwantu*, 古 (gu) transcends its original meaning of 'old' and turns into an expression of an aesthetic assessment of and a value judgement about the objects so designated. They are not just 'old', but sacred by their association with antiquity.

The character 玩 (wan), on the other hand, seems odd and out of place in the context of the scroll, especially regarding the gravitas of the term 古 (gu) as outlined above. Looking at the content of the *Guwantu* even in the most superficial and hasty manner, one can only conclude that the objects depicted are by no means toys, playthings or knickknacks, but products of the highest craftsmanship and of select artistic quality and historical significance. Instead, the term 玩 (wan) may be read as a subtle hint to historical precedents telling a cautious tale about emperors overindulging in the finer things in life and, while enjoying their precious objects and magnificent collections, neglecting politics and the heavenly mandate and losing throne and empire as a consequence. This rather dramatic interpretation of the unassuming term 玩 (wan) is supported by the repeated exhortations of officials to their rulers in the centuries after the fall of the Northern Song dynasty in 1127 to take as a warning the example of Emperor Huizong (r. 1101–25), who eventually neglected government business to devote himself to art and his personal interests and lost both throne and empire to conquering nomads from the north who forced China under foreign rule for centuries.³⁹

Finally, the character 圖 (tu) may appear as a straightforward concept, denoting a picture, a drawing, a chart, an illustration, or, plainly, the scroll itself. Yet, its significance transcends the realm of mere visual representation. It quite comfortably lends itself to the interpretation of a comprehensive map – a cartographic guide to the microcosm of Chinese cultural and historical production as represented by the depicted objects in the scroll. As a map, 圖 (tu) unravels the multifaceted layers of Chinese history and creativity. It traces the evolution of Chinese cultural production throughout four millennia of Chinese history and offers insights into the societal shifts, technological advances and philosophical currents that have shaped the Chinese cultural landscape.

Now, looking at the title as a whole, the *Guwantu* appear to be an illustrated cultural map of the empire, connecting the emperor to the revered past through the depicted objects while at the same time cautioning him against frivolity and excessive indulgence. Acknowledging the educative capacities of art so familiar from the Chinese tradition, the antiquarian collecting and display of ancient objects as material evidence of the past was seen as a means of fostering moral refinement and disseminating knowledge that was in danger of being lost, thereby promoting learning and virtuousness, which were among the guiding principles in becoming a Confucian gentleman and a just and

³⁹ Patricia Buckley-Ebrey, *Emperor Huizong* (Cambridge, MA, 2014), 507–8, cites Zhang Juzheng's 張居正 (1525–82) *Dijian tushuo* (帝鑑圖說, 'The Emperor's Mirror, an Illustrated Discussion', 1572) as one of many sources from post-Song/Late Imperial China that picked up this narrative.

benevolent ruler. The *Guwantu*, therefore, functioned as a means ‘to record and classify China’s cultural patrimony in Manchu dynastic time and space’,⁴⁰ expressing a political programme of cultural hegemony that props up the Yongzheng emperor’s claim to power grounded in the Chinese past and represented through his collections of ‘ancient playthings’.

Style

The *Guwantu* were painted in a hybrid style of Chinese and European techniques that was to become one of the hallmarks of Chinese court painting during much of the eighteenth century.⁴¹ Shane McCausland has observed that the scroll in the Percival David Collection

is, in effect, a hybrid form of representation, one that incorporates the Manchu predilection for polychrome; Chinese techniques of observation and rendering, favouring line and outline, which both structure and evoke the qualities of the subject as well as referring to the process of creation through brush strokes; and selected European techniques, shading and perspective, which define surface, dimensionality, and position in space, but conceal the creative process.⁴²

This is certainly also true for the V&A scroll. One further aspect closely related to the stylistic hybridity of the *Guwantu*, however, is that in the depiction of the objects we can detect an exceptionally high degree of representational accuracy, which allowed for the correct identification of any given object within the collection and even enables us today to match and identify objects from the scroll dispersed in different museums and collections worldwide. The insistence on accuracy in depicting and identifying a single object by the crackle of its glaze, the colour gradients in the patina of an ancient ritual bronze, or the texture, grain or pattern of wooden objects or such made of rock is based on the Chinese concept of ‘writing life’ or ‘drawing from life’. This naturalistic style, known as *xiesheng* (寫生) in traditional Chinese art, is a distinctive approach that emphasises the realistic portrayal of the natural world. In this tradition, which developed during the Tang dynasty (618–906) and was deeply influenced by Daoist notions of nature, artists aim to capture the essence and form of their subjects with meticulous attention to detail. This style often involves the study and observation of real-life objects, plants, animals and landscapes, and had a particular influence on the genre of ‘flower-and-bird painting’ (*huaniaohua* 花鳥畫).⁴³ Artists carefully render these elements with precision, striving for accuracy in proportions, textures and colours. One of the fundamental principles of *xiesheng* is the cultivation of a keen sense of observation. Artists spend extensive time studying their subjects, often through direct observation or sketching in outdoor settings. This

⁴⁰ McCausland, ‘The Emperor’s Old Toys’, 72.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Liu Jie, *Tangdai huaniaohua yanjiu* (Beijing, 2013).

practice allows them to understand the intricate nuances and subtleties of the natural world, which they then translate onto their canvases or scrolls. The use of traditional Chinese painting materials, such as ink and watercolours as we can see in the scroll, is integral to *xiesheng*. Ink wash techniques, which involve diluting ink to create varying shades and tones, are commonly employed to capture the subtleties of light and shadow. This technique allows artists to achieve a sense of depth and three-dimensionality in their works that brings the true nature of the depicted scenes and objects to life. This devotion to faithful representation coincides with the growing interest of early Qing historians, antiquarians and collectors in ‘evidential scholarship’ and in the study of ancient objects as historical sources and material residues of the past. Together with European modes of representation and painting techniques that produced individual portraits of each depicted object instead of mere typologies, the *Guwantu* and their hybrid style of painting stand as an example of art production during the Yongzheng reign.

Yongzheng as collector

Following the decline of the Northern Song Dynasty in 1127 until the end of the Ming dynasty, pursuits like antiquarian studies and the collecting of historical artefacts did not hold significant sway in intellectual circles. Nonetheless, a pivotal shift occurred during the Ming–Qing transition, spurred by the philological reform movement of the era. This transformation, from philosophical speculation to the more empirical and evidence-based approach of ‘evidential scholarship’, rekindled interest in proto-archaeological studies, antiquarianism and collecting. This intellectual reorientation prevailed well into Yongzheng’s reign. ‘Evidential scholarship’ challenged the conventional reliance on textual analyses in the study of Chinese history and instead advocated a heightened emphasis on tangible historical remnants as crucial components of scholarly inquiry.

In this climate, Yongzheng emerged as the first Qing emperor systematically to amass an art collection, taking a personal interest in expanding and enriching its holdings.⁴⁴ Deeply influenced by Confucian values and traditions, the emperor underscored the significance of scholarship and the preservation of cultural heritage. His appreciation for the arts was not merely a personal inclination, but an integral element of his vision for a prosperous and harmonious reign.

Upon closer examination of the objects depicted in the *Guwantu* series, it becomes evident that the art collections of Yongzheng were remarkably diverse, encompassing a wide range of artistic mediums and styles. His interests extended to porcelain, ceramics, jade carvings, and various other decorative arts. Particularly noteworthy, however, was his fondness of ancient bronzes, which held profound cultural and historical significance within Chinese tradition.

⁴⁴ Paola Demattè, ‘Emperors and Scholars: Collecting Culture and Late Imperial Antiquarianism’, in *Collecting China: The World, China, and a History of Collecting*, ed. Vimalin Rujivacharakul (Newark, NJ, 2011), 165–75 (p. 171).

Bronze casting in China can be traced back over three millennia, establishing it as one of the oldest and most venerated artistic traditions in Chinese culture. During the Shang (approximately 1600–1046 BCE) and Zhou (approximately 1046–256 BCE) dynasties, bronze objects held immense cultural, ritual and symbolic importance. They were employed in various ceremonial contexts and often bore inscriptions of dedicatory texts. The practice of emperors collecting bronzes originated with the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) and persisted through subsequent dynasties. Emperors viewed the preservation and acquisition of bronzes not merely as a personal pastime, but as a means to connect with the esteemed heritage of their predecessors, affirming legitimacy and demonstrating a deep respect for tradition.⁴⁵

The Qing dynasty, led by the Manchu ethnic group, was characterized by its cultural amalgamation, blending elements of Manchu, Mongol and Han Chinese traditions. This period was marked by a resurgence of traditional Chinese arts, encompassing painting, calligraphy, ceramics and, notably, bronzes. Yongzheng's fascination with bronzes can be interpreted as part of a general renaissance of traditional Chinese arts during the early Qing dynasty. The collection of bronzes, emblematic of ancient Chinese craftsmanship and artistic excellence, served as a means of re-establishing a connection with the rich cultural legacy of China's past. Yongzheng's collection of bronzes was not merely a personal indulgence, but a manifestation of his authority and an affirmation of the dynasty's rightful inheritance of China's ancient cultural heritage.

Unlike his father, who collected books for educational reasons and to maintain the court's traditional role as a centre of (Confucian) scholarship, and his son, who became a mega-collector for the purpose of demonstrating imperial grandeur and universal power, the Yongzheng emperor was a true connoisseur of art and antiquities who was intensely involved with his collections and took a personal interest in their care and documentation.⁴⁶

Like his ill-fated predecessor Song emperor Huizong, Yongzheng was determined to accumulate a collection of the finest examples of Chinese cultural production from earliest times up until his day. Like Huizong, he not only found aesthetic pleasure in his collections, but shared the distinctive antiquarian and scholarly interest of his contemporaries in objects of the past. Unlike his predecessor, however, the Yongzheng emperor was not only an aesthete who spent a good amount of time and resources on his collections, but a shrewd and perspicacious politician who invested in his collections of 'ancient playthings' as political capital that propped up a distinct political programme of legitimising his and his dynasty's rule over the empire. In this context, the *Guwantu* not only function as an 'illustrated inventory' but represent a form of visual documentation of the collected artefacts, serving as object-related

⁴⁵ Lothar von Falkenhausen, 'Antiquarianism in East Asia. A Preliminary Overview', in *World Antiquarianism. Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Alain Schnapp (Los Angeles, 2013), 35–66.

⁴⁶ Lu Wei 卢葳, 'Painting a Portrait from a Collection: The Yongzheng Emperor's Views on Art as seen in the *Guwantu*', *Zhongguo shoucang*, 9 (2008), 50–1.

cultural representations and expressions of the collector's 'care' for his objects and his deep attachment to and entanglement with them.⁴⁷

Commensurately, the emperor had his collectibles painted as intricate and naturalistic portraits that account for the individuality and biographical value of each item. As representations of both the empires' historical and cultural production as well as the emperor's cultural prerogative and authority of interpretation over this culture, the objects depicted in the *Guwantu* interact with the viewer as 'agents',⁴⁸ forming complex networks of historical and cultural affirmation.⁴⁹ These networks in turn mediate the ontological aspects of the objects and emphasise their performative, constructive and constitutive powers in view of their role as material evidence of the past.

Throughout Chinese history, the material aspect of rulership, including the possession and use of sacred or symbolically significant objects reserved exclusively for the ruler, has played a significant role.⁵⁰ Thus, as physical embodiments of 'tianxia' (天下, 'all under heaven'), a central aspect of the Chinese concept of world, empire and authority, these objects illustrate the different cultural traditions and practices within the empire through their material, historical, biographical and aesthetic properties. It is, thus, safe to assume that Yongzheng, through his careful selection and possession of a thoroughly curated collection of objects functioning as cultural representatives, saw himself as the supreme scholar and guardian of his empire's culture and history.

The *Guwantu* can therefore be seen as a representation of the Chinese cultural cosmos, an ordered system that closely corresponds to the era name chosen by the emperor, Yongzheng, meaning 'harmonious order'.⁵¹ It is this harmonious order that the emperor, as the 'son of heaven' (tianzi 天子), had to maintain in order to rule over the empire by virtue of the 'heavenly mandate' (tianming 天命) that invested him with the power and legitimacy to rule. Through his symbolic command over the things of the world represented in the *Guwantu* and the associated power of order, as a collector the ruler gains access to the forces of the cosmos. Far from being a mere pastime, the emperor's collections and the *Guwantu* as a means of documentation and communication are symbolic of the preservation of the empire and its historical and cultural foundations that he sought to uphold during his reign.

Conclusion

The *Guwantu* as an illustrated inventory of the art collections of the Yongzheng emperor represent an outstanding example of early Qing-period collection documentation, while at the same time offering an insight into the emperor's collecting practices. Scroll B/C.8-V&A possesses a dual historical significance, originating from imperial possession while also bearing witness to the

⁴⁷ Ian Hodder, *Entangled: An Archaeology of the Relationships between Humans and Things* (Chichester, 2012).

⁴⁸ Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford, 1998).

⁴⁹ Bruno Latour, *Nous n'avons jamais été modernes: essai d'anthropologie symétrique* (Paris, 1991).

⁵⁰ Ledderose, 'Some Observations', 34–6.

⁵¹ McCausland, 'The Emperor's Old Toys', 68.

backdrop of colonial violence in nineteenth-century China, rendering it an invaluable historical document.

As an art connoisseur, collector and adherent of the intellectual tenets of the *kaozheng* movement, but also as an astute ruler, the emperor sought to establish interpretative authority over the biographically rich and precious relics of China's past, ultimately seeking to legitimise his contentious reign. The *Guwantu*, functioning as a registry of the cultural essence of the Chinese empire, played a pivotal role in this pursuit.

Their near-total loss has meant that the *Guwantu* have received only limited scholarly attention so far. This article fills an important lacuna and emphasises their cultural and historical importance in the study of Qing imperial collecting and the cultural politics of the Yongzheng era. The *Guwantu* can be seen as the beginning of a systematic collecting endeavour that the Qianlong emperor, Yongzheng's successor, elevated to its zenith, laying the foundation for the current collections housed in the palace museums of Beijing and Taipei.

The 'Illustrated Inventory of Ancient Playthings' and the collecting strategies employed by the Yongzheng emperor wielded significant influence over Qing art policy until the close of the eighteenth century, and they continue to influence state collecting practices in China up to the present day.

Cite this article: Grimberg P (2024). *Guwantu: The Yongzheng Emperor's (r. 1723–1735) 'Illustrated Inventory of Ancient Playthings' (1729) and Imperial Collecting in Eighteenth Century China. Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0080440124000100>