EMPEROR QIANLONG AND THE QING COURT ANCIENT SEAL COLLECTION

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THE IMPERIAL collection of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911) was one of the most prominent in Chinese history. The Qianlong emperor, in particular, had a special affinity for ancient works of art. Through tireless acquisition, there was no treasure of the preceding dynasties that was not included in his treasury. Antiquities filled his palaces and imperial gardens and objets d’art were ubiquitous. Moreover, books and records that provided more details on ancient Chinese seals were compiled during the Qianlong reign (1736–1795); these became important sources of data for subsequent research. The Qianlong emperor also invested a substantial amount of energy on ancient Chinese seals, striving to seek out ones that were worthy of collecting while continuously categorising his acquisitions. Gradually, the number of seals in the treasury reached a considerable size. The emperor’s work became the foundation for the Qing court seal collection and an integral part of the Palace Museum in Beijing and Taipei after the toppling of the Qing dynasty. This essay provides an overview of the acquisition and organisation of the Qianlong emperor’s antique seals, based on historical texts and physical objects.

I. Overview of the Qing Court Seal Collection during the Qianlong Reign

The question of exactly how many ancient seals were in the court collection during the Qianlong period is very difficult to determine because surviving information is limited. However, through imperial poems by Emperor Qianlong on the theme and the extant objects, it is possible to map out a general picture.

1 Jin Xie Liu Zhen Ancient Bronze Seals
National Palace Museum, Taipei
All subsequent images, unless indicated otherwise, are taken from this book
1. Ancient Bronze Seals

Ancient bronze seals of the Qianlong court mainly comprised the following categories:

First are the ones named after Jin Xie Liu Zhen (1, 2, 3), which literally means Treasures Kept in a Fine Album. In the sixteenth year of the Qianlong reign (1751), all of the ancient bronze seals in the court were gathered and kept in five wooden boxes. The façade of each box was decorated with two dragons painted in lacquer that flanked the centrally located four-character title, Jin Xie Liu Zhen, written by Emperor Qianlong. Within each box are six drawers, the first of which contains a book on the impressions of all the seals stored within, while the second to sixth drawers
hold the ancient bronze seals. Included in this collection are 221 official seals and 1070 private seals, making it the biggest of its kind in the Qing court. It is currently in the Palace Museum in Taipei.

Second are the twenty-eight ancient bronze seals that were organised during the twenty-fourth year of the Qianlong reign (1759). The Qianlong emperor wrote the poem titled Yong Gu Yin Zhang (Ode to Ancient Bronze Stamps), which reads: “This fine album is to be treasured for millennia, portraying details of this seal collection. Viewing of these antiquities inspires a sense of solemn respect since they project such brilliance as a perfect literary composition. The seal impressions are to be kept for long-term use, while the seals radiate lasting luxuriant colours. The number of seals is twenty-eight and the harmony they bring are the beautiful blessing from heaven.”

Third are the ancient bronze seals kept in the Summer Resort of Rehe (now Chengde). During the fifty-second year of the Qianlong reign (1787), 244 ancient bronze seals were sorted and kept in an orderly fashion within a red lacquer case. The inner wall of its cover bears the gold-filled intaglio of an imperial poem, Ode to Ancient Bronze Seals, in Emperor Qianlong’s handwriting. This collection holds sixty-three official seals with 188 private ones.

Fourth are the ten seals kept in the original antique chamber of the palace. Stored within a black rectangular lacquer box adorned with blossoms painted in gold, the date of its organisation is unknown. Because these seals served official purposes, the collection was aptly named as Shou Guan Ti Pan (Fine Examples of Rule-Abiding Officials) (4) and is currently in the Taipei Palace Museum (5).

Fifth is the collection in the Yu Qing Gong, the Hall of Celebrated Cultivation. Its 100 seals are placed in a black lacquer case with flowers painted in gold. Each of its four levels holds twenty-five bronze seals. What makes this collection different from the others is that not only does it not include a seal album, preface and an index, it also bears no poem by Qianlong. The organisation of the enclosed seals appears to be rudimentary, which indicates that its scale fell short of Qianlong's expectations and was still undergoing expansion. Nevertheless, Qianlong never managed to complete this task during his lifetime.

A total of 1673 bronze seals are covered in the aforementioned part.

2. Ancient Jade Seals

Qianlong’s fascination with ancient jade seals (6–11) began around the tenth year of his reign (1745). His unflagging interest in them did not end until his passing, and this was perhaps largely related to Qianlong’s penchant for jade objects. To him, the Qin (221–207 BC) and Han (206 BC–AD 220) periods carried special weight among all ancient dynasties. Seals then were made mainly of jade or cast gold, and the gold seals often survived longer than the jade ones, making them rarer and more precious.

In the fourteenth year of the Qianlong reign (1749), the emperor ordered the making of a case and a seal impression album for sixteen jade seals that the court had assembled. In addition to ordering his civil officials to compose its preface and epilogue, Qianlong himself took the opportunity to write a poem to promote the occasion. This is the first time we see from available information that Qianlong amassed and sorted a selection of ancient jade seals. From that time onward, the emperor wrote a poem to record every occasion on which he organised a collection. Through these poems, we are able to capture an overview of the Qianlong court’s ancient jade seal collection, summarised as follows:

Qianlong wrote Ti Han Yu Yin Zhang (On Han Jade Stamps)\(^{5}\) in the seventeenth year of his reign, citing a collection of ten ancient jade seals.

Qianlong wrote Tong Han Yu Zhang (Ode to Han Jade Stamps)\(^{6}\) in the twentieth year of his reign, citing a collection of forty ancient jade seals.

Qianlong wrote Tong Han Yu Yu Zhang (Ode to Han Jade Stamps)\(^{7}\) in the twenty-fifth year of his reign, citing a collection of nine ancient jade seals.

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1. Gao Zong Yu Zi Shi Er Ji, scroll 8.
2. Gao Zong Yu Zi Shi Er Ji, scroll 32.
3. Gao Zong Yu Zi Shi Er Ji, scroll 57.
4. Gao Zong Yu Zi Shi San Ji, scroll 5.
6  Liu Wen Yun Gu (Six Scripts Reminiscent of the Past) Jade Seals
National Palace Museum, Taipei
Image taken from Shi Quan Qianlong: Qing Gaozong De Yi Shu Pin Wei,
National Palace Museum, Taipei, 2013

7  Liu Wen Yun Gu Ancient Jade Seal Album
National Palace Museum, Taipei
Qianlong wrote *Han Yu Qian Qiu Ting Hou Yu* (Han Jade Seal of the Lord of Thousand-Autumn Pavilion)\(^5\) in the twenty-sixth year of his reign, citing the acquisition of a jade seal engraved “Qian Qiu Ting Hou” (The Lord of Thousand-Autumn Pavilion).

Qianlong wrote *Jin Han Yu Yin Yu De Shi Liu, Zhi Li Cong Jia, Beng Ti Yi Ju* (Gaining sixteen additional Han jade seals in the process of collection; he had a case made for them and wrote a sentence about this)\(^6\) in the twenty-eighth year of his reign, citing a collection of sixteen ancient jade seals.

Qianlong wrote *Yong Han Yu Zhang* (Ode to Han Jade Stamps)\(^7\) in the thirty-first year of his reign, citing a collection of six ancient jade seals.

Qianlong wrote *Gu Yu Zhang Ge* (Song of Ancient Jade Stamps)\(^8\) in the thirty-sixth year of his reign, citing a collection of eighty ancient jade seals, five of which indicate

\(^5\) *Gao Zong Yu Zhi Shi San Ji*, scroll 9.
\(^6\) *Gao Zong Yu Zhi Shi San Ji*, scroll 27.
\(^7\) *Gao Zong Yu Zhi Shi San Ji*, scroll 54.
\(^8\) *Gao Zong Yu Zhi Shi San Ji*, scroll 98.
official rankings; one specifies location, fifty-four bear names of individuals and twenty are engraved with auspicious terms.

Qianlong wrote *Yong Gu Yu Zhang* (Ode to Ancient Stamps) in the thirty-seventh year of his reign, citing a collection of forty ancient jade seals.

Qianlong wrote *Xia Gui Qin Han Yin Tong Nei Yu Zhang Ba Mei, Yin Cheng Ba Yun* (storing eight jade stamps recorded in the Qin Han Seal Compendium in a small case; thus came the eight rhymes) in the forty-fifth year of his reign, citing a collection of eight ancient jade seals.

Qianlong wrote *Ti Han Yu Zhang Si Fang* (On Four Han Jade Stamps) in the fifty-first year of his reign, citing a collection of four ancient jade seals.

Qianlong wrote *Ji Gu Yu Yin Bai Gui Tan Xia Yin Zuo Ge* (a song for collecting 100 ancient jade seals and having a small rosewood case made for storage) in the fifty-eighth year of his reign, citing a collection of 100 ancient jade seals, marking the biggest of its kind in his collection.

Furthermore, the Beijing Palace Museum also has two batches of jade seals that had been inspected by Qianlong, although the dates of their organisation are unclear. One of the collections, named *Yun Gu Han Zhen* (Collection of Precious Antiquities), consists of ten pieces. Qianlong wrote a preface for its album of impressions, stating:

"The ten Han jade seals are stored in a small case and arranged in order. The jade materials used are all smoothly dense, with blotches of colour acquired over time. When people in the past obtained a jade seal, they would study it by collecting information about it and eulogising it, not to mention how they might view ten seals as jewels if they came across them all at once. Occasional inspections of these seals profoundly deepened my admiration for the past. Recorded by the Qianlong emperor."

The other collection, with the name of *Lu Zi Ning Hui* (Green Characters of Condensed Brilliance), includes forty-five seals. Judging from the preface and epilogues in the back of the seal album, compiled by grand ministers, we know that Qianlong had also examined this collection.
There are a total of 385 jade seals covered in the above section that were inspected and extolled in poetry by Qianlong.

3. Horn or Stone Seals of the Ming Dynasty

Qianlong not only searched widely for ancient seals, but also paid close attention to carved works from the not so distant past, the Ming dynasty (1368–1644). As best we can determine, Qianlong twice amassed and organised seals dated to that period and built a sizable collection.

The first time was in the eleventh year of the Qianlong reign (1746) when he coincidentally came across 162 horn seals, carved during the Ming dynasty, in the old collection of the Qing court. The makers or users of these seals were Ming dignitaries, such as Wen Zhengmin, Wen Peng, Wang Chong and Xiang Yuanbian. Qianlong was elated over the discovery of these artefacts, which were worth a king's ransom. He, therefore, ordered his civil ministers to reorganise the seals and have made a sandalwood case and a brocade pouch to store this prized collection carefully.

Qianlong even wrote the poem Ming Xian Xiang Ya Zhang Ge (Song on Ivory Stamps of Renowned Sages) to commemorate the circumstances of this find.

The second time was between the fiftieth and the fifty-second year of the Qianlong reign, when the emperor focused on collecting works by the Ming dynasty seal carver, Wen Peng. According to Qianlong's personal account, it was when he made his sixth inspection tour of southern China in the forty-ninth year of his reign (1784) that he first came across seals made by Wen Peng. In March of that year, Qianlong arrived in Hangzhou and discovered surviving seals by Wen Zhengmin, Wen Peng, He Zhen and Gan Yang. He immediately became enamoured with

9 Gao Zeng Yu Zhi Shi Si Ji, scroll 2.
10 Gao Zeng Yu Zhi Shi Si Ji, scroll 74.
11 Gao Zeng Yu Zhi Shi Wu Ji, scroll 19.
12 Gao Zeng Yu Zhi Shi Wu Ji, scroll 78.
13 Gao Zeng Yu Zhi Shi Chou Ji, scroll 31.

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Lou Shi Ming (An Epigraph in Praise of My Humble Home) Seal Set

Bearing the name of Wen Peng
National Palace Museum, Taipei
Image taken from Shi Quan Qianlong: Qing Gaozong De Yi Shu Pin Wei, National Palace Museum, Taipei, 2013

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Lou Shi Ming Seal Set and Corresponding Seal Album

Bearing the name of Wen Peng
National Palace Museum, Taipei
the seals and praised them highly by calling them “The Four Beauties”. This incident was depicted in Qianlong’s poem, *Ti Ming Tin Si Mei* (On the Four Beautiful Seals of the Ming dynasty). After Qianlong brought the seals of the four literati back to Beijing, he had them kept in the Jing Yi Xuan, the Chamber of Tranquil Happiness, and often toyed with them. The emperor considered that Wen Peng’s seal carving style had a quaintly elegant quality and regarded it suitable for the image that he wanted his court to project. He, thus, developed an interest in collecting Wen Peng’s seals (12–15). However, by that time, Wen Peng had already been dead for more than 200 years, and because very few of his seals survived, each one was extremely difficult to come by. This made it all the more remarkable that Qianlong was able to collect nearly sixty seals of approximately a dozen varieties within a matter of two to three years.\(^{14}\)

In summation of all the previously cited material, the Qianlong court possessed a collection of up to 2200 seals. The magnificent scale of the collection was unparalleled at the time.

**II. Concrete Events of Seal Collection and Organisation by Emperor Qianlong and his Officials**

The accumulation and categorisation of seals was an integral part of cultural activities during the Qianlong reign. When speaking of the correlations between Qianlong and the seal collection of the Qing court, questions about the methods of acquisition, arrangement, the reference materials for the sorting process and the identities of the individuals involved in the tasks are inevitable. Here we can envisage how the emperor and his officials actually dealt with seals by summarising existing materials.

1. The Acquisition of Seals

During the Qianlong reign, collecting ancient artefacts became a fashionable trend. Because Emperor Qianlong himself was both an advocate and a follower of this movement, the collection of the imperial treasury burgeoned in scope and size to a breathtaking extent. Qianlong’s goal was to acquire any antiquity that was intricate or grand. Whether they were “ones made in a cast with gilt decorations or those with unexceptional carving, all could enter the scholar’s studio to be appreciated and sung about by the emperor”. Because those below often emulate the taste of those above, Qianlong’s fascination with seals naturally attracted the attention of his officials, who sought out and acquired seals on a regular basis and presented their acquisitions to His Majesty on opportune occasions. This was one way for Qianlong to expand his seal collection during his reign.

For instance, the ten seals sorted in the seventeenth year of the Qianlong reign (1752) were accumulated over the course of several years. Qianlong highlighted this phenomenon in a poem, stating that: “a small case was made for the sixteen seals of the Qin and Han periods that are already in my collection (...) After several years, ten more were gathered, so another small case was made for storage.” Also, another poem that the emperor wrote on seals in the forty-fifth year of his reign says: “As rare as catching the sight of morning stars, it takes several decades for in-

valuable pieces to accumulate into an exquisite collection. How extraordinary it was to be able to acquire eight seals at once.” The verse indicates that the acquisition of seals wasn’t without effort, especially the acquisition of the most pleasing seals. Also, it reflects Qianlong’s exuberance when he came across unexpected finds in his seal collecting. It can be rightly said that the Qing court seal collection during the Qianlong period was unremittingly enriched because of the broad search and wide acceptance by the emperor and his officials. Each seal in the collection was accumulated through a quest that spanned decades.

2. The Authentication and Organisation of Seals

Among all of the seals that were inspected by Qianlong, except for the newly acquired ones mentioned previously, many actually came from the court’s existing collections. Because few had paid adequate attention to the collections in the past, they were in a state of disorder and mostly uncategorised. It was not until Qianlong came along that this situation was addressed. The organisation of each batch of seals generally followed these steps:

First, dating of the seals was conducted, based on mate-
rials, knob styles, characteristics of the inscriptions and content. In accordance with standard procedure, seals had to initially be presented to Qianlong for inspection. If the emperor took a liking to certain ones, the court would then gather relevant information and make an initial evaluation before suggesting their origin. Otherwise, information on the seals was presented for imperial viewing along with the actual seals in order to facilitate a conclusion by the emperor regarding their origin. Consequently, confirmation on the dates of seals often initially came verbally from Qianlong and would receive public acknowledgement later. Eventually, the emperor’s decisions would be reflected in his imperial poems.

Next, the seals were rearranged according to the inscriptions. This is what Qianlong meant when he ordered his officials to “annotate certain categories with rattan notes” and “place them in order per their categories”. This step was carried out by the emperor’s entourage and numerous officials. Attesting to this were such examples in texts as: “We, your officials, have prudently arranged everything according to the seal registry from cover to cover. We humbly presume that there must be no fewer than several hundred precious seals kept in the imperial library, while the quality of this extraordinary piece is fine enough to rival those, and an illustration of this gorgeous piece of jade will make it even more convincing.” Another example from the texts: “We, your officials, are fortunate enough to be able to categorise the seals. We prudently bow with the highest level of respect for being recognised at the end of these records.” Naturally, these officials performed such duties with the authorisation of Qianlong, who wrote: “Due to numerous misplaced seals in the meticulously made box, I ordered officials from the Hanlin Imperial Academy to reorganise the collection” and “When I occasionally come across familiar objects, I would order civil officials to rearrange them”. These are both records of actual events at the time.

Then, an album of seal impressions was produced (16–22). A complete file was made by having the inscriptions printed into an album according to a predetermined order, accompanied by an imperial poem or notation by Qianlong in the front and epilogues by his entourage or ministers in the back. These albums of seal impressions, made of paper, rosewood, plywood or brocade plywood, often bore gorgeous four-character names and were exquisitely made. The production of seal albums pursuant to Qianlong’s decree was a crucial step in the systematisation and appraisal of ancient jade because of the work done by the emperor and his officials, which is fully evident here. Generally speaking, the impressions of ancient jade seals, Emperor Qianlong’s imperial poetry or notations and the epilogues by his entourage or officials are all indispensable in evaluating seal albums. Moreover, paintings and calligraphy either by Qianlong himself, his entourage, officials or court painters, are included in the albums, depending on various circumstances, to make the albums more visually appealing.

Finally, a case for the seals was selected or made. After placing the seals in the case according to a predetermined order with a corresponding seal album, the case was stowed away in a set location. It was not until this point that the authentication and organisation of a batch of seals were deemed complete.

3. Reference Used by Emperor Qianlong and His Officials for Organising Ancient Seals—Qin Han Yin Tong (Compendium on Seals from the Qin and Han Dynasties)

While evaluating and organising ancient seals, Emperor Qianlong and his ministers often mentioned the Qin Han Yin Tong, a critical literary work in the study of Chinese seals (23–25). On several occasions, the emperor referred to it in his poems on seals. For instance: “After consulting the Qin Han Yin Tong, it is found that the inscription and size of the seal knob are identical to those in the compendium”; “seals that cannot be found in the Qin Han Yin Tong will not be selected”; “once more, eighty seals with identical inscriptions and knob styles to those in the seal compendium are selected herein”; and “after consulting the Qin Han Yin Tong, it is discovered that all aspects are consistent with the records”. All of these accounts accentuate the crucial function of the compendium. For Qianlong’s entourage and officials, the Qin Han Yin Tong was even more of an indispensable reference work on the seals. Consequently, the compendium became the gold standard at the time for appraising and cataloguing seals for the imperial treasury. The authentication of seals then, to a large extent, was to determine whether seals matched those recorded in the Qin Han Yin Tong, in terms of inscriptions, knob styles, and calligraphic characteristics. If all the aforementioned attributes corresponded to those detailed in the compendium, the seals were undoubtedly from the Qin and Han dynasties. Otherwise, other references had to be consulted before drawing a conclusion.

Publication of the Qin Han Yin Tong can be traced back to the Ji Gu Yin Pu (The Registry of Ancient Seal Collectors).
publication became the first to feature seal impressions from the Qin and Han dynasties. Because the initial twenty copies were all purchased by aficionados, the idea of “trusting the project entirely to the printer, so that it shall never be forgotten” was implemented. The Ji Gu Yin Pu, after being further expanded and published in woodblock prints during the third year of the Wanli reign, was renamed the Yin Sou (An Assemblage of Seals). Although the publication was reprinted by wood blocks, the styles and characteristics of the seals were essentially preserved in the impressions of this finely engraved woodblock edition. This publication primarily features bronze official seals spanning the Han and the subsequent six dynasties. Nevertheless, it also contains several impressions of forged seals. The thirteen jade seal impressions of the Warring States (475–221 BC), Qin and Han periods, were mostly done in the Ming dynasty and later entered the Qing dynasty imperial treasury. After the Yin Sou was published, the editor of the book, Luo Wangchang, decided that it was not sufficiently comprehensive so he broadened its scope by printing the Qin Han Yin Tong with wood blocks during the thirteenth year of the Wanli reign (1585).

These seal registries from different periods are deemed the most crucial publications for the study of ancient seals.

“Most of the seal impressions in the registries of the Zhao, Yang and other families that did not survive until this day are mostly contained in this book, so they are not forever lost. Meanwhile, seal collections from the Song (960–1279) to the Ming dynasties, which spanned several hundred years, could be gathered in this grand collection that summarised past achievements and inspired future works.”

The Qin Han Yin Tong, in particular, contains the most comprehensive information. It could be said that even until the Qianlong period, there was not another publication on ancient seals that was comparable. For this reason, Emperor Qianlong and his officials naturally chose the Qin Han Yin Tong, the compendium of seals, as the reference work for authenticating the seal collection in the imperial treasury.

Through Qianlong’s imperial poetry, we know that the Qin Han Yin Tong used by the emperor and his officials was the edition printed by Shu Zi Tang (Hall of Thriving Trees) of the Wu family. The book was printed in the thirty-sixth year of the Wanli reign (1608) by the Hall of Thriving Trees of the Wu family and is currently in the library of the Palace Museum. Except for the preface and epilogues of the first scroll, the entire text was printed in vermillion. The name of the publisher, Wu Shi Shu Zi Tang, was printed on the margin of the book, which consists of two sets with twelve volumes. The cover of each volume bears the printed vermillion characters “Not included in Siku (Siku Quanshu, Complete Books of the Four [Imperial] Repositories), Collection of the Fang Family in Balin”. Inside are the imprints of “The Stamp of Rare Old Volumes in the Collection of the Exquisite Green Jade House of the Fang Family in Balin” and “Volume in the Collection of the Exquisite Green Jade House of the Fang Family in Balin”. This set of books was likely requested to be sent to the imperial treasury during the compilation of the Siku Quanshu. Albeit not incorporated in Siku Quanshu, it became the pri-
mary source of reference for Emperor Qianlong and his officials in the process of authenticating ancient seals. It seems as if it was destined by heavenly power to be often consulted and perused.

4. The Participation of Attendants and Officials in the Organisation of Seals and their Duties

Most of the existing seal registries in the collection of the imperial treasury during the Qianlong reign contained epilogues compiled by the emperor’s entourage and officials based on imperial decrees. Via these epilogues, we are able to deduce that no fewer than twenty grand ministers were involved at the time in authenticating and organising seals in the court. They include: Liang Shizheng, Dong Bangda, Yu Minzhong, Jin Deying, Wang Youdun, Jiang Pu, Qiu Rixiu, Zhang Ruocheng, Qian Weicheng, Qian Rucheng, Wang Jinhua, Jiang Cheng, Ji Huang, Guan Bao, Wang Jie, Dong Hao, Peng Yuanrui, Wu Shenglan, Ruan Yuan, Hu Tuli, Na Yancheng, etc. These mandarins shared an expertise in literature, history, and art and were all experienced scholars, who were especially proficient in the fields of painting and calligraphy. However, as Wang Xiantang put it, they “were not professionals in the field of epigraphy” and it was difficult for them to feel completely confident or entirely in their element in seal authentication and organisation. Therefore, in addition to arranging the seals inspected by Qianlong for categorisation, their responsibility was chiefly to write epilogues for seal registries as per imperial decree.

The basic contents of the epilogues serve two purposes, one of which was to provide further evidence to substantiate Qianlong’s rudimentary conclusions and to reinforce his opinions. For example:

“Regarding the sixteen jade seals, we, your officials, received an edict to be granted the opportunity to conduct a viewing. All the pieces possess luxuriant beauty that shine with warm lustre and lush marbled colours. We then researched their knobs and inscriptions by referring to the Qín Hán Yín Tōng. (...) Since the texts are identical to those in the Compendium and as are the sizes and styles, undoubtedly these seals are of the Hán dynasty.”

Also: “We, your officials, have received a decree to inspect the ten seals. We consulted the Qín Hán Yín Tōng and discovered that there was not the slightest discrepancy in the knob patterns or the seal scripts.”

The other function was to prove the superiority of His Excellency by paying homage to Qianlong for advocating the preservation of antiquity and pursuing a broader knowledge of all things, in addition to investigating ancient matters and promoting the rule of culture and education. For instance:

“His Majesty pursues antiquity and knowledge of all things. While conducting broad searches for his collectibles, he would maintain his judiciousness. There is not a name or item that His Majesty does not research or for which he does not try to make a compilation, albeit not the best of things.”

Wang Xiantang, Wu Dēng Jìng Shè Yú Hùa, Qi Lu Shu She, 1985, p. 68.
sunrise. We feel truly and deeply fortunate that these seals received a viewing by the emperor and could be mentioned in imperial poetry. Those seals that used to be scattered could be gathered, while the ones that fell into oblivion could be brought to light. Items so precious as extremely rare jade discs will thus be passed on for eternity.”

“His Majesty pursues antiquity and emphasises culture. With regard to any name or object that has an ancient origin, all are designated for labelling. Such is an exemplar paradigm for the art circle.” In order to show praise, sometimes the exaltations were exaggerated, as shown in this passage: “The auspicious phrases on the small seal mention longevity nine times and prosperity nine times. Since the character nine symbolises eternity, it implies that the good fortune that subjects of the Son of Heaven receive will last tens of thousands of years. Furthermore, it concurs with the connotation of His Majesty’s circumspection and diligence.”

Considering such adulation, how could the self-promoting and showy Emperor Qianlong not feel light-headed!

By cross-examining the imperial poems of the Qianlong emperor with the epilogues by his officials, it is evident that the key figure in sorting the seals in the Qing palace was the emperor himself.

III. Basic Overview of the Qing Court Seal Collection and Organisation during the Qianlong Reign

The authentication and organisation of the imperial treasury’s seal collection by Emperor Qianlong and his officials were not coincidental or isolated phenomena, but were rather triggered by historical and time factors. First, after the rise of epigraphy in the Song dynasty, people gradually came to appreciate the value of ancient seals. By continuous research, a deeper knowledge of ancient seals was gained and they became collectibles for the imperial family and the literati. Such a trend gained special prominence in the second half of the Ming dynasty, when the collection of seals reached an unprecedented scale. The treasury of the Qing palace received a constant supply of seals by relying on the imperial family’s ability to acquire and to benefit from a trend lingering from the Ming dynasty. By the Qianlong reign, the imperial treasury had already amassed a large quantity of ancient seals. Therefore, the organisation and authentication of its seal depository was an inevitable outcome of its ever-expanding collection, and Emperor Qianlong was merely following the trend in a timely manner.

Second, the knowledge of seals was closely related to Emperor Qianlong’s personal interest. Because of the emperor’s enormous enthusiasm for antiquities, he was prompted to seek out their origins, which inspired him to do further research. During his reign, many types of ancient artefacts were sorted and evaluated while corresponding publications were compiled for wide dissemination. Likewise, Qianlong also had his own opinions on ancient seals. To him, they not only preserved the styles of seal scripts, which contributed to the study of characters, but ancient seals could also
be used to set official historical records and perfect one’s knowledge of court lore. More important, they could evoke a sense of meeting people from the past during the exploration and appreciation process. Caressing the seals triggered an instantaneous sense of nostalgia, like “mounting a bamboo mattress with subject literati, and as if seeing all the sages congregated in the courtyard”. With an understanding of these factors, the organisation and authentication of the emperor’s collection became only natural.

What was the quality of the organisational and authentication work done by Emperor Qianlong and his officials? We shall explain by examining the differences between the results of authentication at the time and conclusions drawn today.

With regard to ancient bronze seals, the biggest type of seal collection during the Qianlong period, we know that with the publication of seal albums, many of the bronze seals became widely known. Despite some categorisation and dating that seemed to be less appropriate, the overall analyses were generally identical to opinions of today. Take, for instance, Mr Zhuang Yunkuan’s comments on the seals in the Jin Xie Liu Zhen collection:

“These secret jewels of the imperial treasury are, once again, what the public has never seen before. Although the seals were not polished thoroughly and include slight blemishes, the imperfections were minor compared to their merits. No more words should be wasted in trying to describe such exquisite beauty.”

Meanwhile, another typical example is Ma Heng’s high regard for the bronze seals from the Hall of Celebrated Cultivation:

“The collection from the Hall of Celebrated Cultivation merely contains hundreds of seals stored inside a box. (...) Relevant research is actually as important as the previously published (seal) album.”

It can be said that the authentication results concluded by Emperor Qianlong and his officials are largely acknowledged by later generations. Regarding ancient jade seals, most were pieces made after the Song dynasty and especially during the Ming dynasty. They include seals of feudal lords during the Warring States period, others of kings at the turn of the Chu and Han dynasties, and still others of renowned Han dynasty officials, as well as seals of ladies, who acquired noble status after the Han dynasty. Most of this batch of jade seals is kept in the Beijing Palace Museum. Luo Fuyi’s evaluation also concluded that the pieces are of the “Ming and Qing periods”, which is significantly different from the authentication result of Emperor Qianlong and his officials. When speaking of the Ming dynasty horn and stone seals, excluding the 162 missing horn seals of renowned sages that cannot be compared, most of the seals allegedly made by Wen Peng remain preserved in the Beijing Palace Museum and are almost all forged.

Why is there such a difference in the results? Analysis indicates two reasons. The first is that results achieved by the epigraphy and sigillography of that era had limitations. Despite the phenomenal development seen in both disciplines during the Ming dynasty, numerous questions remained and an understanding of ancient seals remained rather limited. This situation continued until the beginning of the Qing dynasty. It was rightly said that “approaching the Kangxi to Qianlong period, sigillography was still under the influence from the Ming dynasty and had not yet been able to surpass what had been achieved by their forebears. Therefore, inaccuracies were unavoidable.”

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66 Zhuang Yunkuan, Preface of Jin Xie Liu Zhen, Gu Gong Bo Wu Yuan, 1926.
87 Ma Heng, Preface of Yu Qing Gong Cong Han Tong Yin, Gu Gong Bo Wu Yuan, 1927.
88 Wang Xiantang, Wu Dong Jing She Yin Hua, Qi Lu Shu She, 1985, p. 67.
There was a period called Qianlong during the Qing dynasty with an abundance of antiquities. Nevertheless, none of his entourage or officials specialised in epigraphy, resulting in numerous errors in publications that they compiled, such as *Xi Qing Gu Jian* (The Ancient Mirror of Western Clarity), *Quan Pu* (The Spring Album) and *Yin Pu* (The Seal Album). The same also applied to private publications. These are the results of the era.\(^9\)

The second reason was that the authentication paradigm was mechanically applied to all cases. As mentioned previously, Emperor Qianlong and his officials viewed *Qin Han Yin Tong* as the source of standards in evaluating seals in the imperial treasury. Due to an over-reliance on the *Qin Han Yin Tong*, they not only could not detect that the seals were recently forged, but even regarded those seals as genuine, which affected the accuracy of their authentication.

For these reasons, inaccuracies, inappropriate results, or sometimes even wholesale mistakes occurred during the categorisation and appraisal process carried out by Emperor Qianlong and his officials. Nevertheless, situations like these were bound to happen and their endeavours were undoubtedly noteworthy. It was precisely because of their organisation, authentication and preservation of seals in the court that we are able to gain a more comprehensive understanding of this invaluable collection, and even see part of it today. Meanwhile, their efforts also provide rare source materials for future studies, which can be counted as a blessing in the research of the history of sigillography.

\(^9\)Wang Xiantang, *Wu Deng Jing She Yin Hua*, Qi Lu Shu She, 1985, p. 68.