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THE BEGINNINGS OF ART HISTORY  
AND CONNOISSEURSHIP STUDIES  
IN ANCIENT CHINA\*

**Abstract.** The article presents a history of creating thoughts on art and antiquities in ancient China starting from the Wei and Jin dynasties and ending at the early Song dynasty. The goal of this paper is to present theoretical concepts on painting and calligraphy written by artists and literati scholars in different times, as well as the beginnings of interests in connoisseurship. The article presents, how studies on art theory have changed, achieving higher level of maturity in half of the 9<sup>th</sup> century, i.e. when Zhang Yanyuan wrote “A Record of the Famous Painters of All Dynasties” giving the same a rise to further studies on art.

SCHOLAR-OFFICIALS AS ARTISTS, COLLECTORS,  
AND ART HISTORIANS

As a result of cultural development in China, from the late Tang 唐 dynasty (618–907 AD) began to emerge a new group of independent artists called *shiren hua* 诗人画. In general they were intellectuals occupying official positions, however, in spare time creating art and poetry. Their art, reflecting very often personal impressions rather than trained patterns typical for professional artists, earned more and more popularity amongst imperial as well as private collectors. Nevertheless, *shiren hua*, apart from being learnt men, painters, calligraphers and poets in one person, they also might have been art collectors, who thanks to their intellectual abilities, rather than aristocratic background, developed new more professional attitude towards art col-

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\* This article continues a subject of art collecting in China presented by the author in other texts. Please see: ŁAKOMSKA 2012 a: 9–30; ŁAKOMSKA 2012 b: 19–41; ŁAKOMSKA 2013: 95–115.

lecting.<sup>1</sup> Henceforth, collecting, except for being accumulating activity, became perceived as a sort of scientific discipline, goal of which was analysing, cataloguing and writing about collecting items. At some point, this new approach was connected with a growth of art market and will of possessing genuine works of art, which more and more were difficult to find due to rising number of counterfeits. Thus, records of art pieces wrote by artistically sensitive scholar-officials, often on a basis of their own outstanding collections, were invaluable sources of knowledge for other collectors, researchers and art dealers.

Nonetheless, we should bear in mind that freshly emerging writings compiled for studying and learning about connoisseurship of art were based on earlier literature, dating back times of the Wei 魏 (220–265 AD) and Western Jin 晉 (265–317 AD) dynasties. The earliest text so far known to us, raising the issues of aesthetics concerned calligraphy, and it was the *Caoshu shi* 草书势 (The Configuration of Draft Script) by Cui Yuan 崔瑗 (77–142 AD).<sup>2</sup> A little later, another text appeared titled *Zhuan shi* 篆势 (The Configuration of Seal Script) by Cai Yong 蔡邕 (132–192 AD) essentially bringing up the same issue as *Caoshu shi* i.e. resemblance of the calligraphic forms to the images from nature.<sup>3</sup> In fact it was a clear reference to the passages from *Yijing* 易经 (Book of Changes) presenting the story about rather legendary figure of Cang Jie 仓颉 (c. 2650 BC) and his achievements associated with the creation of Chinese writing. Nevertheless, both texts—*Caoshu shi* and *Zhuan shi* contributed greatly to developing a new concept of calligraphy perceived from now on more as an act of creative activity than simply a tool of communication.

At the same time when Cai Yong lived and wrote his essays, another scholar of Confucian views—Zhao Yi 赵壹 (fl. c. 192 AD) created a critical treatise titled *Feicaoshu* 非草书 (Against Cursive Script; the end of the second century) condemning the grass script. In fact, this diatribe seems to express particularly his author's disappointment with the fact that the grass script had been changed and differed strongly from its original; his dissatisfaction Zhao Yi articulated in the following way:

<sup>1</sup> SENSABAUGH 2004: 8–9.

<sup>2</sup> Translation in EGAN 2004: 277–278.

<sup>3</sup> QIAN 1998: 91; EGAN 2004: 282.

For the grass script which originally was easy and rapid has now on the contrary become difficult and slow: how far it misses its purpose!<sup>4</sup>

In the third century another calligraphy theorist—Wei Heng 卫恒 (252–291 AD) integrated *Caoshu shi* and *Zhuan shi* in his treatise titled *Sitishu shi* 四体书势 (Dynamics of the Four Scripts), the complete text of which was in turn included in *Jin Shu* 晋书 (Book of Jin) compiled by Fang Xuanling 房玄龄 (578–648 AD) and others in 648 AD.<sup>5</sup> Apart from *Sitishu shi* Wei Heng, who held a position of *Bishu cheng* 秘书丞 (the Vice-Director of the Palace Library) was also the author of another book on ancient scripts titled *Guwen guanshu* 顾问官书 (Official Writing of Ancient Script). These two works are of great importance for the development of knowledge on Chinese calligraphy, as they do not only present the image of the beginnings of ancient script in China but also give an idea about the calligraphers' lives, their struggles and artistic performances.<sup>6</sup>

Later texts dealing with critique theory and topics of brush styles in calligraphy belonged to such authors as Yang Xin 羊欣 (370–422 AD), Wang Sengqian 王僧虔 (427–485 AD), Yu He 虞龢 (fl. C. 470 AD) and Yu Jianwu 庾肩吾 (487–551 AD).<sup>7</sup> In general all these treatises touched the same issues of the origins of calligraphy and its meaning, but the main problem which stroke their authors the most seems to concern the standards of artistic evaluation and artists' rankings. The issue of establishing models to imitate was in general one of the foremost principles in Chinese culture, therefore, it shouldn't be surprise that the problem of artistic estimation bothered the theorists of calligraphy in the following decades or even centuries. Moreover, the treatises providing the artistic assessment were conducive for developing the art market, and served as sources of reference in case of possessing pieces of art by master mentioned in a dissertation.

<sup>4</sup> ACKER 1979: LVI.

<sup>5</sup> SHAUGHNESSY 2006: 150. JS: 36. 1061–66. Thorough research on pre-Tang calligraphy present a book of Zhang Tiangong *Xian tangshuxue kao bian wenji* 先唐書學考辨文集. See: ZHANG 2009.

<sup>6</sup> From *Sitishu shi* we learn e.g. about Shi Yiguan 师宜官 one of the greatest Han dynasty calligraphers practicing the “clerical style” (*lishu* 隶书), who happened to write characters on walls of a wine shop in order to collect money for wine from the gathering crowd. Translation of a passage about Shi Yiguan in KNECHTGES: 24; based on JS, 36, 1064.

<sup>7</sup> HARRIST 2004: 31–33. Yang Xin wrote *Cai gulai nengshu renming* 采古来能书人名 (Names of Capable Calligraphers from Antiquity Onward) edited by Wang Sengqian in his *Lunshu* 论书 (On books), see: ZÜRCHER 2007: 138; Yu He was the author of *Lunshu biao* 论书表 (Memorial on Calligraphy) and Yu Jianwu wrote *Shupin* 书品 (Evaluation of calligraphy).

One of such influencing and inspiring ancient texts on calligraphy offering the artistic standards was *Shupu* 书谱 written in 687 AD by Sun Guoting 孙过庭 (or Sun Qianli 孙虔礼) (648–703 AD).<sup>8</sup> The manuscript seems to be designed mainly for those like students, who seek advice and hints as to how create outstanding calligraphy. Sun Guoting did not promise everyone success, nevertheless he encouraged to learn because as he wrote: “... there has never been anybody who succeeded without studying.”<sup>9</sup> Already, in the preface,<sup>10</sup> we find the author’s commend for calligraphy of four artists of the Han 汉 (206 BC–220 AD), Wei 魏 (220–265 AD) and the late Jin 晋 (265–420 AD) dynasties, such as Zhong You 钟繇 (ca. 165–230 AD), Zhang Zhi 张芝 (d. 192 AD), Wang Xizhi 王羲之 (303–361 AD) and Wang Xianzhi 王献之 (344–386 AD), whose art in general was praised by critics, though in a slightly different than Sun Guoting’s hierarchy layout.<sup>11</sup> According to Sun Guoting it was Wang Xizhi who surpassed others, for he mastered a technique of combing the styles, however his son—Wang Xianzhi who practised the same method and claimed to be even better than his father did not gain a higher grade in Sun Guoting’s evaluation.<sup>12</sup> Despite rather vague explanation that Wang Xianzhi used his father’s method “in a rough way,” we can expect that the real reason of such assessment laid in traditional approach to the hierarchy in Chinese family, what Sun Guoting actually expressed in the following words: “establishing oneself and enhancing one’s reputation serve to reflect honour on one’s parents.”<sup>13</sup>

After Sun Guoting’s treatise appeared subsequently other texts on calligraphy such as Zhang Huiguan’s 张怀瓘 (fl. first half of the eight century) *Shuduan* 书断 (Judgements on calligraphy, 727 AD) containing all texts about calligraphy from Han to Tang;<sup>14</sup> Dou Ji’s 窦泉 (fl. mid of the eight century) *Shu shu fu* 述书赋上 (Prose Descriptions of Calligraphy Art, 775 AD) annotated by his elder brother Dou Meng 窦蒙 (fl. mid of the eight century)<sup>15</sup> and *Fashu yaolu* 法书要录 (Essentials Records on Calligraphy)

<sup>8</sup> English translation of Sun Guoting’s (or Sun Qianli) “Treatise on Calligraphy” in: CHANG, FRANKEL 1995: 1–16.

<sup>9</sup> A quotation adapted from CHANG, FRANKEL 1995: 12.

<sup>10</sup> In fact the preface is the only original calligraphic work of Sun Guoting that has survived to our days and is currently kept in the Palace Museum in Taipei.

<sup>11</sup> CHANG, FRANKEL 1995: 1.

<sup>12</sup> CHANG, FRANKEL 1995: 2.

<sup>13</sup> A quotation from: CHANG, FRANKEL 1995: 2.

<sup>14</sup> FSYL 7–9.221–316.

<sup>15</sup> FSYL 5–6.173–220.

written and compiled by Zhang Yanyuan 张彦远 (c. 810–c. 880 AD), whose work contained records many of which were not noted anywhere else and composed by writers since the 2<sup>nd</sup> century.<sup>16</sup>

Apart from writings about calligraphy, beginning with the Wei-Jin period there were also compiled dissertations about styles, theory and practice in painting. William Acker argued that the reason as to why the texts about painting appeared relatively later to the papers about calligraphy was that:

... calligraphy, besides being a great art, was also a practical accomplishment which every man of any consequence had perforce to learn. And so, because it was a discipline which every educated man had undergone, it followed that every educated man, having had to practice it himself, was thereby in a position to appreciate to some extent the beauty of the work of the great masters of the art [...] For this reason the appreciation of the beauty of the swift, strong “calligraphic line,” whether in writing or painting was natural to greater numbers of people than could ever have been the case elsewhere, and it was inevitable that the feeling for the sensitive brush line should become the chief means of judging works of art among a people so well trained to understand just this quality.<sup>17</sup>

One of the first writers who had a significant contribution to the theories of painting was Gu Kaizhi 顾恺之 (c. 344–406 AD) the author of three short treatises: *Lun hua* 论画 (Discussion on Painting), *Wei Jin shengliu huazan* 魏晋胜流画赞 (Eulogy on Outstanding Paintings of the Wei and Jin Dynasties) and *Hua yuntaishan ji* 画云台山记 (Notes on a Painting of Cloud Terrace Mountain).<sup>18</sup> The next one was Zong Bing 宗炳 (375–443 AD) the author of *Hua shanshui xu* 画山水序 (Introduction to Landscape Painting)—which is probably the first treatise in the world raising the issues of perspective and its application in relation to the landscape painting.<sup>19</sup> Later in age was *Xu Hua* 序画 (On Painting) by Wang Wei 王微 (415–453 AD), discussing painting as fine art on a par with calligraphy.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, according to Wang Wei the real purpose of landscape painting

<sup>16</sup> The full text of FSYL has been preserved in *Jindai mishu* 津逮秘书 (The Collection of Mysterious Writings)—the edition compiled by Mao Jin 毛晋 (1599–1659 AD)—a famous printer and book collector.

<sup>17</sup> A quotation after ACKER 1979: XIII.

<sup>18</sup> These three articles were included and quoted by Zhang Yanyuan in his “Record of the Famous Painters of All the Dynasties,” and then mentioned in *Siku quanshu zongmu* 四庫全書總目 “Imperial Library Catalogue” or “Complete Library of the Four Treasures” completed in 1782. ACKER 1979: XLIX; ACKER 1974: chapter 4.

<sup>19</sup> ZHANG 2006: 44–45; JACOBY 2009: 37–38; 112–113.

<sup>20</sup> BUSH 2004: 60–80, especially 69–70.

was not to present resemblance of the surrounding world (such as it was in case of a painting by Xie Zhuang's 谢庄 (421–466 AD), also an author of a treatise: *Hua qin tiexu* 画琴帖序 (Short Introduction to Painting and the Lute), showing a detailed map of topography), but one's feelings about nature.<sup>21</sup>

More substantive than the previous treatises, though covering merely six pages of text in the old woodblock editions was a manuscript by Xie He 谢赫 (fl. 5<sup>th</sup> c. AD) titled *Gu huapin lu* 古画品录 (Old Record of the Classifications of Painters).<sup>22</sup> The work of Xie He was composed in a form similar to the earlier treatises classifying calligraphers into grades according to the quality of their work.<sup>23</sup> Xie He's selection of twenty-seven painters divided into six ranks must have been, however, quite controversial. The author did not follow the common judgements and did not categorize Gu Kaizhi in the first class as it was generally accepted but placed him in the third group, adding the following comment:

His style and execution were refined and minute and he never used his brush haphazardly. But his works did not come up to his conceptions, and his fame goes beyond the reality.<sup>24</sup>

Nevertheless, despite controversy Xie He's opinions were influential in later ages, especially because of the theory of the Six Elements, which was to facilitate estimation of specific works of art or painters. These six canons called: Spirit Resonance, Bone Method, Correspondence to the Object, Suitability to Type, Division and Planning, and Transmission by copying,<sup>25</sup> stipulated a direction of artistic creativity for over next one thousand years becoming the main principles of Chinese painting.

After Xie He's *Gu huapin lu* appeared *Xu huapin* 续画品 (Continuation of the Classifications of Painters) by Yao Zui 姚最 (fl. 6<sup>th</sup> c. AD), which treats about twenty painters from the time of about 420 to 557 AD.<sup>26</sup> Although, the text was considered as continuation of Xie He's work it differs in layout

<sup>21</sup> ZHANG 2006: 45; BUSH 2004: 63, 71.

<sup>22</sup> Translation in: ACKER 1979: 1–32. The author's explanation as to the translation of the title of Xie He's work: ACKER 1979: XIV. See also the article of Victor H. MAIR 2004: 81–122.

<sup>23</sup> ACKER 1979: XII.

<sup>24</sup> ACKER 1979: 19.

<sup>25</sup> ACKER 1979: 4.

<sup>26</sup> Translation in: ACKER 1979: 33–58. The text was probably produced during the reign of the Emperor Yuan Di 元帝 (552–555 AD). ACKER 1979: XLV.

(there is no division into six classes) and in painters' rankings, e.g. Yao Zui gave the art of Gu Kaizhi the highest grade. He wrote:

But when it comes to praising one such as Gu Kaizhi, (one can only say that) he commands the highest place in the records of the past and stands lofty alone. In all time he had no equal. He had a sort of supernatural brilliance, which ordinary intelligence could never hope to realise.<sup>27</sup>

In the seventh century, in turn, one of the most important works on painting was *Zhenguan gong si hua shi* 贞观公私画史 (Record of Paintings in Public and Private Collections in the Zhenguan Era) written by Pei Xiaoyuan 裴孝源 (fl. ca. 639 AD).<sup>28</sup> The author listed almost three hundred of painting scrolls and forty-seven wall paintings belonging to the imperial and private collections as well as to temples. At some point, the record of Pei Xiaoyuan closes early period of formation of the art history discipline, and in consequence art connoisseurship in China. Nonetheless, the first historical theses providing opportunities for deeper studies on connoisseurship and collecting were written and compiled by Zhang Yanyuan. *Lidai minghua ji* 历代名画记 (A Record of the Famous Painters of All Dynasties, 847 AD) and *Fashu yaolu* 法书要录 are undeniably two remarkable works enabling not only acquaintance with the early history of Chinese collecting, but also presenting the personal author's passions for art, its accumulating and preserving. Zhang Yanyuan must have been entirely convinced about the significance of his projects, in particular, the project on painting. This assumption results from the fact that he often compared his work with earlier treatises not sparing the critical comments on them, e.g. he wrote that they all of them "are shallow, thin, incomplete, and sketchy, not covering more than a few pages."<sup>29</sup> Zhang Yanyuan belief in the superiority of his work over the others, in particular over the Pei Xiaoyuan's paper is even more evident in the following passage: "His (Pei Xiaoyuan's) classification [of the painters] according to grades was made in arbitrary manner, and it is absolutely unworthy of consideration,"<sup>30</sup> whereas selection used in *Lidai minghua ji*, in the eyes of his author was made without hasty generalizations and was based on "wide experience of seeing things."

<sup>27</sup> A quotation after ACKER 1979: 36.

<sup>28</sup> ZGGSHS 1997: 9–22.

<sup>29</sup> ACKER 1979: 144.

<sup>30</sup> ACKER 1979: 202.

Born to a high-ranking family in Puzhou 蒲州 (Shanxi), Zhang worked as a ministry counsellor of the *Ci* 词 (Poetry or Words) department. However, apart from his official position he must have been a very gifted collector, about which did not fail to mention in one of the chapters of his book. He wrote:

Ever since my childhood I have been a collector of rare things, and have been assiduous day and night in the appreciation and enjoyment of them, and in mounting and putting them in good order. Whenever I hunted down a hand-scroll or a hanging scroll, I would be sure to mend and repair it diligently, and spend whole days in gloating over it. When there was a chance of getting something, I would even sell my old clothes and cut down (the allowance for) rice and other foods. My wife and children and the servants nag and tease me, sometimes saying: “What good does it do, after all, to spend all day doing useless things”? At which I sigh and say: “But if one does not do these useless things, then how can one find pleasure in this life which has an end?” And so as my passion grows more and more violent it comes near to being an irresistible craving.”<sup>31</sup>

Nonetheless, this love for art and art collecting Zhang Yanyuan, in somehow, must have inherited from his great ancestors, especially from his great grandfather—an imperial censor during the reigns of Wu Zetian 武则天 (r. 690–705 AD), the Duke of Hedong 河东—Zhang Jiazhen 张嘉贞 (666–729 AD), and his grandfather—a chancellor during the reign of the Emperor Dezong 德宗 (r. 779–805 AD), the Duke of Wei 魏—Zhang Yanshang 张延赏 (723 or 727–787 AD). Both of them Zhang Yanyuan introduced in his book writing, that they “successively collected famous works of art.”<sup>32</sup> Talking about the Duke of Wei, Zhang Yanyuan also referred to his grandfather’s best friend the Duke of Zhen 贞—Li Mian 李勉 (717–788 AD), who as well was an avid collector of rare things, and famous works of the Wei and Jin dynasties.<sup>33</sup> According to the author both men—the Duke of Wei and the Duke of Zhen would spend days admiring and discussing psaltery and painting. It seems that Li Mian was very fond of musical instruments, and even carved psalteries with his own hands—the two finest of all the Duke had made, were called “Echo Fountain” and “Resonant Stone-chines.”<sup>34</sup>

<sup>31</sup> ACKER 1979: 211.

<sup>32</sup> ACKER 1979: 132.

<sup>33</sup> ACKER 1979: 133.

<sup>34</sup> ACKER 1979: 135.



In 818 the Zhang family's collection, however, was depleted. It happened so because of some discord between Wei Hongjian 魏弘简 (Zhang Yanyuan's grandfather) and apparently envious Duke Gaoping 高平, who informed about a wealth of his rival's collection the Emperor Xianzong 宪宗 (805–820 AD).<sup>35</sup> Xianzong in turn, ordered the institution called Chen Han 宸翰 (Imperial Palace of Writing Brush) to send a letter to Wei Hongjian, in which demanded all the greatest treasures from his collection. As Zhang Yanyuan informs us, his grandfather did not dare to hide anything, but made a selection of his best pieces and presented them to the ruler.<sup>36</sup> The selection was as follow: one writing by each of the famous calligraphers, such as Zhong You 钟繇 (151–230 AD), Zhang Zhi 张芝 (d. 192 AD), Lady Wei 卫 and Suo Jing 索靖 (239–303 AD); five scrolls of each of the Two Wangs; a scroll of calligraphy for each Wei 魏, Jin 晋, Song 宋, Qi 齐, Liang 梁, Chen 陈 and Sui 隋 dynasties; and thirty scrolls of paintings by masters such as Gu Kaizhi, Lu Tanwei 陆探微 (active 450–490 AD), Zhang Sengyou 张僧繇 (490–540 AD), Zheng Fashi 郑法士 (active during the Sui dynasty (589–618 AD)), Tian Sengliang 田僧亮 (active during the Northern Qi (550–589 AD)), Yang Qidan 杨契丹 (active during the Sui dynasty (589–618 AD)), Dong Boren 董伯仁 (active during the Sui dynasty (589–618 AD)) and Zhan Ziqian 展子虔 (active during the Sui dynasty (589–618 AD)).

Wei Hongjian added also to the gift a nimbly written letter, expressing author's complete understanding as to the emperor's wish to possess rare things, and belief in Xianzong's content of the gift. Moreover, as if it was not enough, Wei Hongjian sent separately a painting entitled "Genuine Picture of the Emperor Xuanzong Engaged in Horse Archery" by Chen Hong 陈闳—the Marshal of the Palace of the Prince Yong 永. Along with the scroll, the collector joined another letter, praising the Emperor Xuanzong for his artistic character, and the same making an allusion to the equally artistic

<sup>35</sup> ACKER 1979: 138–139.

<sup>36</sup> Hiding works of art did not always produce effects, what illustrates the story about Wang Ya 王涯 (d. 835 AD)—Duke of Dai 代 whose precious collection of paintings and calligraphy hidden behind double walls in his own residence became destroyed just after the soldiers of the powerful eunuch Qiu Shiliang 仇士良 (d. 843 AD) cruelly murdered the Duke and all his family. Wang Ya was killed as a result of political machinations caused by eunuchs falsely accusing Wang of plotting against the Emperor Wenzong 文宗 (r. 829–840 AD). After the Duke's death thieves looted his residence stealing from the hidden collection mainly jade and golden ornaments abandoning or destroying the rest of the works of art. (厚为垣窃, 而藏之复壁。至是, 人破其垣取之, 或剔取函奩金宝之饰与其玉轴而弃之). JTS 169.4404.

nature of the Emperor Xianzong. As one might guess the imperial response was very friendly and according to Zhang Yanyuan, went as follow:

... A collector of calligraphy as well as of painting, your accuracy and breadth of knowledge are both perfect. When We opened and reverently examined the painting of Xuanzong engaged in horse-archery, which you sent separately. We were overcome with emotion, as though actually in the presence of the spirit of Our sage ancestor. The calligraphy by Zhong (You), Zhang (Zhi) and the rest, and the paintings by Gu (Kaizhi), Lu (Tanwei), etc., are things honoured alike in Antiquity and today, and treasured by those who possess the dwell in Our hours of leisure from affairs of state, and by this means We may know how the subtleties of red and blues may sometimes harmonize with the work of Creation (*zao huo* 造化). For We desire to view these symbols [*xiang* 象] in order to examine Our Person, and by no means should we enjoy things (merely) out of a love for the curious. All the more, therefore, do We appreciate your having taken the trouble to compose a memorial.<sup>37</sup>

In this way, the Emperor expressed not only his admiration to Wei Hongjian's collecting taste and his ingenuity, but also gave to understand that as an enlightened man he was able to benefit from his own knowledge to enjoy consciously art pieces and not only the fact of their exceptional nature. Regardless of kindness on the part of the Emperor, and fact that Wei Hongjian saved his head, neither he nor anyone else outside the court could ever see again the precious works of calligraphy and paintings, which were deposited in the Inner Storehouse. In addition, most of the works, which had remained to the Wei Hongjian's family were lost in 821 during the rebellion of Zhu Kerong 朱克融 (d. 826 AD). Zhang Yanyuan, thus, must have rebuilt the family's collection in a very arduous way. We cannot exclude that he did get a benefit from some art dealers, as his great grandfather did in 785, receiving "a considerable number of original works" from a dealer called Sun Fangyong 孙方颢.<sup>38</sup> However, there is no clear explanation what works of art Zhang Yanyuan finally managed to gather, we can only assume, that it must

<sup>37</sup> ACKER 1979: 141. See also there: p. 67, where is explanation, what kind of forms meant the emperor (Acker translates *xiang* 象 as symbols, though in my opinion it can also be translated as forms or images). For, the Emperor Xianzong has referred to words expressed supposedly by the legendary Emperor Shun 舜 (of Shang dynasty), which in turn were captured in *Shangshu* 尚书 (The Book of Documents). Shun instructing his ministers as to their responsibilities had to say: "When I desire to contemplate the symbols (*xiang* 象) of the Ancients, (such as) the sun and moon, the stars, mountains, dragons, and pheasants done in colours [...] it is you who distinguish them for me."

<sup>38</sup> ACKER 1979: 207.

have been truly impressive collection, which undoubtedly also served as a source for his literary work.

Apart from writing, and collecting Zhang Yanyuan also did calligraphy and paintings, however, not to satisfy his ambition, but rather to amuse himself. Moreover, his historical knowledge about pieces of art was combined with deep care about their appropriate preservation and conservation, what clearly expressed in the following passage:

Now works in the hands of those who do not know how to value and enjoy them are abused and insulted on the slightest provocation. People who do not know how to go about rolling and unrolling (scrolls) soon cause damage by handling them roughly and pawing them over; and people who do not understand how they are backed and mounted leave them laying about just anywhere and so harm them. Is it not painful (to think) that, as a result, they are causing the number of genuine works to become smaller and smaller? Writings and paintings should not be entrusted to the care of anyone not a real amateur of the arts. One should never look at calligraphy and paintings near a fire or candle. In wind or sunlight (this also applies) and when one has just been eating, drinking, spitting, or blowing one's nose one should never look at calligraphy or paintings without first washing one's hands.<sup>39</sup>

Furthermore, Zhang Yanyuan in his dissertation gave a lot of other suggestions regarding scroll mounting, backing, ornamental borders and rollers.<sup>40</sup> All of this to show that connoisseurship of art is not a mere spiritual entertainment, but also a responsibility for a material substance of every piece of art, which is a part of the national heritage, and even though Zhang Yanyuan doesn't say that in a straight way, his message is very palpable through all his text.

#### RISE OF ANTIQUARIANISM

Despite so thorough research about painting and calligraphy till the beginning of the Song 宋 dynasty (960–1279 AD) there was no any substantial study about antiquities. Although, at some point appeared two texts about bronze collecting, such as *Gujin daojian lu* 古今刀筌录, (Notes on ancient

<sup>39</sup> ACKER 1979: 210.

<sup>40</sup> "On Mounting, Backing, Ornamental Borders, and Rollers," in: ACKER 1979: 242–253 (Section III, Chapter III.).

and modern swords and knives) ascribed to Tao Hongjing 陶弘景 (452/456 – 536 AD),<sup>41</sup> and *Dinglu* 鼎录 (Notes on *ding*) attributed to Yu Li 虞荔 (503–551 AD),<sup>42</sup> but in fact, they might have been falsified and produced much later than it is assumed.<sup>43</sup> The first one included a list of swords and knives' owners, who collected weapon belonging once to emperors, feudal lords, generals of the Wu 吳 Kingdom (222–280 AD) and generals of the Wei 魏 Kingdom (220–265 AD), as well as dates of their production (or obtainment), measurements, inscriptions, and in some cases short notes. The second one in turn was a short record of *ding*'s owners, also including dates of production, inscriptions, and in some cases short notes, measurements and locations of storing.

How weakly was developed research on antiquities in comparison to studies on calligraphy and painting we can observe through a script *Sanlitu* 三礼图 (Illustration of the Three Ritual Classics), written and presented to the Emperor Taizu 太祖 (960–976 AD) by a Confucian scholar Nie Chongyi 聂崇义, (d. 962 AD).<sup>44</sup> *Sanlitu* was produced in order to study rites, not particularly antiquities, and most of its illustrations showing ancient vessels or ritual jades were simply pictures based on earlier writings and author's imagination, but not on really existing objects. The main course of Nie Chongyi's considerations was based on the thought that "a vessel should reflect a certain shape."<sup>45</sup> However, the presence of the genuine jades or bronzes, shapes of which might have been regarded as undisputable models was rather at that time invisible, and apart from written—though frequently mistaken, descriptions treating about items used during the rituals, there was no other references.<sup>46</sup> Therefore, Nie Chongyi's pictures showing e.g. jades *gu* 谷 *bi* and *pu* 蒲 *bi* (with images of cereal and grass), *zu* 馐 *cong* (in the shape of octagonal instead of prism), or *da* 大 *cong* (with bizarre bulge in the middle of the eight side surface), and vessels *jue* 爵 shaped like a sparrow with a cup on its back, were entirely literal interpretation of remained texts.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>41</sup> CHENG 2010: 98–99. Based on SKQS, vol. 840.

<sup>42</sup> CHENG 2010: 99. Based on SKQS, vol. 840.

<sup>43</sup> CHENG 2010: 99.

<sup>44</sup> XDSLTL 2006; CHANG 2000: 21–22. EBREY 2008: 475.

<sup>45</sup> Quotation after: CHANG 2000: 23.

<sup>46</sup> According to Song dynasty intellectualist—Ouyang Xiu 欧阳修 (1007–1072 AD), scholars of the Han dynasty who already tried to reconstruct the original content of the "Six Classics" *Liu Jing* 六经 did not always do it properly contaminating the old texts with subjects connected with current divinations. CHANG 2000: 22.

<sup>47</sup> XDSLTL 2006: 301; 302; 309; 310; 370; 466.

In the absence of other sources *Sanlitu* became a new paradigm for conducting rituals, meaning of which was especially significant from a political point of view, as for a freshly set up dynasty there was nothing more stabilizing as a settled system of rites. Thus, in order to facilitate a spread of *Sanlitu*'s content, its illustrations had been copied on the wall of the lecture hall at the National University, and served as a mean of information for those who were working on this subject matter.<sup>48</sup> In consequence, it led to launching for almost 200 years a manufacture of completely new vessels, which might have had a considerable influence on a change of conducting rituals,<sup>49</sup> and paradoxically had also influence on deepening of antiquarian studies, which were a response of connoisseurs' environment to scientific incompetence on the part of the author in terms of knowledge of the antiquities. After publishing Nie Chongyi's book other papers on antiquities became increasingly visible,<sup>50</sup> revealing more researching skills of their authors and expressing, rather crushing critique of *Sanlitu*'s dilettantism. Nevertheless, even though, it might have been perceived as naïve and completely devoid of professionalism Nie Chongyi's work is undeniably an important source of information, exposing, however, a sad truth about the lost—probably within a few hundreds of years—knowledge on ancient bronzes and jades' appearances.

One might ask however, what happened then to the ritual bronzes after the Han dynasty and whether they totally disappeared? The answer is difficult, due to the insufficient archaeological material.<sup>51</sup> Even though there is

<sup>48</sup> CHANG 2000: 21–22.

<sup>49</sup> Production of new vessels based on *Sanlitu* lasted till 1143, when the Emperor Gaozong 高宗 (r. 1127–1162 AD) ordered to prepare *Xuan he bogu tu lu* 宣和博古图录 (Illustrated Description of Antiquities Contained in the *Xuan he* Palace). Nonetheless, it must be mention that, there was a period during the reign of the Emperor Huizong 徽宗 (1100–1126 AD), when the Ritual Revision Service—set up in 1108—tried to restore the correct shapes of the ancient vessels. Unfortunately, due to the conquest of northern China by Mongols in 1127 all these efforts were wasted. See CHANG 2000: 23.

<sup>50</sup> The invention of printing was one of the greatest accomplishments of Chinese culture. During the Tang dynasty it was invented the carved woodblock printing, which later modernised thanks to movable types. Nonetheless, the woodblock print industry developed on a great scale already during the Northern and Southern dynasties, when invented new printing techniques, as well as refined paper and ink qualities. About printing examples in ancient China see: EACIA 2008: 190–239.

<sup>51</sup> It is said that Liu Zhiliang (sixth century) of the Liang dynasty owned several hundred bronze vessels but there is no more detailed information about this collection. See HARRIST 1995: 238.

a hypothesis about the production of traditional vessels along with the new bronze forms throughout the Six Dynasties period and the Sui dynasty, but the scholars are still quite sceptical.<sup>52</sup> There is high probability, however, that the emergence of a new ceramic technology and the rise of Buddhism, as well as, the advanced metal working knowledge during the Tang dynasty were the main factors which contributed to the fall of the bronze vessel industry. It seems that especially products made of silver and gold attracted more and more attention and became new objects of desire instead of ancient bronze vessels. Amateurs of golden objects were e.g. the Prince of Hejian 河间—Yuan Chen 元琛 of the Northern Wei dynasty and the Prince Xiao Xu 萧续 (d. 535 AD) the son of the Emperor Wu 武 (r. 502–549 AD) of the Liang dynasty. Yuan Chen according to the *Luoyang qielan ji* 洛阳伽蓝记 (A Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Loyang) by Yang Xuanzhi 杨衒之 had a great collection of gold and silver items made especially for his requirements.<sup>53</sup> Most of the objects were related to the subject of horses, of which Yuan Chen was very affectionate, the remaining items belonged to a group of more than 100 gold bottles and silver cauldrons and different gold and silver wine sets. It is said that the Prince loved showing off his collection to his guests. No less attractive must have been collection of the Prince Xiao Xu who managed to gather during all his life over one thousand items made of gold and silver, given after the prince's death to his father.<sup>54</sup>

It seems that especially during the Tang dynasty treasuring of luxurious gold and silver objects developed on a great scale, particularly amongst imperial members and high rank officials. A great example of that are findings from the hoards near Xi'an, such as that at Hejiacun 何家村, where amid one thousand objects archaeologists unearthed 270 unusual gold and silver vessels, many of which had foreign shapes but decorated with Chinese motives. It is still uncertain at whose workshop those objects were made and to whom they belonged. Nonetheless, there are some researches inclining towards a theory about hiding these precious objects by Liu Zhen 刘桢,

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<sup>52</sup> Robert J. Herold in his article about the Post-Han ritual vessels expressed a disagreement over the standard opinion as to the non-existence any forms after the Han. He wrote: "Between the end of the Han, and the beginning of the Sui, three hundred and sixty years elapsed. It seems incomprehensible that, in this time, the tradition of bronze vessels should have suddenly disappeared without trace, rhyme, or reason. The various containers of the later Han, elegant in their simplicity, appear to be leading somewhere." See HEROLD 1975: 259.

<sup>53</sup> RAY 2009:165.

<sup>54</sup> HEROLD 1975: 278.

a high ranking official responsible for the palace possessions, who might have ordered taking as much as it was possible from the imperial treasure after a mutiny fomented by soldiers from the Jingyuan 泾原 Circuit (modern Pingliang 平凉, Gansu) in 783 AD and the Emperor Dezong's 德宗 (r. 779–805 AD) flee.<sup>55</sup>

Whoever was the possessor of the Hejiacun hoard it must have been a person with an exclusive taste and passion for original things. Beautiful eared cups with designs of musicians and hunting scenes, or bowls with patterns of lotus petals and mandarin ducks, sea animals, dragon and phoenix, lions, flowers and birds, or pots and flasks with designs of dancing horses etc. show the highest level of craft's quality. They seem to be objects of utility, however due to their uniqueness and value, were most likely treated as precious gems and used only on special occasions to indulge their owner or his/her special guests. Apart from vessels, however, the Hejiacun hoard contained group of 466 gold, silver and copper coins, which due to various time of mint—ranging from the Warring States (475–221 BC) to the Tang dynasty, and diverse provenances including foreign currency from the Byzantine Empire (610–711 AD), the Sasanian Empire (of the King Khusro II 590–627 AD) and Japan (coins of *He Tong Kai Zhen* 和同开珎 from 708 AD),<sup>56</sup> may indicate some collecting fancy.<sup>57</sup>

Supposedly, this fascination with innovative metal works and beginnings of aesthetic appreciation of ceramics as an art form developed during the Tang dynasty<sup>58</sup> might have had a considerable impact on decreased interest in bronzes. However, with the advent of the Song dynasty, something had changed and it seems that the need of recollecting the old rituals, and thus ancient vessels (symbolically confirming a privilege of kingship) became a matter of national importance. How significant was this call for studies can certify the Emperor Renzong's 仁宗 (r. 1022–1063 AD) decree from 1051 AD, in which the ruler ordered turning over the bells and tripods kept in the Bi Ge 秘阁 and Tai Chang 太常 Pavilions to the Institute of Music

<sup>55</sup> From the foreword of SHAANXI 2010.

<sup>56</sup> SHAANXI 2010: 74–89.

<sup>57</sup> The Hejiacun hoard also uncovered its unknown owner's penchant for ornaments made of jades and precious stones, such as the gilded jade armband or 10 sets of jade belts plaques, as well as different sorts of cups, such as 3 agate cups (including one with gilded ox head), the crystal oval cup, white jade cup with design of honeysuckles and the glass cup with raised beads. SHAANXI 2010: 6–15.

<sup>58</sup> WATT 1990: 68.

*Taiyuesuo* 太乐所 for the purpose of study, comparison, measurement and weighing.<sup>59</sup> Nevertheless, those who primary were interested in bronzes and their collecting did not belong to the court, but to the intellectual society of scholars.<sup>60</sup> At the time, when the court began to pay attention to restoration of rituals and produced new vessels based on—as it were thought—original shapes of ancient bronzes, the scholars began to concentrate on their anti-quarian meaning and tried to develop researching methods through identification of antiquities, their description and application. This situation led to a sort of dichotomy in collecting antiquities, as another goal guided private collections and another imperials’.

“GOVERNMENT MODEL LETTERS”  
AS A PROJECT OF IMPERIAL ART HISTORY

Delayed court’s interest in conducting research on antiquities—in relation to scholars from the outside of the palace environment—caused that the court experts trying as if to catch up the lost time began working intensively on history of calligraphy. Practically, the imperial attention had been focused on aesthetic values of calligraphy since the Eastern Han dynasty,<sup>61</sup> though the idea to create the official history of calligraphy in illustrated form belonged to the emperor of the Northern Song dynasty. The initiator of the project titled variously as *Guan fatie* 官法贴 (Government Model Letters), or *Chunhua ge tie* 淳化阁贴 (Model Letters of the Imperial Archives in the Chunhua Era), or *Chunhua mige fatie* 淳化秘阁法贴 (Chunhua Pavilion Copy book) was the Emperor Taizong of Song (r. 976–997 AD).<sup>62</sup> The ruler like his predecessor from the Tang dynasty deeply admired the art of Wang Xizhi, what was of great importance in constructing the general plan of the project.

Song Taizong ordered Wang Zhu 王箸 (d. 990 AD)—a skilful calligrapher whose art the emperor highly admired—to select the finest works of calligraphy stored in the Imperial Archives.<sup>63</sup> The pieces of calligraphy,

<sup>59</sup> WANG 1927: 223.

<sup>60</sup> WANG 1927: 222–223; 225–226; EBREY 2008: 473–74.

<sup>61</sup> It means from the time, when a script was “established everywhere throughout the Chinese culture area as a fine art” as wrote William Acker. ACKER 1979: XII. See also HARRIST 2004: 32, 51 n. 4.

<sup>62</sup> See the article of MCNAIR 1994: 209–225.

<sup>63</sup> MCNAIR 1994: 210.



chosen by Wang Zhu came largely from the former emperors' collections accumulated in the Chunhua Pavilion, though among the selected group were also new acquisitions made by Taizong's agents and Wang Zhu himself.<sup>64</sup> The work on the project apart from the substantive contribution required artistic preparation—as the original pieces of calligraphy had been copied on paper and then engraved in wooden plates. The result of this work was a publication containing 419 calligraphic works of some one hundred calligraphers dating back from Han to the mid-Tang dynasties.<sup>65</sup> In total, the compendium consisted of ten volumes, of which the first one was dedicated to “Model Letters of Emperors and Princess of Successive Dynasties” (mainly from the Han, Six Dynasties and Tang dynasties); the second, the third and the fourth volumes were devoted to “Model Letters of Famous Ministers of Successive Dynasties” (most of these models had been done by those who had high affinity to Wang Xizhi, or came from the same social circle or simply made calligraphy in his style);<sup>66</sup> the fifth volume contained “Antique Model Letters of the Masters” (presenting calligraphy of figures formally “outside the political system,”<sup>67</sup> such as those from the pre-Han times, when the classical tradition had not been yet developed, or female and Buddhist artists); the latter five volumes were totally dedicated to the works of Wang Xizhi and Wang Xianzhi (e.g. the volumes sixth, seventh and eight contained 160 letters attributed to Wang Xizhi, and the volumes ninth and tenth presented 73 letters attributed to Wang Xianzhi).

Such construction of the project, half of which was dedicated to presenting the works of Wang Xizhi and the calligraphic traditions connected with the style of the master suggests a specific political idea behind this undertaking. Amy McNair explained it in a following way:

The preponderance of works by Wang Xizhi in the *Chunhua ge tie* represents Song Taizong's perpetuation of the imperial identification with Wang Xizhi set by Tang Taizong. Song Taizong also promoted the Wang style in Tang Taizong's manner.

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<sup>64</sup> McNAIR 1994: 210.

<sup>65</sup> In September 5<sup>th</sup> and September 7<sup>th</sup> 2003 Shanghai Internet news: english.eastday.com informed that the four volumes of the Song dynasty *Chunhua ge tie* were purchased from a certain American by the Shanghai Museum. The Museum claimed then that it were the only existing original copies of the compendium and that “the rest six volumes are yet to be discovered,” however, during the sale 8474 at the Christie's Auction House in 18 September 1996 was sold the sixth volume engraved in 992 AD, where it is now, hardly to say.

<sup>66</sup> McNAIR 1994: 211.

<sup>67</sup> McNAIR 1994: 212.

He, too, commanded the calligraphers of the Hanlin Academy to practice the style of Wang Xizhi, and he gathered the extant works of Wang Xizhi for the Imperial Archives. His modern contribution to the imperial program of propaganda was the engraving of the *Chunhua ge tie*. [...] Song Taizong sponsored the Wang style for the same reason Tang Taizong did for the political legitimation conferred by identification with the elite aristocratic style.<sup>68</sup>

Moreover, the *Chunhua ge tie* also had another political significance equal to that which had ancient bronzes and charts, namely, confirmation of power.<sup>69</sup> Fact of gathering the whole group of important pieces of calligraphy in one compendium accomplished on the basis of the Imperial collection was a deliberate action aimed at presenting the people documents that were inviolable proof of legitimacy of the throne—“the strands and leading ropes which can regulate disorders”—as Zhang Yanyuan once wrote.<sup>70</sup> Nonetheless, the *Chunhua ge tie* included a substantial number of fakes what particularly proved and criticised scholars of the Northern Song dynasty, such as Ouyang Xiu 欧阳修 (1007–1072), Huang Bosi 黄伯思 (1079–1118 AD) or Mi Fu 米芾 (1051–1107 AD).<sup>71</sup> But even with this broken reputation, the *Chunhua ge tie* still enjoyed the prestige, what likely was the result of very strong propaganda for the classical style imposed by the court. Moreover, this imperial publication regarded by many scholars as unreliable source of information, paradoxically contributed to development of research among scholars on material substance of bronzes as well as on epigraphy in Northern Song dynasty. Disappointment with this book aroused in the connoisseurs’ circles caused that private collectors began to publish compendia containing engraved works of calligraphy transferred from the original steles.<sup>72</sup> From this time on began a new era of connoisseurship and art history, which should be discussed separately.

<sup>68</sup> McNAIR 1994: 213.

<sup>69</sup> McNAIR 1994: 213.

<sup>70</sup> ACKER 1979: 77.

<sup>71</sup> McNAIR 1994: 210; McNAIR 1998: 10.

<sup>72</sup> Open criticism of the scholar environment, did not completely degrade “Model Letters of the Imperial Archives,” which the book was continually published, however, in new re-engraved and annotated editions. McNAIR 1994: 214.

## CONCLUSIONS

Searching for the beginnings of the art history and connoisseurship studies in ancient China, we may say that they took place already in the Wei and Jin dynasties, or at least, that it was time of creating the beginnings of thoughts on art. Nevertheless, much more advanced studies occurred in the mid ninth century, when Zhang Yanyuan wrote his exceptional in terms of writing style and author's individual approach to the described issues two substantial treatises. This initial, however, more developed phase of scholars' theoretical activity lasted until the beginning the Song dynasty, and embraces work by Nie Chongyi titled *Sanlitu*, and imperial project titled *Chunhua ge tie*. After this time, in the history of thoughts on art in China began a new chapter.

Tracing the beginnings of art concepts in China we can define main subjects taken then into account, as well as purposes, to which at the time served art and antiques. First, most of the scholars' texts concerned especially calligraphy, paintings, and later antiques (or ritual bronze vessels), because those fields of art had the greatest meaning in range of building a cultural image of China. Second, art pieces and antiquities were used as collecting objects, research subjects and tools of political power. Sometimes, however, those goals, in which art objects were used coincided with each other, especially when the rulers realised that possessing objects without exploring their meaning and proper demonstration of their existence was not enough to strengthen the imperial authority.

The goals and subjects established in this early stage of creating art history were continued during the next centuries, however, they were realised with the use of new research methods. Moreover, the range of subjects became increased as a result of connoisseurs' interests in new objects, nonetheless, calligraphy, paintings and antiques still belonged to a group of the most important things.

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POCZĄTKI NAUKOWEJ MYŚLI O SZTUCE I ZABYTKOZNAWSTWA  
W STAROŻYTNYCH CHINACH

Streszczenie

Artykuł przedstawia historię kształtowania się myśli o sztuce i antykach w dawnych Chinach, poczynając od czasów dynastii Wei i Jin po wczesny okres dynastii Song. Celem niniejszego tekstu jest prezentacja zarówno teoretycznych koncepcji na temat malarstwa i kaligrafii pisanych przez artystów i uczonych-urzędników w różnych okresach, jak również przedstawienie rodzaju się zainteresowania zabytkoznawstwem. Artykuł pokazuje, w jaki sposób studia nad teorią sztuki ulegały zmianie, osiągając większy stopień dojrzałości w połowie IX wieku n.e., tj. w momencie, kiedy Zhang Yanyuan napisał „Rejestr Słynnych Malarzy wszystkich Dynastii”, dając tym samym asumpt do kolejnych studiów nad sztuką.

**Key words:** ancient China, art history, theory of art, connoisseurship studies, calligraphy.

**Słowa kluczowe:** starożytne Chiny, historia sztuki, teoria sztuki, zabytkoznawstwo, kaligrafia.