

# Redefining an imperial collection: problems of modern impositions and interpretations

Nicole T.C. Chiang

## Introduction

In 1924, when Aisin Gioro Puyi, the last emperor of China, was driven out of the imperial palaces, the Republican government formed the Committee for the Disposition of the Qing Imperial Possessions and took a comprehensive inventory of the objects in the Forbidden City.<sup>1</sup> According to the committee's twenty-eight volumes of reports, which were first published in 1925, the Qing court had left more than one million objects including bronzes, jades, ceramics paintings, calligraphy, enamel wares, lacquer wares and many other miscellaneous articles.<sup>2</sup> Although many objects were accumulated by successive Qing rulers, it was the Qianlong emperor who was most responsible for the formation of the former palace riches.

The Qianlong emperor came to the throne in 1736 at the age of twenty-five as the sixth emperor of the Manchu-led Qing dynasty (1644-1911) and abdicated voluntarily sixty years later as a filial act in order not to reign longer than his grandfather, the Kangxi emperor (r. 1662-1722). His reign witnessed the most prosperous time of the Qing dynasty as the economy flourished, the population grew and the territory expanded. In the heyday of the dynasty, his court amassed numerous cultural riches from all over China and beyond.

The huge span of objects gathered together during the reign of the Qianlong emperor has deeply influenced the present understanding of the history of Chinese art. It has been pointed out that 'surviving into museum collections to this day, the enormous store of cultural riches amassed by the Qianlong emperor has sometimes come to seem as if it is Chinese culture, and the material excluded by him has been correspondingly marginalised, or has not been preserved.'<sup>3</sup> The extant objects from

<sup>1</sup> Pinyin romanisation is used in this paper for Chinese unless when citing secondary sources which use other methods of Chinese romanisation. Wherever names can be identified to be of Manchu origin, the romanisation follows the rules regulated in Paul Georg von Möllendorff, *A Manchu Grammar*, Shanghai: American Presbyterian Mission Press, 1892; Committee for the Disposition of the Qing Imperial Possessions: 清室善後委員會 (*Qingshi shanhou weiyuanhui*).

<sup>2</sup> The inventory was republished in 2004, see: Qingshi shanhou weiyuanhui 清室善後委員會, *Gugong wupin diancha baogao* 故宮物品點查報告, 1925, Beijing: Xianzhuang shuju, 2004.

<sup>3</sup> Craig Clunas, 'Picturing Cosmic Grandeur', *The Qianlong Emperor: Treasures from the Forbidden City*, Edinburgh: National Museum of Scotland, 2002, 15.

the Qianlong court have had a long-standing impact on the formation of knowledge and connoisseurship of Chinese art as a scholarly discipline.

Present scholarship is built on the presumption that there was a single, readily definable imperial collection which contained a monumental amalgamation of objects of art assembled by the Qianlong emperor, whose ambition was to possess all categories of objects and declare his legitimacy as the supreme ruler by establishing his image as the owner of the greatest collection in Chinese history.<sup>4</sup> This presumption has been taken for granted and has never been questioned before. However, the present view of the collection does not take into account that the phrase 'imperial art collection' contains many notions that are of European origin and may not be a very precise description for the objects actually collected at the Qing imperial court in eighteenth-century China.

This paper will challenge the assumed popular identity of the so-called Qianlong imperial art collection, which will be argued, has been constructed largely with modern Eurocentric views. By applying philological and historiographical analysis, the paper intends to re-establish the definition and description of the actual collection in its original context. It will be demonstrated that the collection was not necessarily an assemblage of works of art and that it was not as monumental as previously assumed. In addition, the paper includes a discussion of how the perception of objects accumulated by the Qing imperial court as one entity was formed in the early twentieth century. It will be argued that it was the financial pressure faced by the Qing imperial household and the rise of nationalism that contributed to the disappearance of the boundary between collectibles and non-collectibles. Overall, this paper will challenge the 'canon' that has been constituted around the collection after the twentieth century and provide an alternative view towards imperial collecting and objects assembled in the eighteenth-century Chinese imperial court.

<sup>4</sup> There are numerous studies related to the subject. Only a selected few are referenced here as examples: Fong Weng and James C.Y. Watt, eds, *Possessing the Past: Treasures from the National Palace Museum, Taipei*, New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1996; Feng Ming-chu 馮明珠, ed, *Qianlong huangdi de wenhua daye 乾隆皇帝的文化大業 (Emperor Ch'ien-lung's Grand Cultural Enterprise)*, Taipei: National Palace Museum, 2002; Jessica Rawson and Evelyn Rawski, eds, *China: The Three Emperors, 1662-1795*, London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2005. Harold L. Kahn, 'A Matter of Taste: The Monumental and Exotic in the Qianlong Reign', *The Elegant Brush: Chinese Painting under the Qianlong Emperor 1735-1795*, Phoenix, AZ: Phoenix Art Museum, 1985, 288-302; Michèle Pirazzoli-t'Serstevens, 'La collection impériale sous Yongzheng (1723-1735) et Qianlong (1736-1795), son impact sur la création artistique et sur l'histoire de l'art chinois', *Autour des collections d'art en Chine au XVIIIe siècle*, Genève: Librairie Droz, 2008, 3-27; Rosemary E. Scott, 'The Chinese Imperial Collections', *Collecting Chinese Art: Interpretation and Display*, Colloquies on Art and Archaeology in Asia no.20, London: SOAS, Percival David Foundation, 2000, 19-32.

**Reinstating the meaning of 'art'**

What defines a work of art has been an ongoing debate in the modern Western world. It has been suggested that a work of art is an aesthetic object that possesses distinctive expressive and symbolic properties which can stimulate viewers and be perceived by spectators.<sup>5</sup> It also has been argued that a work of art is not the physical object itself but the specific pattern of colour, line, tone, mass and texture it presents.<sup>6</sup> An object could also be identified as a work of art by examining the bond between the original intention of the artist, the final product and its historical context. In other words, something is art if it was or has been intended to be regarded as art.<sup>7</sup> A work of art may not even be a tangible object but the act or the process of expressing one's emotions.<sup>8</sup> There seems to be no conclusive answer to whether a work of art is a physical object, an abstract entity or something that only exists in the mental experience of an artist or a viewer. Anything could seem to be turned into a work of art.

The modern Western understanding of fine art, however, is a modern invention that has a history of barely two hundred years. Larry Shiner argues in his book *The Invention of Art* that the line between art and craft was drawn during the eighteenth century as a result of key social transformations in Europe. Before the eighteenth century, the English word 'art', derived from the Latin *ars* and Greek *techne*, signified any human activity performed with skill and the opposite of art was not craft but nature. However, after what Shiner calls 'the Great Division' in the eighteenth century, the universality of the modern European idea of art as 'fine art' as opposed to 'craft' has been taken for granted and applied to all people and periods of time.<sup>9</sup>

Similarly, what has been written about the supposed imperial art collection or Chinese art in general is often predicated on the assumed Eurocentric meaning for the word 'art'. Craig Clunas has pointed out that 'Chinese art is a quite recent invention, not much more than a hundred years old' and it was created in the nineteenth century in Europe and North America to allow 'statements to be made about, and values to be ascribed to, a range of types of objects.'<sup>10</sup> Before the nineteenth century, painting, sculpture ceramics and calligraphy were not grouped together as objects 'constituting part of the same field of inquiry'.<sup>11</sup> Despite Clunas's warning, what the equivalent word for 'art' in Chinese meant in eighteenth-century China has not been properly investigated, and how objects that may be described as

<sup>5</sup> Monroe C. Beardsley, *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism*, Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co., 1981; Monroe C. Beardsley, *The Aesthetic Point of View*, Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 1982.

<sup>6</sup> Eddy Zemach, 'No Identification without Evaluation'. *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 26: 1986, 239-251.

<sup>7</sup> Jerrold Levinson, *Contemplating Art: Essays in Aesthetics*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006.

<sup>8</sup> Robin George Collingwood, *The Principles of Art*, London: Oxford University Press, 1958.

<sup>9</sup> Larry Shiner, *The Invention of Art: A Cultural History*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2001.

<sup>10</sup> Craig Clunas, *Art in China*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, 9.

<sup>11</sup> Clunas, *Art in China*: 9.

works of art today were actually perceived prior to the nineteenth century has not been examined either. Thus the modern concept of 'Chinese art' continues to affect our perception of the so-called Qianlong imperial collection as an agglomeration of works of art.

In modern-day Chinese, two terms are generally translated to the English word 'art' or 'arts'. *Meishu*,<sup>12</sup> which normally refers more specifically to 'fine arts' or 'visual arts', was not used in eighteenth-century China. It was a late nineteenth century adoption of the Japanese word *bijutsu* which was itself a translation from the French word *beaux-arts*, thus bringing it back to the European origins of the concept of fine art.<sup>13</sup> The other term *yishu*,<sup>14</sup> in modern Chinese, refers not only to fine art but also the broader discipline of all arts. The latter term, unlike *meishu*, has been used in the Chinese language for centuries. Nevertheless, its meaning in classical Chinese in fact has a very similar meaning to the Western understanding of art before the Great Division, namely human activities performed with skill. For example, *The Collected Statutes of the Great Ming* states: '[The Ministry of Rites] must have knowledge of who may possess the skills (*yishu*) in astronomy, geography, medicine, divination and music in order to recruit them when necessary.'<sup>15</sup> This meaning remained unchanged in the early Qing period. *The Kangxi Dictionary*, compiled in 1716 under imperial auspices, defines the character *yi* as ability, talent, or endowment. In the annotation, the dictionary also clearly identifies *yi* as 'the six skills', which are the skills in performing rites, music, archery, charioting, calligraphy, divination and mathematics.<sup>16</sup> The second character *shu*, is identified as 'technical' skills.<sup>17</sup> The term *yishu* in China prior to the nineteenth century, therefore, used to have a meaning closer to the notion of art as in 'the art of medicine' or 'the art of archery' rather than 'fine art' in the English language.

As demonstrated above, when using the term 'art' with the modern notion of 'fine art' and applying it to the objects of Chinese art from the past, we risk reading contemporary Western interpretations into eighteenth-century Chinese society, and this can be misleading. It is necessary, therefore, to reinstate how the Qianlong emperor and his contemporaries might have viewed and described the objects that would be referred to as 'works of art' today, before it is possible to start defining what the imperial 'art' collection was.

<sup>12</sup> *Meishu*: 美術

<sup>13</sup> For issues relating Chinese terms adopted from Japanese in the nineteenth century, see: Xong Yuezhi 熊月之, *Xixuedongjian yu wanqing shehui* 西學東漸與晚清社會, Shanghai: Shanghai Renmin chubanshe, 1994.

<sup>14</sup> *Yishu*: 藝術

<sup>15</sup> 一凡天文、地理、醫藥、卜筮、師巫、音樂等項藝術之人，本部務要備知以憑取用。 See: Xu Pu 徐溥 (1428-1499) et al, eds, *Ming hui dian* 明會典 in *Si ku quan shu* 四庫全書, 95 juan 卷; English translations of Chinese texts are by the author unless noted otherwise.

<sup>16</sup> Ability, talent, or endowment: 才能 (*caineng*); The six skills: 六藝 (*liuyi*); See: 藝 (*yi*) in: Zhang Yushu 張玉書 (1642-1711) et al, eds, *Kangxi zidian* 康熙字典, Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1958.

<sup>17</sup> Technical skills: 技術 (*jishu*). See: 術 (*shu*) in *Kangxi zidian*.

### The perception of various types of objects at the Qianlong court

The most ambitious project for the categorisation and classification of things during the Qianlong reign is the compilation of the *Complete Library of the Four Treasuries*.<sup>18</sup> Compiled under the auspices of the Qianlong emperor, the Library archives the largest collection of books in Chinese history according to categories and orders. The way books about things are categorised in the Library can reveal how things themselves were defined at the time, because through organisation, boundaries are set and hierarchical relationships are established between categories. As a result, examining how various objects are categorised and classified in the Library can provide an insight into how these objects were perceived at the Qing imperial court.

When investigating the Library, it is evident that discussions of objects that might be considered 'works of art' today are not grouped under the same category but dispersed among different disciplines. The Library, comprising over 3,400 titles is arranged into four main sections: Classical Writings, Histories, Philosophical Texts, and Belles-lettres,<sup>19</sup> which themselves are divided into several sub-categories and further broken up into different units. Most of the texts discussing what are considered works of art today are organised under different categories within the section of 'Philosophical Texts.' Books on paintings and calligraphy are grouped as a unit and listed under the category of '*Yishu*,' and books on specific types of implements or utensils, such as bronzes and inkstones, are grouped as a unit listed under the category of 'Catalogues.'<sup>20</sup> Meanwhile, books that discuss both two-dimensional and three-dimensional objects or examine more than one type of implement are listed under the category of 'Miscellaneous Works.'<sup>21</sup> It is evident that the eighteenth-century Qing imperial court did not include paintings, calligraphy and various types of objects that might be called 'works of art' today into the same field of inquiry.

Moreover, it is worth noting what other books are listed alongside the discussions on 'works of art' in order to see the context in which they are categorised. In the category of '*Yishu*,' treatises on music, chess and seal carving are included alongside books on paintings and calligraphy,. In the category of 'Catalogues,' books on food, beverages, herbs, woody plants, insects and marine life are included in addition to books on specific implements and utensils. It is clear that discourses on what may be described as 'works of art' today are in fact grouped together with discussions of various other disciplines.

Furthermore, some books concerning 'works of art' can also be found outside the 'Philosophical Texts' section in what would have been the more revered 'Classical Writing' section. For example, calligraphy, due to its association with the study of writing Chinese characters, seems to enjoy a more elevated status than

<sup>18</sup> Ji Yun 紀昀 (1724-1805) et al, eds, *Si Ku Quan Shu* 四庫全書, Electronic Wenyuange edition, Shanghai and Hong Kong: Shanghai People's Publishing House and Digital Heritage Publishing Ltd., 1999.

<sup>19</sup> Classical Writings: 經 (*Jing*); Histories: 史 (*Shi*); Philosophical Texts: 子 (*Zi*); Belles-lettres: 集 (*Ji*).

<sup>20</sup> The category of Catalogues: 譜錄類 (*Pulu lei*)

<sup>21</sup> The category of Miscellaneous Works: 雜家類 (*Zajia lei*)

other forms of 'art'. It is therefore often listed under the category of 'Lesser Learning' within the section on 'Classical Writing' rather than under the category of 'Yishu' within the 'Philosophical Texts' section.<sup>22</sup> Other texts that are associated with Chinese characters and scripts are also grouped under the 'Classical Writing Section' rather than under the 'Philosophical Texts' Section. For example, the *Twenty Volumes of Inscriptions on Zhong and Ding*,<sup>23</sup> which discusses the inscriptions on bronzes rather than their forms, authenticity and functions, is listed under the category of 'Lesser Learning' within the 'Classical Writing Section'.<sup>24</sup> It is clear that some bronze vessels and calligraphic works were valued for the inscriptions and contents they bore, rather than their forms, materiality, or brushwork. They were categorised separately from objects made of the same materials and techniques due to their association with writing, whereas the modern discipline of art history would most likely discuss them together, as if they belonged to the same field of inquiry in eighteenth century China.

From the categorisation system of the *Complete Library of the Four Treasuries*, it can be concluded that, first of all, the concept of works of art as it is understood in the modern Western world did not exist in eighteenth-century China, or at least it was diluted by, and dispersed within, other disciplines of knowledge. Objects that might be considered works of art today were not perceived as a single discipline or grouped together as a unit in the *Library*. Secondly, there was a hierarchy in the categorisation of objects. 'Works of art', which were discussed side by side with classical texts, various skills and natural sciences, were perceived as a part of the comprehensive knowledge of the universe in eighteenth-century China. Thus, it was the knowledge of the historical references associated with the more esteemed objects that determined their higher status, not their aesthetic or intrinsic value. The collection of the Qing imperial household, therefore, could not have been an art collection, in the way that current scholarship approaches it.

### **Distinguishing possessions of the imperial state and of the imperial household**

Not only is the term 'art' problematic, but also, the use of the word 'imperial' (which pertains to an empire or emperor) without further clarification, as for example,

<sup>22</sup> Lesser Learning: 小學 (*xiaoxue*)

<sup>23</sup> The Twenty Volumes of Inscriptions on Zhong and Ding: 鐘鼎款識二十卷 (*Zhong ding kuanzhi ershi juan*)

<sup>24</sup> The categorisation of the book within the Library is explained by the editors:

欽定四庫全書總目 / 卷四十一

此書雖以鐘鼎款識爲名，然所釋者諸器之文字，非諸器之體製，改隸字書，從其實也。

The General Catalogue of the Complete Library of the Four Treasuries / *juan* 41

Although the title of the book professes to discuss the patterns and inscriptions (*kuanzhi*) on bronze vessels, its content explains only the inscriptions on the vessels rather than their forms and designs. As a result, it is alternatively grouped with books on characters in order to be in accord with its actual subject matter.

See: Ji Yun 紀昀 (1724-1805) et al. eds, *Siku quanshu* 四庫全書.

when used in the phrase 'imperial art collection' in current scholarship. As a result, it has been assumed that there was only one imperial collection and that the emperor possessed all types of objects in the universe. Nevertheless, while large quantities of objects came into the court through different channels, such as commissions, tributes, gifts, confiscations, and purchases, not all of them should be considered as the emperor's personal possessions. The Qing imperial court in fact consciously separated the state's treasury from the emperor's personal vaults. The expression 'imperial' can therefore cause confusion as it is not clear whether the word refers to the imperial state or the imperial household.

During the Ming dynasty, treasuries of the state and the imperial household were not clearly separated. Starting from the time of the first Ming emperor, part of the income of the Board of Revenue was used to cover imperial expenditure.<sup>25</sup> The Wanli emperor (r. 1572-1620) once asked the Board of Revenue for 20,000,000 silver taels when the inner court did not have sufficient money.<sup>26</sup> Towards the end of the Ming dynasty, most of the state income was drained by the expenditures of the imperial household.<sup>27</sup> Learning from the mistakes of the previous dynasty, the Qing imperial court created a clear separation between the treasuries of the state and the imperial household.<sup>28</sup> The treasury of the state was looked after by the Board of Revenue and the finances of the imperial household were managed by the Privy Purse of the Imperial Household Department.<sup>29</sup> Although in reality the Imperial Household Department and the Board of Revenue sometimes exchanged funds,<sup>30</sup> ideologically, state finances were separated from the emperor's, which is an important distinction not normally acknowledged in research on the supposed 'imperial' collection. To avoid confusion, it is necessary to investigate the sources of objects that came into the imperial court. Therefore, the following texts will examine commissions, tributes and gifts, confiscations and purchases as sources of acquisitions and clarify whether the acquired objects went to the treasury of the imperial state or the emperor's personal vaults.

## Commissions

Works commissioned for the emperor and for the state were in fact presided over by different administrative agencies and were paid for by different financial bodies. Many commissioned pieces produced by the imperial workshops should therefore be seen as possessions of the state rather than the personal belongings of the

<sup>25</sup> The Board of Revenue: 戶部 (*Hubu*); English translations of all Chinese official titles in the paper are from: Charles O. Hucker, *A Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China*, Beijing: Peking University Press, 2008; Qi Meiqin 祁美琴, *Qingdai neiwufu* 清代內務府, Shenyang: Liaoning mingzhu chubanshe, 2008, 11.

<sup>26</sup> Qi, *Qingdai neiwufu*, 11.

<sup>27</sup> Qi, *Qingdai neiwufu*, 11.

<sup>28</sup> Qi, *Qingdai neiwufu*, 11, 104-105.

<sup>29</sup> Privy Purse: 內庫 (*Neiku*)

<sup>30</sup> Preston M. Torbert, *The Ch'ing Imperial Household Department: A Study of its Organization and Principal Functions, 1662-1796*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1977, 127-129; Qi, *Qingdai neiwufu*, 105-108.

emperor. It is a very important distinction which has significant implications for the study of 'imperial' objects.

During the Qing dynasty, when commissioning objects for state affairs, the Board of Works would be in charge of the tasks.<sup>31</sup> The Court of Imperial Sacrifices,<sup>32</sup> an office subordinate to the Board of Rites that was responsible for the conduct of major state sacrificial ceremonies, would provide the patterns, colours and numbers of utensils that were required.<sup>33</sup> The Board of Revenue would pay for production costs.<sup>34</sup> For example, the commissioning of various types of porcelain utensils used for the Altars of Heaven, Earth, Sun and Moon would follow this procedure. These were perceived as properties of the state rather than of the emperor. As for objects required by the inner court, they would be produced following the instructions given by the Imperial Household Department and paid for by the Privy Purse. There is a clear distinction between the procedures of commissioning objects required by the state and by the imperial household. In addition, they were paid for and managed by entirely different administrative units. Therefore, objects commissioned for the imperial state should not be confused with the emperor's possessions and should not be seen as part of the collection of the imperial household.

### Tributes and Gifts

Part of the emperor's personal fortune came from tributes. It has been a custom since antiquity that regional leaders should present local specialties as tribute gifts to the monarch on a regular basis.<sup>35</sup> Throughout the Qing dynasty, provinces and territories within the Qing domain generally presented tribute gifts to the court either two or three times a year according to the nature of local products.<sup>36</sup> In addition to routine tributes from provinces and territories, Imperial Manufactures, Salt Commissioners and Customs were expected to procure rare gifts and present them to the emperor annually.<sup>37</sup> Apart from large numbers of provisions, such as tea, herbal medicine, fruits and game, local crafts were also presented, including textiles, fans, bronze mirrors, brushes and other handiworks.<sup>38</sup> After the Qianlong emperor conquered Xinjiang, four thousand *jin*, or approximately two thousand kilograms, of jade were presented as tribute gifts to the court each year.<sup>39</sup>

Officials would also present annual gifts to the emperor on his birthday and during the New Year, as well as various festivals and occasions. For example, when

<sup>31</sup> The Board of Works:工部 (*Gong bu*)

<sup>32</sup> The Court of Imperial Sacrifices: 太常寺(*Taichangsi*)

<sup>33</sup> The Board of Rites:禮部 (*Li bu*)

<sup>34</sup> Wang Guangyao 王光堯, *Zhongguo gudai guanyao zhidu* 中國古代官窯制度, Beijing: Forbidden City Publishing House, 2004, 149.

<sup>35</sup> Qi, *Qingdai neiwufu*, 125.

<sup>36</sup> Qi, *Qingdai neiwufu*, 125.

<sup>37</sup> Imperial Manufactures: 織造 (*Zhizao*); Salt Commissioners: 鹽政 (*Yanzheng*); Customs 海關 (*Haiguan*); Qi, *Qingdai neiwufu*, 128.

<sup>38</sup> Qi, *Qingdai neiwufu*, 125-127.

<sup>39</sup> Qi, *Qingdai neiwufu*, 127.

the emperor made an inspection tour to Shandong province in the spring of 1776, local officials presented over one thousand items, including textiles, jewellery, snuff bottles, turquoise belt buckles and cloisonné thumb rings.<sup>40</sup> Sometimes gifts were simply offered to express the official's gratitude for the emperor's favours. For example, the handscroll *Along the River during the Qingming Festival* by Zhang Zeduan (1085-1145) was presented to the emperor by one of his favourite officials Shen Deqian (1673-1769).<sup>41</sup>

Tribute gifts presented by foreign envoys had also been considered as a part of the emperor's personal fortune since the Tang dynasty (618-907).<sup>42</sup> Soon after the Qing conquest in 1644, the Residence for Foreign Tributary Envoys was requested to make a report on the goods brought by foreign diplomats to the Board of Rites and then transferred them to the Imperial Household Department.<sup>43</sup> Apart from minor exceptions, such as elephants, sulphur and some cumbersome tribute goods, which were forwarded to provincial treasuries, all tributes became the emperor's personal possessions throughout the eighteenth century.<sup>44</sup>

It is worth noting that, contrary to the belief that the Qianlong emperor wished to claim monumentality and universality, he did not always accept everything presented to him. The emperor decreed a halt to the presentation of eagles and peonies in 1738 and 1764 respectively.<sup>45</sup> In 1792, he also decreed that bronzes from Yunnan and leather goods from Guizhou should no longer be presented to the court.<sup>46</sup> Sometimes, the number of tribute gifts was so large that it exceeded the needs of the imperial household and the emperor would call for a decrease in the quantity to be offered. For instance, in 1792, there were over 20,000 brushes stored at the Hall of Diligence.<sup>47</sup> The emperor consequently instructed the Zhejiang province to reduce the number of brushes sent to him from 1509 to 750 per year.<sup>48</sup>

The Qianlong emperor declined gifts from officials as well. For example, in 1780, when the emperor was about to turn seventy, he decreed that no birthday gifts from tributary states would be accepted and local provinces should only present gifts following annual conventions. Despite the order, Zheng Dajin (1709-1782), the Governor of Hubei province offered excessive gifts including many gold utensils and one thousand gold taels. The emperor only kept one gold vessel for the

<sup>40</sup> Qi, *Qingdai neiwufu*, 129.

<sup>41</sup> David Ake Sensabaugh, 'Suitable for Sons and Grandsons: the Qing Emperors and the Imperial Collection of Calligraphy and Painting'. *The Last Emperor's Collection: Masterpieces of Painting and Calligraphy from the Liaoning Provincial Museum*, New York: China Institute Gallery, 2008, 22.

<sup>42</sup> Torbet, *The Ch'ing Imperial Household Department*, 121.

<sup>43</sup> The Residence for Foreign Tributary Envoys: 會同館 (*Huitong guan*); Torbet, *The Ch'ing Imperial Household Department*, 121.

<sup>44</sup> Torbet, *The Ch'ing Imperial Household Department*, 121-123.

<sup>45</sup> Qi, *Qingdai neiwufu*, 126.

<sup>46</sup> Qi, *Qingdai neiwufu*, 126.

<sup>47</sup> Hall of Diligence: 懋勤殿 (*Maoqing dian*)

<sup>48</sup> Qi, *Qingdai neiwufu*, 126.

Panchen Lama and returned everything else.<sup>49</sup> In fact, the emperor was not at all impressed by the extravagance, and actually issued an order to rebuke Zheng Dajin for the lavishness.<sup>50</sup>

In addition, it should be noted that not everyone had the privilege of presenting tributes and gifts. Only officials with certain ranks or status were allowed to do so.<sup>51</sup> When an official with a low rank from Xinjiang presented some jades to the emperor in 1764, the gifts were not immediately accepted and had to be reported to the emperor for his approval, as the behaviour was not normally considered appropriate.<sup>52</sup> Furthermore, when officials who had the honour to present gifts made mistakes, this privilege could be taken away. For example in 1782, Bi Yuan (1730-1797), Governor of Shaanxi province, was stripped of the privilege for life because he did not deal with a corruption case properly.<sup>53</sup> To the emperor, presentations of tributes and gifts was a method of creating loyalty and a sense of honour among officials rather than a channel to obtain 'everything under the sun', as it were.

Large numbers of tributes or unsuitable gifts were not always desired or deemed as proper. While the presentation of tributes and gifts was a way for officials to curry favour with the emperor, this approach did not always succeed, as the emperor often declined gifts and even rebuked officials who went over the top. Moreover, the most important function of the tribute system was not to acquire objects but to generate fidelity to the emperor among officials within what was clearly a very tricky system.

## Confiscations

During the Qianlong reign, a number of officials were charged with various felonies and their assets were confiscated.<sup>54</sup> Confiscated items were always either forwarded to the Imperial Household Department or to the Gate of Veneration of Literature,<sup>55</sup> which was responsible for taxing goods coming into the capital and managed by

<sup>49</sup> Wei Meiyue 魏美月, 'Qianlong huangdi de jiazhi guan yu rugong de ruguan wenwu 乾隆皇帝的價值觀與入宮的入宮文物', *Gugon wenwu yuekan* 故宮文物月刊 (*The National Palace Museum Monthly of Chinese Art*). vol.16, no.5, 1998, 121.

<sup>50</sup> First Historical Archives of China, eds, '11<sup>th</sup> day, 8<sup>th</sup> month, 45<sup>th</sup> year of the Qianlong reign (1780)', *Qianlong chao shangyu dang* 乾隆朝上諭檔, Beijing: Dang'an chubanshe, 1998.

<sup>51</sup> For qualifications to present tribute gifts, see: Dong Jianzhong 董建中, 'Qing Qianlong chao wanggong dacheng guanyuan jingong wenti chutan 清乾隆朝王公大臣官員進貢問題初探', *Qingshi yanjiu* 清史研究, vol.1, 1996, 40-41.

<sup>52</sup> Dong, 'Qing Qianlong chao wanggong dacheng guanyuan jingong wenti chutan', 41.

<sup>53</sup> National Palace Museum, eds, 'Palace memorial by Min Queyuan (閔鵲元), 29<sup>th</sup> day, 1<sup>st</sup> month, 47<sup>th</sup> year of the Qianlong reign (1782)', *Gongzhongdang Qianlong chao zouzhe* 宮中檔乾隆朝奏摺, Taipei: National Palace Museum, 1982-1986.

<sup>54</sup> Yu Bingkun 俞炳坤, Zhang Shucui 張書才 and the First Historical Archives of China, eds, *Qianlong chao chengban tanwu dang'an xuanbian* 乾隆朝懲辦貪污檔案選編, Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1994.

<sup>55</sup> Gate of Veneration of Literature: 崇文門 (*Chongwen men*)

officials of the Imperial Household Department.<sup>56</sup> The Imperial Household Department was responsible for making inventories of confiscated items and sometimes sold and converted them into cash with the help of the 'Gate of Veneration of Literature.'<sup>57</sup> Confiscated items were therefore considered a part of the emperor's personal fortune and were never managed by the Board of Revenue.<sup>58</sup>

It has been suggested that the Qianlong emperor confiscated officials' properties in order to increase his own assets.<sup>59</sup> However, the emperor did not seem to confiscate someone's properties with the specific intention to acquire particular works. Indeed, the emperor was not always aware of what his officials possessed. For example, Gao Pu (?-1778), who was the Grand Minister Superintendent of Yarkand, Xinjiang, was charged with corruption in 1778.<sup>60</sup> He was sentenced to death and his property was confiscated. While the officials were making an inventory of the confiscated items, they discovered that Gao Pu owned many fine-quality jade bowls. After reading the inventory, the emperor was upset and wrote an imperial order: 'Gao Pu had only presented nine works of jade each time and they were quite ordinary. It turned out that he kept and hid the fine ones in [his] household. From this fact alone it could be seen that he had no moral conscience whatsoever.'<sup>61</sup> The passage shows that the emperor had no idea that Gao Pu possessed so many fine-quality jade bowls prior to the confiscation of his property. In fact, the tone of the imperial order seemed to suggest that the emperor believed it was an ethical thing for his officials to present the best items to him automatically.

Sometimes the emperor was aware of what his officials possessed but he did not confiscate their properties simply to incorporate their collections into the imperial household. For example, in 1781, Wang Danwang (?-1781), who was at the time the Governor of Zhejiang province, was found guilty of corruption and his assets were confiscated. A year later, the confiscated items arrived at Beijing and the emperor issued an imperial decree:

Previously when confiscating the assets of Gao Pu, [within the confiscated items] there was a set of ink rubbings of calligraphy by Mi [Fu] commissioned by Wang Danwang. All inner court officials saw it. This set of ink rubbings was [produced] from inscribed steles, which must have been preserved... The whereabouts of the steles of Mi's calligraphy has to be precisely located.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>56</sup> Qi, *Qingdai neiwufu*, 131.

<sup>57</sup> Qi, *Qingdai neiwufu*, 131.

<sup>58</sup> Qi, *Qingdai neiwufu*, 130-132.

<sup>59</sup> Qi, *Qingdai neiwufu*, 130-132.

<sup>60</sup> For a concise study of the case, see: Torbet, *The Ch'ing Imperial Household Department*, 136-171.

<sup>61</sup> 高樸每次所進玉器不過九件，又俱甚平常，今乃以佳者留藏家內，即此一端亦可見其天良盡喪矣。See: Yu, Zhang, and the First Historical Archives of China, eds, '20<sup>th</sup> day, 9<sup>th</sup> month, 43<sup>rd</sup> year of the Qianlong reign (1778)', *Qianlong chao chengban tanwu dang'an xuanbian*.

<sup>62</sup> 從前查抄高樸家產內，有王宜望所刻米帖墨搨一種，內廷諸臣皆所共見，此種墨搨必有刻石留存... 所有米帖石刻現在何處收藏務得實在下落。See: Yu, Zhang, and the First Historical

This passage shows that the emperor had been aware that Wang Danwang possessed the steles at least since 1778 but he had not confiscated his property at that time. In addition, the reason why the emperor was interested in the steles was that he suspected the officials responsible for carrying out the confiscation were substituting low-quality items for high-quality ones in order to make profits on the side. In the same decree, the emperor explained:

Wang Danwang had paid special attention to the collecting of ancient playthings, paintings and calligraphy. Of the objects he used to present [to the court], some had not been properly appreciated and were better than [objects presented by] others. Items from the confiscation of Wang Danwang's assets last year were mostly repulsive. According to the investigation by Šengju, it appears that [objects] have been substituted. This needs to be properly scrutinised.<sup>63</sup>

Three hundred and sixty steles were eventually discovered in Zhejiang. A local official thought they were worthless stones and decided to sell them rather than sending them to Beijing, which was totally legal under Qing court regulations. However, the emperor's suspicion was valid. Other officials were indeed substituting gold, jades, calligraphic works and various other types of objects. These officials were all dismissed from office.<sup>64</sup>

While confiscated objects were considered the possessions of the imperial household and were handled by the Imperial Household Department, the Qianlong emperor did not seem to confiscate his officials' properties because he lusted after their collections. From the case of Gao Pu, it can be seen that the emperor did not always know what the officials possessed. As for the case of Wang Danwang, it is clear that the emperor's primary concern was maladministration and corruption rather than the acquisition of objects.

## Purchases

There are few extant records of the emperor's purchases.<sup>65</sup> However, it is clear that a major acquisition of a thousand scrolls from the collection of An Qi (1683-1745 or 1746) was completed in 1746 with the help of the emperor's brother-in-law Fuheng (1720-1770).<sup>66</sup> It is also known that for the *Wuyongshi* version of the *Dwelling in the*

---

Archives of China, eds '16<sup>th</sup> day, 9<sup>th</sup> month, 47<sup>th</sup> year of the Qianlong reign (1782)', *Qianlong chao chengban tanwu dang'an xuanbian*.

<sup>63</sup> 王亶望平日收藏古玩字畫等物最為留心，其從前呈進各件未經賞收者尚較他人為優。乃昨歲查抄王亶望家產內多不堪入目之物，現經盛住查奏，顯有抽換隱匿情弊，自應嚴切徹底根究。See: Yu, Zhang, and the First Historical Archives of China, eds, '16<sup>th</sup> day, 9<sup>th</sup> month, 47<sup>th</sup> year of the Qianlong reign (1782)', *Qianlong chao chengban tanwu dang'an xuanbian*.

<sup>64</sup> Wei, 'Qianlong huangdi de jiazhiguan yu rugong de ruguan wenwu', 125-127.

<sup>65</sup> The emperor's purchases may have been well documented, by these records did not survive. Alternatively, they could still be buried somewhere in the First Historical Archives or the Palace Museum.

<sup>66</sup> Sensabaugh, 'Suitable for Sons and Grandsons', 22.

*Fuchun Mountains* alone, the emperor paid two thousand taels.<sup>67</sup> This is a rare case in which when the cost of a handscroll is known, as the emperor inscribed the actual purchase price on the painting. Furthermore, based on the *Archives of the Imperial Workshops*,<sup>68</sup> there is evidence in support of the fact that the emperor purchased objects such as jade through someone named Yang Qiyun, who was possibly an art dealer working in Beijing.<sup>69</sup>

The common view of current scholarship, which generally sees objects coming into the Qing imperial court through all channels as the personal possessions of the emperor, is in fact inaccurate. It fails to acknowledge that Qing court regulations consciously kept a certain separation between the treasuries of the state and the imperial household, and that objects acquired from different sources were paid for or managed by different administrative units. As demonstrated above, objects commissioned and purchased by the Imperial Household Department, as well as tributes, gifts and confiscated items were considered the emperor's possessions and were handled by the Imperial Household Department. However, objects commissioned and purchased by the outer court were seen as the possession of the imperial state and were managed mostly by the Board of Works and the Board of Rites. They were not part of the personal possession of the emperor and should be excluded from the discussion of the collection of the imperial household.

### Examining the Term 'Collection'

If the terms 'art' and 'imperial' can be understood as problematic, the word 'collection' also deserves closer examination. It has been proposed that 'collecting comes to mean collecting precisely when a series of haphazard purchases or gifts suddenly becomes a meaningful sequence.'<sup>70</sup> A collection therefore is not formed when objects come into one's possession but when a specific group of items are assembled together with meaning or intention. Although large numbers of objects flooded into the vaults of the Qianlong emperor in various ways, in most cases, the emperor simply retained them but did not actively collect them. What are preserved in museums and private hands today are twenty-first-century collections.

<sup>67</sup> Ho Chuan-hsing 何傳馨, ed, *Shanshui hebi: Huang Gongwang yu Fuchun shanju tu tezhan* 山水合璧: 黃公望與富春山居圖特展 (*Huang Gongwang and Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains*), Taipei: National Palace Museum, 2011, 26.

<sup>68</sup> *Archives of the Imperial Workshops: 內務府造辦處各作成作活計清檔 (Neisufu zaobanchu gezuo chengzuo huoji qingdang)*. Part of the archives has been published. See: First Historical Archives of China and the Art Museum and Chinese University of Hong Kong, eds, *Qinggong neiwufu zaobanchu dang'an zonghui* 清宮內務府造辦處檔案總匯, Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 2005.

<sup>69</sup> Chi Jo-hsin 嵇若昕, 'Cong 'huojidang' kan Yong Qian liangchao de neiting qiwu yishu guwen 從<<活計檔>>看雍乾兩朝的內廷器物藝術顧問 (The Advisors for Decorative Art to Emperor Yuan-chen and Emperor Ch'ien-lung: Based on the Artisans of the Imperial Workshops)', *Dongwu lishi xuebao* 東吳歷史學報 (*Soochow Journal of History*), vol.16, 2006, 87-90.

<sup>70</sup> Mieke Bal, 'Telling Objects: A Narrative Perspective on Collecting', *The Cultures of Collecting*, London: Reaktion, 1993, 101.

As such, they are modern creations rather than fragments reminiscent of the collection of the Qing imperial household, since they have been grouped together by modern institutions and contemporary individuals with their own objectives. The collections of the two Palace Museums have had huge impact on our perception of the collection of the Qing imperial household, yet these are creations of the modern era. This issue will be discussed later in this paper. What is important to note here is that many objects accumulated at the Qing imperial court, although they may be personal possessions of the Qianlong emperor, should not be seen as part of the collection of the imperial household as they were not assembled with a specific intention.

For example, many extant works produced from the Qing imperial workshops were commissioned on a regular basis not to increase the size of the collection of the imperial household as such, but simply to uphold the emperor's sumptuous lifestyle. According to the *Archives of the Imperial Workshops*, from 1743 to 1745, the glass workshop annually presented various numbers of large glass vases in preparation for the Lunar New Year and routinely produced glass snuff bottles so that the emperor could give them away as gifts.<sup>71</sup> Certain types of ceramics, mostly daily utensils, referred to as *dayun ciqu* in the archives, were also produced and shipped to Beijing on a regular basis.<sup>72</sup> A huge number of objects entered the inner court as a part of routine operations at the imperial household. The emperor approved the production costs but did not always actively commission them.

Apart from commissioned pieces, as mentioned previously, many tribute gifts were also presented regularly as a custom, and the quantity could be so large that the emperor had to decrease it. Although it has been suggested that Qing emperors confiscated the assets of certain officials and sold them to subsidise the income of the imperial household, as mentioned earlier,<sup>73</sup> this is quite different from confiscating someone's properties in order to obtain particular works to enhance the collection of the imperial household. In fact, it would mean storing confiscated items behind palace walls rather than converting them into cash. The inactivity on the emperor's part implies that not all objects which came to his personal possession were collected.

The term 'collection' in Chinese also implies a certain degree of importance and a sense of secrecy, which is lost in translation. The original meaning of '*cang*', or 'collection' in English, is essential to understanding the nature of the collection of the Qing imperial household. According to the *Kangxi Dictionary*, when used as a verb, the character means 'to reserve' or 'to hide.' When used as a noun, it means 'storage' or 'hidden objects.' The dictionary additionally states that it is also an

<sup>71</sup> Zhang Rong 張榮, ed, *Guang ning qiu shui: Qinggong zaobanchu boli qi* 光凝秋水：清宮造辦處玻璃器 (*Luster of Autumn Water: Glass of the Qing Imperial Workshop*), Beijing: Forbidden City Publishing House, 2005, 391-392.

<sup>72</sup> *dayun ciqu* : 大運瓷器; Wang Guangyao 王光堯, 'Cong Gugong cang Qingdai zhici guanyang kan Zhongguo gudai guanyang zhidu 從故宮藏清代制瓷官樣看中國古代官樣制度', *Guan yang yu ci* 官樣御瓷. Beijing: Forbidden City Publishing House, 2007, 16.

<sup>73</sup> Qi, *Qingdai neiwufu*, 130-132.

equivalent of another character, 'zang', which means internal organs.<sup>74</sup> Lothar Ledderose has pointed out that the two characters share very similar appearances. He further suggested that 'in the same way in which vital energy has to be stored in the inner organs of a human being, the treasure of the ruler are carefully hidden and preserved in the palaces.'<sup>75</sup> In this vein, it becomes possible to suggest that the collection of a Chinese imperial household was not merely any group of objects, but a specific assemblage of objects to which the imperial household attached importance, and one that was hidden away from the gaze of most people.

The collection of the imperial household in the Qianlong reign was therefore not formed or increased when various items came into the emperor's possession, but rather when he actively started grouping certain objects together, giving special weight to them and hiding them away from sight. These actions demonstrated his intention to separate what might called 'collectibles' from 'non-collectibles.'

Shen Chu (1729-1799), who obtained a *jinshi* degree in 1764, recalled an instruction from the Qianlong emperor in his jotting notes the *Xiqing Biji*:

His Majesty ordered that paintings and calligraphy should be ranked into first and second class for his inspection. First-class objects are [eligible] for collection. Second-class objects are for display. Bronzes follow the same principles.<sup>76</sup>

This passage clearly shows that the act of assessing and grading objects directly contributed to the formation of the collection of the imperial household during the Qianlong reign. In addition, Shen Chu's writing implies that collectibles were not considered the same as display pieces or furnishings. The wording he uses for collection, *jucang*, which if translated literally means 'to store' and 'to hide,' suggests that collectibles were not out on display.

Other evidence also suggests that not all objects were treated as equal. Commissioned objects whose quality did not meet certain standards would be given away as gifts or sold to subsidise the income of the imperial household.<sup>77</sup> For example, in 1735, Tang Ying (1682-1756), the superintendent of the imperial kiln at Jingdezhen, wrote that he shipped two to three thousand pieces of ceramics of lesser quality to Beijing for the emperor to bestow upon others as presents.<sup>78</sup> In 1742, the emperor instructed that sub-quality ceramics should no longer be sent to the capital

<sup>74</sup> *cang*: 藏; *zang*: 臟; See: *cang* (藏) in Zhang Yushu et al, eds, *Kangxi zidian*.

<sup>75</sup> Lothar Ledderose, 'Some Observations on the Imperial Art Collection in China', *Transactions of the Oriental Ceramic Society*, vol. 43, 1978-1979, 33-46.

<sup>76</sup> 上命審定書畫分一二等呈覽，一等弄藏，二等以備陳設。銅器亦如之。See: Shen Chu 沈初 (1729-1799), *Xiqing biji* 西清筆記 in *Biji xiaoshuo daguan* 筆記小說大觀, vol. 24, Yangzhou Shi: Jiangsu guangling guji keyin chubanshe, 1983-4.

<sup>77</sup> Yu Pei-chin 余佩瑾, 'Bie you xin yi - yi Qianlong guanyao de chuangxin wei li 別有新意 - 以乾隆官窯的創新為例', *Qianlong huangdi de wenhua daye* 乾隆皇帝的文化大業 (*Emperor Ch'ien-lung's Grand Cultural Enterprise*), Taipei: National Palace Museum, 2002, 295; Wang, *Zhongguo gudai guanyao zhidu*, 199.

<sup>78</sup> Wang, *Zhongguo gudai guanyao zhidu*, 198.

and should instead be sold for cash in the vicinity of the imperial kiln.<sup>79</sup> These ceramics, therefore, were not intended to be kept, even though they were produced from the imperial kiln and seen as the personal possessions of the emperor.

As demonstrated above, the widely used phrase 'imperial art collection' could be regarded as misleading when used in discussions of the so-called Qianlong emperor's collection. First of all, applying the Western concept of works of art as it is understood today to eighteenth-century China is inadequate and inappropriate. Various objects which would be considered as works of art nowadays were perceived as manifestations of certain skills and part of the comprehensive knowledge of the universe. They were not perceived as part of the same discipline in the *Complete Library of the Four Treasuries* and were not appreciated primarily for their aesthetic quality. Secondly, the word 'imperial', which can refer to both the imperial state and the imperial household, is vague and imprecise. The current loose usage of the word 'imperial' fails to acknowledge Qing court regulations, which distinguished the emperor's possessions from the properties of the state and constantly confuses the two distinctive groups of objects as a single collection. Finally, it is necessary to differentiate 'modern collections of objects from the Qianlong court' from the 'collection of the imperial household during the Qianlong reign'. Many objects, which are seen as collectibles today, were simply retained by the emperor but were not considered as part of the actual collection, as they were not assembled with intention and were not hidden away from view.

In light of the analysis above, it is proposed that, alternatively, 'the collection of the imperial household in the Qianlong reign' would be a more precise description of the specific group of objects that were valued and preserved by the emperor. It may, but not necessarily, contain what might be described as works of art today. It also excludes objects paid for or handled by the outer court. More accurately, it refers to a group of objects that belonged to the imperial household, with the emperor as its head, managed by the Imperial Household Department. In addition, it denotes a group of objects that had gone through a process of selection at the Qianlong court and to which the emperor attached special importance. The collection of the imperial household in the Qianlong reign, therefore, is not as immense as previously assumed.

### **The destruction of the original understanding of the collection**

The original understanding of the collection of the Qing imperial household was gradually lost at the beginning of the twentieth century as a result of a series of deliberate actions which were intended to blur the boundary between collectibles and non-collectibles. These actions were initiated by the Qing imperial household itself and followed by the rise of nationalism, which also contributed to the destruction of the original meaning of the collection. The following section will retrace the gradual disappearance of the line between objects simply retained at the Qing imperial court and the intentionally chosen collectibles that were stored and hidden away.

<sup>79</sup> Wang, *Zhongguo gudai guanyao zhidu*, 199.

The Qing imperial household started to obscure the meaning of the collection, as it attempted to diminish its humiliation in selling part of its collection to ease financial pressures in the early twentieth century.<sup>80</sup> The sale of imperial holdings is known in many cases. For example, the Dowager Empress Cixi offered part of the imperial holdings as collateral to the Salt Industry Bank in exchange for financial assistance when she fled the Forbidden City in 1901 as a result of the Boxer Rebellion.<sup>81</sup> In 1911, the 'last emperor' Puyi was forced to abdicate his throne but he continued to live within the Forbidden City and keep a court, which, although small in comparison with his ancestors' entourage, was expensive to maintain.<sup>82</sup> In the hope that he might regain his power, Puyi tried to establish friendly connections with warlords, Japan and other foreign powers, which also cost a lot of money.<sup>83</sup> The financial pressure forced him to offer part of imperial holdings as collateral to several banks, including the Salt Industry Bank, in order to secure a loan.<sup>84</sup> As Puyi states in his autobiography, '(...) the Household Department pawned a large batch of palace gold and jewellery through my father-in-law Jung Yuan at a fraction of its true value.'<sup>85</sup> It seems that during these events, some collectibles of the imperial household and not just objects retained at palaces, were offered to the banks as collateral. In 1927, Sir Percival David was able to acquire fifty ceramics from the Salt Industry Bank, including a Ru ware brush-washer.<sup>86</sup> It was stored in a *box of many treasures* and literarily hidden away.<sup>87</sup> In addition, boxes of many treasures generally contained objects that had gone through a selection process and had been deemed to possess exceptional quality at the Qing imperial court.<sup>88</sup> The brush-

<sup>80</sup> For the dispersal of Qing imperial riches, particularly paintings and calligraphy, in the early twentieth century, see: Yang Renkai 楊仁愷, *Guobao chenfu lu 國寶沉浮錄*, Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2007 and Yang Renkai, 'The Story behind the Last Emperor's Dispersal of the Imperial Painting and Calligraphy Collection', *The Last Emperor's Collection: Masterpieces of Painting and Calligraphy from the Liaoning Provincial Museum*, New York: China Institute, 2008: 1-11.

<sup>81</sup> Stacey Pierson, *Collectors, Collections and Museums: the Field of Chinese Ceramics in Britain, 1560-1960*. Oxford and New York: Peter Lang, 2007, 133.

<sup>82</sup> Aisin Gioro Pu Yi, *From Emperor to Citizen: the Autobiography of Aisin Gioro Pu Yi*, Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1964, 143-144.

<sup>83</sup> Shih Shou-chien 石守謙, 'Qingshi shoucang de xiandai zhuanhua – jianlun qi yu Zhongguo meishushi yanjiu fazhan zhi guanxi 清室收藏的現代轉化 – 兼論其與中國美術史研究發展之關係 (The Transformation of the Ch'ing Imperial Collection in the Early Twentieth Century)', *Gugong xueshu jikan 故宮學術季刊 (The National Palace Museum Research Quarterly)*, vol. 23, no.1, 2005, 8.

<sup>84</sup> Jeannette Shambaugh Elliott and David Shambaugh, *The Odyssey of China's Imperial Art Treasures*. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2005, 61.

<sup>85</sup> Aisin Gioro, *From Emperor to Citizen*, 137.

<sup>86</sup> For details of David's purchase, see: Pierson, *Collectors, Collections and Museums*, 132-134; The Ru ware brush-washer referred to here is: PDF 76.

<sup>87</sup> Box of many treasures: 多寶格 (*doubaoge*)

<sup>88</sup> Yu Pei-chin 余佩瑾, 'Pin jian zhi qu – shiba shiji de taoci tuce ji qi xiangguan de wenti 品鑑之趣 – 十八世紀的陶瓷圖冊及其相關的問題 (The Appeal of Connoisseurship: Eighteenth Century Ceramic manuals and Related Questions)', *Gugong xueshu jikan 故宮學術季刊 (The National Palace Museum Research Quarterly)*, vol. 22, no. 2, 2004, 139-140.

washer, therefore, should be seen as part of the actual collection of the Qing imperial household. Its presence in the David collection suggests that some collectibles were sold by the imperial household in the early twentieth century.

In fact, many objects preserved in the boxes of many treasures were also sold in the early twentieth century to ease the financial pressure of the imperial household. In a sandalwood box of many treasures, now in the collection of the National Palace Museum in Taipei, there is a yellow label stating that the objects once stored therein were 'bestowed' to Pujie, who was a brother of Puyi.<sup>89</sup> In his autobiography, Puyi admitted that the bestowed objects were in fact brought out of the palaces to Tianjin and were subsequently sold.<sup>90</sup>

Paintings recorded in the *Shiqu boaji*, a series of secular painting catalogues commissioned by Qianlong, were also seen as part of the collection because they had been selected, ranked and stored away.<sup>91</sup> However many of these were bestowed on Pujie and removed from the collection. For example, the work *Along the River during Qingming Festival* by Zhang Zeduan, was among the objects bestowed and subsequently sold.<sup>92</sup> In fact, the Committee for the Disposition of the Qing Imperial Possessions later found a list which recorded over a thousand paintings and calligraphic works that were 'bestowed' to Pujie and quite a number of them were recorded in the *Shiqu baoji*.<sup>93</sup>

Occasionally, the sales were actually organised by the Imperial Household Department. According to records preserved at Mayuyama & Co., an antique dealer based in Tokyo, a wide range of objects was auctioned. Apart from medicine, tea, and leather goods, objects such as bronzes of the three dynasties, ceramics of the Song, Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties, Buddhist statues and lacquer ware were also included. Mayuyama's records also document that the Imperial Household Department described the auctioned lots as 'display pieces' or simply as 'objects'.<sup>94</sup> However, it is reasonable to suspect that this auction probably contained objects from the collection of the imperial household. As illustrated above, the imperial household had no hesitations in selling its collectibles during this period of time. The vague and imprecise description of auctioned lots was probably a calculated decision which aimed to lessen the embarrassment. In other words, under financial pressure, the Qing imperial household deliberately made no difference between furnishings and objects from the actual collection, which used to be as important and vital to the imperial household as internal organs to a person.

In 1914, the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Nationalist government established the Exhibition Office of Ancient Artefacts.<sup>95</sup> The office mounted the first

<sup>89</sup> Shih, 'Qingshi shoucang de xiandai zhuanhua', 9.

<sup>90</sup> Aisin Gioro, *From Emperor to Citizen*, 129.

<sup>91</sup> *Shiqu boaji*: 石渠寶笈

<sup>92</sup> Yang, *Guobao chenfu lu*, 44-45.

<sup>93</sup> Yang, 'The Story behind the Last Emperor's Dispersal of the Imperial Painting and Calligraphy Collection', 37; For the most updated list of paintings and calligraphy dispersed from the palaces in the early twentieth century, see: Yang, 'The Story behind the Last Emperor's Dispersal of the Imperial Painting and Calligraphy Collection', 323-418.

<sup>94</sup> Shih, 'Qingshi shoucang de xiandai zhuanhua', 9.

<sup>95</sup> Exhibition Office of Ancient Artefacts: 古物陳列所 (*Guwu chenliesuo*)

public exhibition of imperial holdings in 1914 and the exhibits were considered a loan from the Qing imperial household. However, in 1916, when the second exhibition was organised, the government claimed that it was the Ministry of Internal Affairs that had loaned the objects and sponsored the exhibition.<sup>96</sup> This shift of claimed ownership was probably caused by Yuan Shikai (1859-1916), who briefly declared himself emperor but ultimately failed to establish a new dynasty in 1916. Perhaps due to the need to strengthen the idea of a 'republic', the Nationalist government felt it had to establish the claim that the imperial holdings of the last dynasty was now for the Republic and all its citizens.

The strategy seemed to work well for the Nationalist government. By the 1920s, the public had developed a sense of ownership of the former imperial holdings.<sup>97</sup> Consequently, the sales and dispersal of palace riches became severely criticised.<sup>98</sup> Although Puyi saw the objects as the possessions of the Qing imperial household and thus private and at his disposal, the Nationalist government disagreed with him, and believed the objects belonged to the whole nation. In part to prevent Puyi from further dispersing palace holdings, it was finally decided in 1924 that he should be expelled from the Forbidden City. The Committee for Disposition of the Qing Imperial Household Possessions took control of the Forbidden City and ordered a complete inventory of the palace contents. One of the Committee's responsibilities was to distinguish between state possessions and private property. In the beginning, an agreement emerged that the newly established Republic would have historic relics, while the former Qing imperial household could keep artefacts for daily use.<sup>99</sup> However, the Committee staff very soon discovered that almost all objects possessed historic value to some degree.<sup>100</sup> Everything left by the former Qing imperial court, whether or not a collectible, was seen to embody some historic significance and considered possessions of the new nation, and thus, when the Committee compiled the inventory of objects in the Forbidden City, the staff made sure it was as comprehensive as possible. It is famously known that the very first object recorded in the inventory was a wooden stool at the Palace of Heavenly Purity.<sup>101</sup> The compilation of the inventory, which included nearly every item at the Forbidden City, therefore not only destroyed the boundary between collectibles and furnishings but also the line between the property of the Qing imperial state and property of the Qing imperial household. All objects were now perceived as part of a single entity.

In addition, it is possible to suggest that the people who were responsible for making the inventory had no idea of these differences. Chuang Yen (1899-1980), a graduate student who later became the deputy director of the National Palace

<sup>96</sup> Shambaugh Elliott and Shambaugh, *The Odyssey of China's Imperial Art Treasures*, 58.

<sup>97</sup> Shambaugh Elliott and Shambaugh, *The Odyssey of China's Imperial Art Treasures*, 64.

<sup>98</sup> Shih, 'Qingshi shoucang de xiandai zhuanhua', 9.

<sup>99</sup> Na Chih-liang 那志良, *Gugong bowuyuan sanshinian zhi jingguo* 故宮博物院三十年之經過, Taipei: Zhonghua congshu, 1957, 2-3.

<sup>100</sup> Jack Langlois, 'Chuang Yen and the National Palace Museum', *Echo of Things Chinese*, vol.2, no.3, March 1972, 16-17.

<sup>101</sup> Qingshi shanhou weiyuanhui, *Gugong wupin diancha baogao*; Palace of Heavenly Purity: 乾清宮 (*Qianqing gong*).

Museum, was recruited along with other Peking University students to assist with the compilation of the palace inventory in 1924. By the 1970s, he was still awed at the thought that they were the first 'common people' outside of employees of the imperial household ever to enter the inner court of the Forbidden City.<sup>102</sup> As commoners who were totally unfamiliar with the Qing imperial household, they only knew that every single object, whether a collectible or a display piece, had previously been hidden from their view. It was only natural that they considered all objects were part of the actual collection (*cang*).

Although forced to leave the Forbidden City, Puyi did not stop fighting for his right to reclaim what he considered rightfully his possessions. There was a series of disputes between the former imperial family and the Nationalist government. The National Palace Museum was established within this historical context and served as a realisation of the claim of the Nationalist government that the former private holdings of the Qing Imperial Household would from now on become public possessions. As Shih Shou-chien has pointed out, the museum opened on the tenth of October 1925, The National Day of the Republic of China, to strengthen the connection between the opening-up of the Forbidden City to the public and nationalism. The committee members involved in the establishment of the museum, all supporters of the 1911 revolution, openly condemned actions of dispersing 'national treasures'.<sup>103</sup> Huang Fu (1880-1936), who also participated in the 1911 revolution, declared at the opening ceremony of the museum: 'This is the first day of the Palace Museum, as well as the Double Tenth. From now on, this day will be a double anniversary, both National Day and Palace Museum Day. Any sabotage of the Palace Museum will be regarded as sabotage to this great day of the Republic.'<sup>104</sup> This speech sent a clear message that the Palace Museum was a national symbol of the Republic. It also implied that all objects it contained were national treasures and should not be disrupted. All objects once kept at the Qing imperial court, whether they were daily utensils, religious items or collectibles, were now all seen as a single entity, the collection of the National Palace Museum. Furthermore, as they were all elevated to the equally important position as 'national treasures', the different status and degrees of significance which they previously had were completely wiped away.

Within the course of the first quarter of the twentieth century, the original meaning of the actual collection was obliterated. First to reduce the disgrace of and later also to lessen public anger towards the sales of palace holdings, the Qing imperial household tactically obscured the line between collectibles and non-collectibles by referring them all as 'display pieces' or 'furnishings'. In addition, to stop Puyi from claiming palace holdings and to reinforce the general public's identification with the new Republic, the Nationalist government promoted all objects left by the Qing imperial court to the status of 'national treasures' without acknowledging their different levels of importance at the former court. These

<sup>102</sup> Langlois, 'Chuang Yen and the National Palace Museum', 15.

<sup>103</sup> Shih, 'Qingshi shoucang de xiandai zhuanhua', 11-12; national treasures: 國寶 (*guobao*).

<sup>104</sup> English translation from: Shambaugh Elliott and Shambaugh, *The Odyssey of China's Imperial Art Treasures*, 72.

intentional endeavours, stemming from the specific circumstances and needs of the time, have obscured the original understanding of the collection of the imperial household prior to the twentieth century and given rise to the myth of a monumental collection assembled during the Qianlong reign.

## Conclusion

One legacy of the objects amassed and produced by the Qing imperial court, particularly during the Qianlong reign, is that large quantities of paintings, calligraphy and objects made of various materials have established most people's notion of Chinese court style and taste. The study of Chinese art history and connoisseurship as a scholarly discipline is largely built on research into objects accumulated by the Qing imperial court and passed down to the present day as a result of their preservation. This paper, however, has challenged the widely accepted identity of this so-called Qianlong imperial art collection. It questions the common presumption that there was a single and readily definable assemblage, which includes every physical object that had once been kept in the imperial palaces. While this assumption has been taken as a 'fact' for decades, it is arguably one that needs to be adjusted. The actual collection in fact contains a far more restricted group of objects. As demonstrated in this study through philological and textual studies, defining the collection of the Qing imperial household is essential because it underpins the correct understanding of the original context within which objects were actually perceived at the Qing imperial court in the eighteenth century.

In addition, by re-examining the political and historical milieu of the early twentieth century, it is disclosed that the financial strain faced by the Qing imperial household and the need to promote nationalism by the Republican government, both contributed to the destruction of the original definition of what were truly considered collectibles of the imperial household prior to the fall of the dynasty. This intended destruction has impaired our understanding of the collection in the past century and has caused confusion between collectibles of the imperial household and all other objects that were simply accumulated at the palaces.

As a consequence of the rediscovery of the original definition of the actual collection, many issues need to be re-evaluated. The task of selecting collectibles and separating them from other objects in order to establish the basis of a collection has not been given enough critical attention, as most discussions have focused on the personal connoisseurship and tastes of the emperor.<sup>105</sup> The collective effort of court members, which contributed to the formation of the collection, has been overlooked. In addition, objects which are not usually considered 'works of art' as well as objects that fall out of the tradition of Chinese art history, have often been neglected. They have not been properly situated within the context of the collecting activities in the eighteenth century Chinese imperial court. Furthermore, the concept of collecting in China has often been interpreted and studied from a

<sup>105</sup> The latest example: Ho Chuan-hsing 何傳馨, ed, *Shiquan Qianlong: Qing Gaozong de yishu pinwei* 十全乾隆: 清高宗的藝術品味 (*The All Complete Qianlong: the Aesthetic Tastes of the Qing Emperor Gaozong*), Taipei: National Palace Museum, 2013.

Eurocentric point of view, which sees royal collections as functioning in part in the display of power and the instilling awe in audiences. However, imposing this interpretation onto the collection of the Qing imperial household not only imposes an interpretative bias, but also neglects the fact that many objects were actually boxed up and out of sight. Assuming they were on view is a presumption made about the collection that has coloured its interpretation. For these reasons, further research is needed to shed light on the objects assembled at the Qing imperial court during the Qianlong reign and how we approach this assemblage.<sup>106</sup>

**Nicole T.C. Chiang** is the curator of the Museum of East Asian Art in Bath, UK. Before joining the MEAA, she worked at the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge and the National Palace Museum in Taipei. She received her PhD from SOAS, University of London in 2012 with a thesis that re-evaluated the historiography and function of the collection of the Qing imperial household during the Qianlong reign.

curator@meaa.org.uk

<sup>106</sup> For the latest research on the topic, see: Nicole T.C. Chiang, *Reconsidering the Collection of the Qing Imperial Household during the Qianlong Reign*, PhD Thesis, London: SOAS, University of London, 2012.