

Emperor Qianlong's Hidden Treasures

Reconsidering the Collection of the Qing Imperial Household

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Contents

Acknowledgements	vi
Notes on Romanisation	vii
Introduction	1
1. Defining the Collection	19
2. Creating the Collection as an Institutional Activity	46
3. A Repertoire of Standardised Models	80
4. Concealment and Secrecy	109
Conclusion	137
Bibliography	143

Introduction

Collecting is a key cultural activity which contributes to the ways knowledge is constituted, transmitted, and contested. A collection can reveal its collector's perception of the world by offering insight into the things the collector treasures and believes worth preserving. Although collecting is a phenomenon found at different levels of the society, the collecting of imperial households is a particularly interesting category as rulers' visions for establishing collections generally involve complicated political and cultural agendas. Studies of imperial collecting therefore can reveal many different facets of the social and political dimensions of the past.

The assemblage of objects by the Qing imperial household, particularly during the Qianlong reign (1736–1795), is one of the most impressive cultural activities in Chinese history. 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 (*Qingshi shanhou weiyuanhui* 清室善後委員會) and charged the committee to take a comprehensive inventory of the objects kept in the Forbidden City. According to the committee's twenty-eight volumes of reports, 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.¹ Despite the fact that the inventory was unable to include the numerous objects sold by the last emperor or stolen by his entourage before his expulsion, the extent of Qing court possessions was still very impressive.² Even though an extraordinary number of objects was

1. Liang Jinsheng 梁金生, 'Cangpin de laiyan he zucheng' 藏品的來源和組成, in *Gugong bowuyuan bashi nian* 故宮博物院八十年, ed. Li Wenru 李文儒 (Beijing: Forbidden City Publishing House, 2005), 239. 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).

2. For the dispersal of Qing court possessions, see Yang Renkai 楊仁愷, *Guobao chenfu lu* 國寶沉浮錄, 1989, (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2007); Yang Renkai, 'The Story behind the Last Emperor's Dispersal of the Imperial Painting and Calligraphy Collection', in *The Last Emperor's Collection: Masterpieces of Painting and Calligraphy from the Liaoning Provincial Museum*, ed. J. May Lee Barrett (New York: China Institute, 2008), 1–11.

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, born Hongli 弘曆 (1711–1799), 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 the fourth Qing emperor to ruler over China proper. He abdicated voluntarily in 1796 as a filial act in order not to reign longer than his grandfather, the Kangxi emperor (r. 1662–1722). In spite of his retirement, he retained supreme power until his death in 1799.³ His reign witnessed the most prosperous time of the Qing dynasty as the economy flourished, the population grew, and the territory expanded.⁴ In the heyday of the dynasty, his court amassed enormous cultural riches from all over China and beyond.

From Neolithic jades to artefacts produced at the Qing imperial workshops, from articles made within China proper to items imported from Europe and Central Asia, objects that came into the Qianlong court were not only enormous in number but also widely varied in type. The sheer number of extant objects makes it tempting to compare the emperor with other great monarch-collectors of his time, such as Catherine the Great in Russia and the Habsburg rulers in Vienna.⁵ Just as Catherine the Great and the Habsburgs have been seen as the founders of the State Hermitage Museum and the Kunsthistorisches Museum respectively,⁶ the Qianlong emperor has been credited for assembling the collections now preserved in the two Palace Museums in Beijing and Taipei.⁷ It is not surprising that the Qianlong emperor has often been claimed as ‘the greatest patron of the arts in China since late medieval times’⁸ and ‘the last of the great imperial art collectors and patrons in Chinese history’.⁹ The huge range of objects gathered together during the reign of the Qianlong emperor has deeply influenced the present understanding of the

3. Arthur Hummel, ed., ‘Hung-li’, in *Eminent Chinese of the Ch’ing Period (1664–1912)* (Leiden: Global Oriental, 2010): 369–73.

4. For a concise history of the Qianlong reign, see Alexander Woodside, ‘The Ch’ien-lung Reign’, in *The Ch’ing Dynasty to 1800*, ed. Willard, J. Peterson, *The Cambridge History of China*, vol. 9, part one (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 230–309.

5. Harold L. Kahn, ‘A Matter of Taste: The Monumental and Exotic in the Qianlong Reign’, in *The Elegant Brush: Chinese Painting Under the Qianlong Emperor 1735–1795*, ed. Ju-hsi Chou and Claudia Brown (Phoenix, AZ: Phoenix Art Museum, 1985), 288.

6. For more on Catherine the Great and the Hermitage, see Nathalie Bondil, ed., *Catherine the Great: Art for Empire: Masterpieces from the State Hermitage Museum, Russia* (Montreal: Snoeck Publishers, 2005); Isabella Forbes and William Underhill, eds., *Catherine the Great: Treasures of Imperial Russia from the State Hermitage Museum, Leningrad* (London: Booth-Clibborn Editions, 1990); for the Habsburgs and the Kunsthistorisches Museum, see Sabine Haag, Cornelia Holzach, and Katja Schneider, eds., *Splendour and Power: Imperial Treasures from Vienna* (Cambridge: The Fitzwilliam Museum, 2011).

7. Zhang Hongxing, ed., *The Qianlong Emperor: Treasures from the Forbidden City* (Edinburgh: National Museum of Scotland, 2002), 17.

8. Zhang, *The Qianlong Emperor: Treasures from the Forbidden City*, 17.

9. Gerald Holzwarth, ‘The Qianlong Emperor as Art Patron and the Formation of the Collections of the Palace Museum, Beijing’, in *China: The Three Emperors, 1662–1795*, ed. Evelyn S. Rawski and Jessica Rawson (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2005), 43.

history of Chinese art. As Craig Clunas has pointed out, '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'.¹⁰ The extant objects from the Qianlong court have had a long-standing impact on the formation of knowledge and connoisseurship of Chinese art as a scholarly discipline as well as on art markets. The so-called Qianlong imperial art collection is commonly referenced in the literature of Chinese art and in museum labels and panels as well as in commercial sales. Objects previously possessed by the Qianlong emperor and items produced from his imperial workshops often fetch record-breaking prices due to their provenance.

Given the great influence of this significant cultural activity on the field of Chinese art history and art markets, it is only natural that much research and a number of exhibitions have been devoted to the examination of what is repeatedly called the Qing imperial art collection, often focusing on the Qianlong period. Attempts have been made widely to explain the Qianlong emperor's motives for assembling objects on a grand scale. The emperor's exploitations of his collection to achieve certain political aims have also been discussed extensively. In addition, the emperor's patronage and his skills in connoisseurship have been given much attention as well. The collecting activities of the Qianlong emperor therefore appear to be a well-established category in Chinese art history.

Ambiguous Definition of the Collection

Although much research has been done on the subject, some vital issues have been taken for granted for decades without serious consideration. One of them is the scope of the collection. The Qianlong emperor has been portrayed as an avid collector whose 'avowed aim was to incorporate examples of every category of works of art into the imperial collections'.¹¹ Many exhibitions suggest that the so-called Qianlong imperial collection was an amalgamation of ancient and contemporary objects that were both decorative and utilitarian, coming into the possession of the court from not only within China proper but also from tributaries around China as well as from Europe.¹² These exhibitions

10. Craig Clunas, 'Picturing Cosmic Grandeur', in *The Qianlong Emperor: Treasures from the Forbidden City*, ed. Zhang Hongxing (Edinburgh: National Museum of Scotland, 2002), 15.

11. Rosemary E. Scott, 'The Chinese Imperial Collections', in *Collecting Chinese Art: Interpretation and Display*, ed. Stacey Pierson, *Colloquies on Art and Archaeology in Asia* no. 20 (London: SOAS, Percival David Foundation, 2000), 25.

12. Chang Lin-sheng, 'The National Palace Museum: A History of the Collection', in *Possessing the Past: Treasures from the National Palace Museum, Taipei*, trans. Dora C. Y. Ching, ed. Weng C. Fong and James C. Y. Watt (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1996), 22; Feng Ming-chu 馮明珠, ed.,

supported their claim by providing a wide scope of exhibits, ranging from robes, palace furnishings, paintings, weapons, ceremonial objects, clocks, scientific instruments, antique jades and bronzes, to ceramics, carvings, and lacquer ware, and thus the implication is that all of the exhibits come from 'the personal collection of the Ch'ien-lung emperor'.¹³ It has even been proposed that the emperor had to renovate and extend imperial gardens and resorts to house the growing amount of objects.¹⁴ The problem of such a description, however, is that it is not very clear what was perceived as important collectibles and what was simply accumulated at the Qianlong court.

Changes in scholarship have also contributed to the ambiguous and grand description of the alleged collection. In the past few decades, more and more types of objects have come to be seen as part of the assumed collection. Scholarship in the 1960s saw the Qianlong emperor not only from a Sinocentric perspective but also from the viewpoint of the traditional Confucian literati class. The emperor's taste was seen as aristocratic and conservative, and discussions surrounding Chinese art collected by the emperor were concentrated on paintings and calligraphy.¹⁵ Primary sources used to study Qing history as well as the Qing imperial collection were mainly Chinese since Manchu documents were not yet accessible at the time. However, with the improved access to archival materials in the Manchu language in the 1980s, perceptions of the Qing period and its rulers have changed dramatically, and a large body of secondary literature has been published.¹⁶ Recognising the Qianlong emperor's endeavour to be the ruler of all religions and peoples as well as his effort to create a new ideology of rulership that departed from the Confucian model, scholars have perceived objects commissioned and assembled during his reign as a tool for projecting various images to different audiences.¹⁷ For instance,

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); Evelyn S. Rawski and Jessica Rawson, eds., *China: The Three Emperors, 1662–1795* (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2005); in the exhibition *La Cité interdite au Louvre*, Western chandeliers and scientific instruments are seen as part of the alleged imperial collection. See Jean-Paul Desroches, ed., *La Cité interdite au Louvre: Empereurs de Chine et rois de France* (Paris: Somogy, 2011), 217.

13. Philippe Montebello, Director's Foreword to *Splendors of Imperial China: Treasures from the National Palace Museum, Taipei*, by Maxwell K. Hearn (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art and Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 1996), 7.
14. Chan Hou Seng 陳浩星 ed., *Huaibao gujin: Qianlong huangdi wenhua shenghuo yishu* 懷抱古今：乾隆皇帝文化生活藝術 [The life of Emperor Qianlong] (Macao: Museu de Arte de Macau, 2002).
15. Guoli gugong bowuyuan and Guoli zhongyang bowuyuan, eds., *Chinese Art Treasures: A Selected Group of Objects from the Chinese National Palace Museum and the Chinese National Central Museum in Taichung, Taiwan* (Geneva: Skira, 1961), 17.
16. For surveys and reviews of secondary literature on Qing history in English published in the 1980s and 1990s, see Evelyn S. Rawski, 'Presidential Address: Reenvisioning the Qing: The Significance of the Qing Period', *Journal of Asian Studies* 55, no. 4 (Nov. 1996): 829–50; Joanna Waley-Cohen, 'The New Qing History', *Radical History Review* issue 88 (2004): 193–206.
17. Lin Lina 林莉娜, 'Cong yishu wenhua kan Qianlong huangdi yu xiyang ji zhoubian shubang de wanglai guanxi' 從藝術文化看乾隆皇帝與西洋及週邊屬邦的往來關係, in *Qianlong huangdi de wenhua daye* 乾隆皇帝的文化大業 [Emperor Ch'ien-lung's grand cultural enterprise], ed. Feng Ming-chu 馮

it is thought that inkstones made of *Songhua* stones from Manchuria may have been commissioned to help consolidate the emperor's Manchu identity. The display of the emperor's hunting images in the Chengde Mountain Resort may have been to appeal to his Mongol allies. As a result of this shift, a much wider variety of objects have come to be perceived as part of the supposed imperial collection.

In addition, recent scholarship also argues that Qing emperors expanded the scope of what could be considered as collectibles in China by incorporating new types of objects into the supposed imperial collection, including fish fossils and ostrich eggs.¹⁸ They enthusiastically commissioned works such as the *Illustrated Album of Sea Oddities* (*Haiguai tu* 海怪圖) (Figure 1), whose style differed significantly from the refined and elegant fashion associated with what might be considered appropriate collectibles for the elite class. The Qing

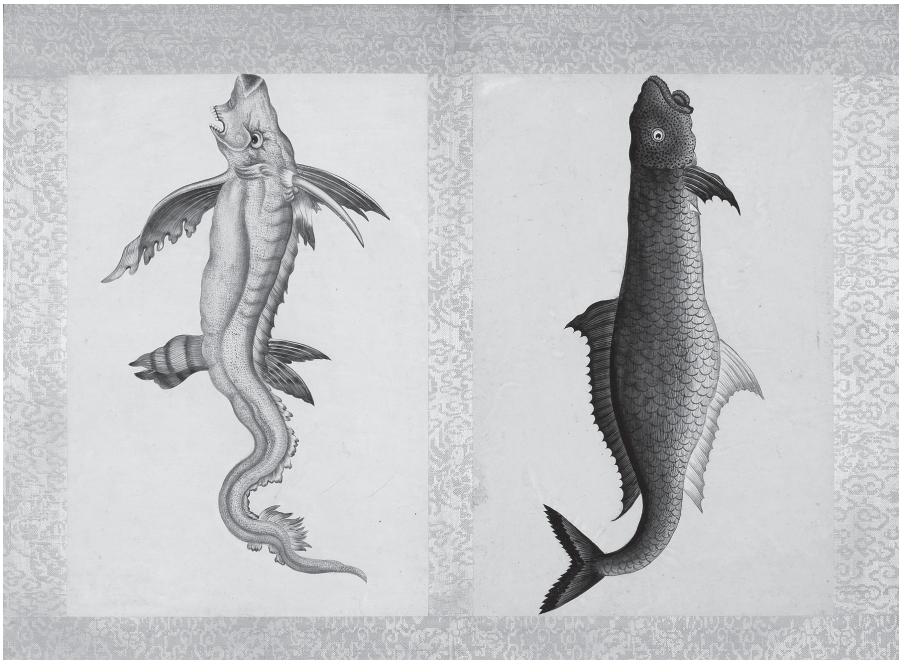


Figure 1: *Illustrated Album of Sea Oddities*, anonymous artist, Qing dynasty, ink and colours on paper. ©National Palace Museum.

明珠 (Taipei: National Palace Museum, 2002), 49. For a re-evaluation of the Qianlong emperor's role in history and its connection with art patronage, see Evelyn S. Rawski, 'Re-imagining the Ch'ien-lung Emperor: A Survey of Recent Scholarship', *The National Palace Museum Research Quarterly* 21, no. 1 (2003): 1–29; Chuimei Ho and Bennet Bronson, *Splendors of China's Forbidden City: The Glorious Reign of Emperor Qianlong* (London and New York: Merrell; Chicago: Field Museum, 2004).

18. Lai Yu-chih 賴毓芝, 'Cong Kangxi de suanxue dao Aodili Anbuliesibao shoucang de yixie sikao' 從康熙的算學到奧地利安布列斯堡收藏的一些思考, *Gugong wenwu yuekan* 故宮文物月刊 [The National Palace Museum Monthly of Chinese Art] no. 276 (2006): 106–19.

emperors' unusual interest in collecting and commissioning unconventional objects has led to the suggestion that they were probably not as old-fashioned as previously portrayed.¹⁹ The implication is that what used to be perceived as collectibles of the Qianlong emperor in the 60s—mainly paintings and calligraphy—have now been expanded to include many more different types of objects.

The image of the Qianlong emperor as a collector has shifted from that of a foreign ruler with a conservative taste and a desire to assimilate himself into Confucian culture to one of a calculated monarch who used various parts of his supposed imperial art collection to project certain images to different groups of audience in order to connect with them. This shift, on the one hand, may have helped us approach Qing history and its collecting activities from a less Sinocentric and probably a more historically accurate view. On the other hand, it has allowed more types of objects to be included in the discourse of imperial collecting, which strengthens the Qianlong emperor's image as a universal ruler who collected various types of objects in order to appeal to different audiences. It has become very difficult to distinguish the difference between the actual collection and general imperial holdings, which can lead to many difficulties when managing and interpreting objects with a Qing imperial provenance.

Some attempts have been made to define the scope of this so-called imperial collection, none of which has been very successful. For example, in theory, the Palace Museum in Beijing divides its collection into three categories: historical and cultural relics, ancient art treasures collected by the Ming and Qing imperial courts, and books and documents collected by the Qing imperial court.²⁰ Such a division implies that ancient objects with high artistic values predating the last two dynasties of China were collectibles of the Ming and Qing courts and did not belong to the same category as utilitarian objects used in daily life. However, the museum also admits that it is often impossible to categorise its collection according to these principles in practice. Historical and cultural relics as well as books and documents often possess great artistic value, while ancient art treasures often embody important historical and cultural references.²¹ The museum therefore does not completely exclude objects made during the Ming and Qing period from its definition of an imperial collection. It has therefore settled for the popular theory in which Qing emperors, believing everything in the universe to belong to them, went to all lengths to gather objects to enrich the so-called imperial collection. From this

19. Lai, 'Cong Kangxi de suanxue dao Aodili Anbuliesibao shoucang de yixie sikao', 119.

20. Li Wenru 李文儒, ed., *Gugong bowuyuan bashi nian* 故宫博物院八十年 (Beijing: Forbidden City Publishing House, 2005); Gugong Bowuyuan 故宫博物院, ed., *Gugong bowuyuan* 故宫博物院 (Beijing: Forbidden City Publishing House, 2005).

21. Gugong Bowuyuan 故宫博物院, ed., *Gugong bowuyuan* 故宫博物院 (Beijing: Forbidden City Publishing House, 2005), 154–55.

theory arises the inference that all objects should be seen as one entity serving to manifest imperial grandeur.²²

It has also been proposed that the Qing imperial collection consists of three parts: objects used in daily life, objects reserved in the inner palace that were enjoyed by the emperor and which served as models for his artisans, and objects that were given away as gifts.²³ Another definition has divided the so-called Qianlong imperial art collection into two categories: works made in his imperial workshops, and works he acquired, including objects coming from inheritance, tributes, presents, and confiscations.²⁴ Both descriptions of the collection are grand in scale, and in fact, encompass every object that was kept at the Qianlong court at one point.

Gerald Holzwarth's definition has been the most precise when establishing his discussion of the Qianlong emperor based on the latter's role as a patron of the arts in relation to the formation of 'the actual imperial art collection'.²⁵ According to Holzwarth, what '[constituted] the actual palace collection in a narrow sense [were] items which were collected as works of art'.²⁶ Within this group were objects 'listed in collection catalogues, and evaluated and classified in according with traditional theories of art', and he asserts that these objects 'were not in general intended to be exhibited and displayed'.²⁷ Holzwarth, however, does not explain how he came to the conclusion that the original function of certain objects was to be works of art; nor does he discuss what was actually considered to be 'works of art' in eighteenth-century China. In fact, he includes in his definition of 'the actual imperial art collection' some objects that are not generally described as works of art, such as 'bizarrely shaped stones or wood fungi'.²⁸ He simply justifies his inclusion of these natural objects with the fact that they were 'given artistic status by being

22. Liang, 'Cangpin de laiyan he zucheng', 238; Jean-Paul Desroches ed., *La Cité interdite au Louvre*, 193–307; Susan Naquin has written an article discussing issues related to how the Palace Museum presents its collection abroad, see Susan Naquin, 'The Forbidden City Goes Abroad: Qing History and the Foreign Exhibitions of the Palace Museum, 1974–2004', *T'oung Pao* second series, vol. 90 (2004): 341–97.

23. Michèle Pirazzoli-t'Serstevens, 'La collection impériale sous Yongzheng (1723–1735) et Qianlong (1736–1795)', in *Autour des collections d'art en Chine au XVIII^e siècle*, eds. Michèle Pirazzoli-t'Serstevens and Anne Kerlan-Stephens (Genève: Librairie Droz, 2008), 16.

24. Cheng Yen-wen, 'Tradition and Transformation: Cataloguing Chinese Art in the Middle and Late Imperial Eras', PhD thesis (East Asian Languages and Civilizations, University of Pennsylvania, 2010), 115.

25. Holzwarth, 'The Qianlong Emperor as Art Patron and the Formation of the Collections of the Palace Museum, Beijing', 41–53.

26. Holzwarth, 'The Qianlong Emperor as Art Patron and the Formation of the Collections of the Palace Museum, Beijing', 41.

27. Holzwarth, 'The Qianlong Emperor as Art Patron and the Formation of the Collections of the Palace Museum, Beijing', 41.

28. Holzwarth, 'The Qianlong Emperor as Art Patron and the Formation of the Collections of the Palace Museum, Beijing', 41.

mounted'.²⁹ Furthermore, Holzwarth does not include in the 'actual imperial art collection' paintings created for decorative purposes,³⁰ which we might more commonly deem to be works of art. In other words, although Holzwarth seems to realise that certain objects enjoyed a higher status than others at the Qing imperial court, he is unable to sufficiently clarify where the line was drawn because he does not properly define what he means by 'works of art'. In addition, although he notices that there was a distinction between objects that were displayed and objects that were wrapped in silk or boxed up, he falls short of offering any explanation as to how this phenomenon contributes to his definition of the 'actual palace collection' or why these 'works of art' were hidden away.

In current scholarship, there is no satisfactory paradigm that helps distinguish what was believed to be worth collecting and preserving at the Qianlong court. Museums as well as art markets often have trouble determining how to present, interpret, and manage certain objects assembled or produced during the Qianlong reign. This has been particularly the problem when encountering objects that are not normally considered as fine art. How do we, for example, situate the Qianlong emperor's musket sold by Sotheby's in London for nearly two million pounds in 2016 within the context of imperial collecting? In the discipline of art history, firearms are rarely discussed or seriously considered within the framework of imperial collecting because they are not normally seen as works of art. In the Palace Museum in Beijing, similar muskets are categorised as cultural relics and are cared for by the Department of Palace Life and Imperial Ritual. This categorisation implies that firearms, although having significant historical value, are objects related to everyday life rather than collectibles of the Qing imperial household, which are cared for by the Department of Objects and Decorative Arts. Yet, the Sotheby's musket is inscribed with a mark 'Supreme Grade, Number One' (*te deng di yi* 特等第一), and it bears the six-character Qianlong reign mark just as the numerous jades, ceramics, and paintings inscribed during the eighteenth century, which are often seen as part of the so-called imperial art collection. On what grounds do we include or exclude firearms from the collection of the Qianlong household? This kind of ambiguity often leads to imprecise descriptions and interpretations of objects which, as seen above, has affected the daily operations of museums and auction houses.

29. Holzwarth, 'The Qianlong Emperor as Art Patron and the Formation of the Collections of the Palace Museum, Beijing', 41.

30. Holzwarth, 'The Qianlong Emperor as Art Patron and the Formation of the Collections of the Palace Museum, Beijing', 42.

Assumed Purposes of the Collection and Imperial Patronage

The assembling of objects at Chinese imperial courts has often been connected with the emperor's desire to achieve certain political programmes.³¹ Research since the 1980s has addressed the Qianlong emperor's need to consolidate the newly conquered regions, his responsibility to create coherence in a multi-ethnic empire, and his dilemma of maintaining Manchu identity while gaining acceptance not only from the Han Chinese but also from Mongol and Tibetan subjects.³² It has been argued that the key to Qing success was its ability to make use of cultural links with peoples of different ethnicities rather than its adoption of systematic sinicisation.³³

Within this framework, it is commonly believed that the function of the alleged collection of the Qianlong emperor was to strengthen his legitimacy to rule, to manifest his absolute monarchy, and to express imperial grandeur and authority.³⁴ Imperial patronage is often seen as an integral part of the emperor's political agenda, the reason underlying the making of different types of products for different intended viewers or recipients.³⁵ The heterogeneous assortment of objects commissioned and produced under the supervision of the emperor and the hybrid styles of these objects are thought to symbolically represent the empire in microcosm. The *Illustrations of Tributaries* (*Zhi gong*

31. For one of the earliest studies, see Lothar Ledderose, 'Some Observations on the Imperial Art Collection in China', *Transactions of the Oriental Ceramic Society* 43 (1978–1979): 33–46.

32. For surveys and reviews of secondary literature on Qing history in English published in the 1980s and 1990s, see Rawski, 'Presidential Address: Reenvisioning the Qing: The Significance of the Qing Period'; Waley-Cohen, 'The New Qing History'.

33. Laura Hostetler, *Qing Colonial Enterprise: Ethnography and Cartography in Early Modern China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

34. Harold L. Kahn, *Monarchy in the Emperor's Eyes: Image and Reality in the Ch'ien-lung Reign* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971); Kahn, 'A Matter of Taste'; Wen C. Fong, 'Imperial Patronage of the Arts under the Ch'ing', in *Possessing the Past: Treasures from the National Palace Museum, Taipei*, ed. Weng C. Fong and James C. Y. Watt (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1996), 555; Chen Chieh-hsien 陳捷先, 'Lun Qianlong chao de wenhua zhengce' 論乾隆朝的文化政策, in *Qianlong huangdi de wenhua daye* 乾隆皇帝的文化大業 [Emperor Ch'ien-lung's grand cultural enterprise], ed. Feng Ming-chu 馮明珠 (Taipei: National Palace Museum, 2002), 229; Lin, 'Cong yishu wenhua kan Qianlong huangdi yu xiyang ji zhoubian shubang de wanglai guanxi', 278–80; Zhang, *The Qianlong Emperor: Treasures from the Forbidden City*, 280; Joanna Waley-Cohen, 'Diplomat, Jesuits and Foreign Curiosities', in *China: The Three Emperors, 1662–1795*, ed. Evelyn S. Rawski and Jessica Rawson (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2005), 180; Jessica Rawson, 'The Qianlong Emperor: Virtue and the Possession of Antiquity', in *China: The Three Emperors, 1662–1795*, ed. Evelyn S. Rawski and Jessica Rawson (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2005), 272.

35. For example, the emperor publicly honoured outstanding warriors and officials involved in the campaigns against the Zunghars by commissioning portraits of them and having the paintings displayed in *Ziguang ge* 紫光閣, the Hall of Purple Splendour. See Nie Chongzheng 聶崇正, *Gongting yishu de guanghui: Qingdai gongting huihua luncong* 宮廷藝術的光輝：清代宮廷繪畫論叢 (Taipei: Dongda tushu gongsì, 1996), 93–106. When the sixth Panchen Lama travelled to Beijing to celebrate the Qianlong emperor's seventieth birthday in 1780, he was showered with gifts, including objects produced from the imperial workshops. See Lin, 'Cong yishu wenhua kan Qianlong huangdi yu xiyang ji zhoubian shubang de wanglai guanxi', 278–80; for commissions' role in social and political networking, see Zhang, *The Qianlong Emperor: Treasures from the Forbidden City*.

tu 職貢圖), for example, pulls together different ethnic groups with a unified format.³⁶ In another example, all objects stored in *duobaoge* 多寶格, or 'boxes of many treasures', receive equal status, whether antiques or contemporary works, authentic relics or copies of masterpieces, Chinese or foreign.³⁷ The imperially directed production is thus seen as the 'glue' that holds the different cultures together under Qing rule.³⁸ Even the gathering of craftsmen who produced the products has been suggested to be a reflection of the emperor's role as a universal ruler. According to this view, the Qing imperial household, recruiting from throughout the empire, is able not only to demonstrate its ability to bring together the best specialists to court but also to enhance the image of an emperor presiding over his domain.³⁹ It sees the whole process of commissioning works as revolving around the emperor and as itself a manifestation of absolute monarchy.⁴⁰ The variety of objects produced by the imperial workshops during the Qianlong reign is believed to exhibit not only the emperor's command over a vast empire but also his control over the harmonious order of things; differences are unified under the rule of the emperor. It has been claimed that the emperor's 'manic collection practices, which seemed to extend to any physical object, suggest that his collecting and cataloguing was a nearly delusional effort to control the known world'.⁴¹ This statement sums up how paramount the monumentality of the assumed collection and its perceived manifestation of absolute imperial authority have become in the understanding of present scholarship. It is the argument of this book, however, that this conclusion is built on the shaky grounds of an imprecise description of the assumed collection of the Qianlong emperor.

36. Hostetler, *Qing Colonial Enterprise: Ethnography and Cartography in Early Modern China*, 49.

37. James C. Y. Watt, 'The Antique-Elegance', in *Possessing the Past: Treasures from the National Palace Museum, Taipei*, ed. Weng C. Fong and James C. Y. Watt (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1996), 553.

38. Rawski, 'Re-imagining the Ch'ien-lung Emperor', 15.

39. Jan Stuart, 'Imperial Pastimes: Dilettantism as Statecraft in the 18th Century', in *Life in the Imperial Court of Qing dynasty China*, ed. Chumei Ho and Cheri Jones (Denver: Denver Museum of Natural History, 1998), 62.

40. Chang Li-tuan 張麗端, 'Cong "huojidang" kan Qing Gaozong zhijie kongguan yuzhi qiyong de liangge jizhi' 從《活計檔》看清高宗直接控管御製器用的兩個機制 [Two mechanisms by which the Ch'ing emperor Kao-tsun exerted direct control over the implements made for court use, as evidenced in the documents of the archives of imperial workshop], *Gugong xueshu jikan* 故宮學術季刊 [The National Palace Museum Research Quarterly] 24, no. 1 (2006); Wang Guangyao 王光堯, 'Cong Gugong cang Qingdai zhici guanyang kan Zhongguo gudai guanyang zhidu' 從故宮藏清代製瓷官樣看中國古代官樣制度, in *Guan yang yu ci* 官樣御瓷, ed. Guo Xingkuan 郭興寬 and Wang Guangyao 王光堯 (Beijing: Forbidden City Press, 2007), 14–31; Nie, *Gongting yishu de guanghui*, 5–9; Wang, 'Cong Gugong cang Qingdai zhici guanyang kan Zhongguo gudai guanyang zhidu'; Wang Guangyao 王光堯, *Zhongguo gudai guanyao zhidu* 中國古代官窯制度 (Beijing: Forbidden City Publishing House, 2004).

41. Paola Demattè, 'Emperors and Scholars: Collecting Culture and Late Imperial Antiquarianism', in *Collecting China: The World, China and a History of Collecting*, ed. Vimalin Rujivacharakul (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2011), 173.

Nevertheless, there is no denying that the Han Chinese formed a major part of population under Qing rule. This is to say that how the Qianlong emperor used his so-called imperial art collection to project an image that would appeal to the literati is an important part of the scholarly discourse on the function of the assemblage. It is generally thought that the emperor wished to emulate ancient sage-rulers and even to compete with other emperor-collectors in history.⁴² The actions of commissioning catalogues, assembling works of art, leaving seal impressions on paintings, writing inscriptions over objects, and compiling collection catalogues are also associated with the deeds of previous emperors of Han ethnic origin as these conventions had been practised for centuries in China. Therefore, it has been argued that by imitating previous Han rulers, the Qianlong emperor was able to impress his Han subjects with his aesthetic sensibility and gain respect from the biggest ethnic group in China.⁴³ Such a view attributes a political role to the supposed imperial art collection, a role thought to be important for a foreign dynasty, which must establish itself culturally as more Chinese than the Chinese dynasties.⁴⁴

At the same time, a conflicting view prevails among modern scholars: they do not seem too impressed with the emperor's actions of emulation and often perceive these as signs of his arrogant nature and a reflection of his fondness for the grandiose. The emperor has been described as

a voracious art collector, a niggardly and opinionated connoisseur, an unstoppable writer of inscriptions and stamper of seals who was determined, as a function of his imperial role, to leave his indelible mark upon China's artistic legacy. His seals almost obliterate some of the finest paintings in the imperial collection, which now grew to such enormous size that there were few ancient masterpieces that were not gathered behind the high walls of the Forbidden City, shut away forever from the painters who might still have studied them had they remained in private hands.⁴⁵

42. Hsieh Ming-liang 謝明良, 'Qianlong de taoci jianshang guan' 乾隆的陶瓷鑑賞觀 [Ch'ien-lung's connoisseurship of ceramics], *Gugong xueshu jikan* 故宮學術季刊 [The National Museum Research Quarterly] 21 no. 2 (2003): 1–38; Yu Pei-chin, 'Consummate Images: Emperor Qianlong's Vision of the "Ideal" Kiln', *Orientations* (2011): 80–88; Holzwarth, 'The Qianlong Emperor as Art Patron and the Formation of the Collections of the Palace Museum, Beijing', 43; for a comparison of the collecting activities between Huizong and Qianlong, see Patricia Buckley Ebre, *Accumulating Culture: The Collections of Emperor Huizong* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2008), 342–47.

43. Jessica Rawson, 'The Qianlong Emperor: Virtue and the Possession of Antiquity', in *China: The Three Emperors, 1662–1795*, ed. Evelyn S. Rawski and Jessica Rawson (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2005); 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] 23, no. 1 (2005): 5–7; Liu Yu 劉雨, ed., *Qianlong sijian zonglibiao* 乾隆四鑑綜理表 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1989), 11; Demattè, 'Emperors and Scholars', 172; Chen, 'Lun Qianlong chao de wenhua zhengce'.

44. Michèle Pirazzoli-t'Serstevens and Anne Kerlan-Stephens, eds., *Autour des collections d'art en Chine au XVIII^e siècle* (Genève: Librairie Droz, 2008), 60.

45. Michael Sullivan, *Symbols of Eternity: The Art of Landscape Painting in China* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 140, 142.

Present scholarship therefore, on the one hand, considers that the emperor's attempt to show his cultural sensibility could help the Han Chinese identify with him. On the other hand, it also sometimes portrays him as a gluttonous collector who nearly destroyed some of the greatest works of art in China and prevented most people from appreciating them. These contradictory views show that the issues surrounding the function of the collection and how the emperor projected his images through the act of collecting are complicated. These issues remain difficult to resolve, as the supposed collection, containing so many different categories of objects, lends itself to such varying interpretations.

The Emperor's Skills in Connoisseurship

Apart from describing the scope of the so-called Qianlong imperial art collection and trying to explain its function, much research has centred on the Qianlong emperor's skills of connoisseurship and on how his personal tastes or preferences contributed to the formation of the supposed collection.⁴⁶ In current scholarship, the assumption is that the emperor's personal taste directly affected the development and formation of the collection.

The emperor has been depicted as a very strict patron when it came to the commissioning of works. From giving the initial order to the final inspection, the emperor was involved in every step of the process.⁴⁷ He left very little room for artisans to express their artistic visions.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, he knew the strengths of his craftsmen and could appoint specific persons to do certain parts of a job.⁴⁹

The emperor has also been portrayed as an enthusiastic patron of the arts who was quite knowledgeable in paintings and calligraphy and who possessed a good understanding of ceramics.⁵⁰ It is commonly believed that he had a genuine love for jades and was relatively well-informed on the subject.⁵¹

46. Kohara Hironobu, 'The Qianlong Emperor's Skill in the Connoisseurship of Chinese Painting', *Chinese Painting under the Qianlong Emperor*, ed. Ju-hsi Chou and Claudia Brown, *A Journal of Art History*, Phoebe 6 no. 1 (Tempe: Arizona State University, 1988), 56–73; Yu Pei-chin 余佩瑾, ed., *De jia qu—Qianlong huangdi de taoci pinwei* 得佳趣——乾隆皇帝的陶瓷品味 [Obtaining refined enjoyment: The Qianlong emperor's taste in ceramics] (Taipei: National Palace Museum, 2012).

47. Chang, 'Cong "huojidang" kan Qing Gaozong zhijie kongguan yuzhi qiyong de liangge jizhi', 45–70.

48. Nie, *Gongting yishu de guanghui*, 7–9.

49. Chang, 'Cong "huojidang" kan Qing Gaozong zhijie kongguan yuzhi qiyong de liangge jizhi'.

50. Ho Chuan-hsing 何傳馨, 'Qianlong de shufa jianshang' 乾隆的書法鑑賞 [Emperor Ch'ien-lung's connoisseurship of calligraphy], *Gugong xueshu jikan* 故宮學術季刊 [The National Museum Research Quarterly] 21, no. 1 (2003): 31–63; Hsieh, 'Qianlong de taoci jianshang guan'.

51. Chang Li-tuan 張麗端, 'Cong "yu e" lun Qing Qianlong zhong wan qi shengxing de yuqi leixing yu diwang pinwei' 從「玉厄」論清乾隆中晚期盛行的玉器類型與帝王品味 [The debacle of jade: A discussion of prevailing types of jade and imperial taste during the Middle and Late Ch'ien-lung Period], *Gugong xueshu jikan* 故宮學術季刊 [The National Palace Museum Research Quarterly] 18, no. 2 (2002), 61–116; Teng Shu-ping 鄧淑蘋, 'Qianlong Jiaqing shiqi Yisilan fengge yuqi dongchuan

However, to modern scholars, the emperor's skills of connoisseurship in ancient jades and early bronzes did not display a high level of scholarship. He made noticeable errors, such as mistaking Neolithic jades for Han pieces.⁵² And it has been pointed out that the four bronze catalogues commissioned by the emperor consisted of many wrongly identified pieces.⁵³ This may have been due to the lack of the help of modern archaeology and the aid of *Jin shi xue* 金石學 (the study of metal and stone), which only became prominent in the nineteenth century.⁵⁴ Studies have also shown that the emperor acquired his knowledge through various means, such as by adopting empirical methods, employing stylistic analysis, as well as conducting textual research.⁵⁵

The claim that the emperor's personal taste had a direct effect on the formation of the collection, however, is worth our reconsideration. Some studies on the jade holdings in the Qianlong court show that commercial incentives held great sway in the eighteenth century. Unable to compete with profitable enticements, the personal taste of the emperor had its limitations in leading contemporary stylistic development of jade.⁵⁶ The emperor detested hollowed-out and over-elaborate decorations. He also disapproved of a common phenomenon at the time, which was to over-accommodate the original shape of jade boulders at the expense of proportion and liveliness of the final work.⁵⁷ In addition, he lamented after 1789 the adoption of Chinese styles by Islamic jade craftsmen.⁵⁸ It seems, however, that the emperor's personal dislike of the aforementioned styles did not prevent them from entering the possession of the Qing imperial household. Today, these types of jade are often included in the discourse of the so-called Qianlong imperial art collection and are presented in exhibitions and commercial sales as such. Once again, the contradiction raises questions, such as what role the emperor actually played in

de yanjiu' 乾隆、嘉慶時期伊斯蘭風格玉器東傳的研究 [On the Eastern transmission of Islamic-style jade during the Ch'ien-lung and Ch'ia-ching period (1736–1820)], *Gugong xueshu jikan* 故宮學術季刊 [The National Palace Museum Research Quarterly] 21, no. 2 (2003), 168–202; Ming Wilson, '1760—An Important Year in the Production of Chinese Jade', *Transactions of the Oriental Ceramic Society* 73 (2008–2009): 51–59.

52. Wilson, '1760—An Important Year in the Production of Chinese Jade', 57.

53. Rong Geng 容庚, 'Xiqing jinwen zhenwei cunyibiao' 西清金文真偽存佚表, *Yanjing xuebao* 燕京學報5 (1929): 811–876; Liu, ed., *Qianlong sijian zonglibiao*.

54. Shih, 'Qingshi shoucang de xiandai zhuanhua—jianlun qi yu Zhongguo meishushi yanjiu fazhan zhi guanxi', 16–23; Wilson, '1760—An Important Year in the Production of Chinese Jade', 58–59; Demattè, 'Emperors and Scholars: Collecting Culture and Late Imperial Antiquarianism', 165–75. *Jin shi xue* is the study of inscriptions written for many different purposes in a wide range of media, including metal, stone, bone, bamboo, and wood. For detailed explanations and history of this scholarly discipline, see Chu Chien-hsin 朱劍心, *Jin shi xue* 金石學, 1930 (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1955).

55. Ho, 'Qianlong de shufa jianshang', 33; Hsieh, 'Qianlong de taoci jianshang guan', 4–6.

56. Chang, 'Cong "yu e" lun Qing Qianlong zhong wan qi shengxing de yuqi leixing yu diwang pinwei', 61–116; Teng, 'Qianlong Jiaqing shiqi Yisilan fengge yuqi dongchuan de yanjiu', 175–202.

57. Chang, 'Cong "yu e" lun Qing Qianlong zhong wan qi shengxing de yuqi leixing yu diwang pinwei', 68–70.

58. Teng, 'Qianlong Jiaqing shiqi Yisilan fengge yuqi dongchuan de yanjiu', 175.

the creation of the collection and how much weight should be given to the emperor's personal preferences and his skills in connoisseurship when examining the formation and the quality of the collection.

Some studies have recognised the collective efforts of court members who took part in the examination, research, and ranking of objects, and who played important roles in distinguishing superior works from lesser ones.⁵⁹ However, these studies situate the efforts of court members within the context of how craftsmen and officials helped cultivate the emperor's skills in connoisseurship and assisted in the development of his diverse tastes in art. The contributions of court members to the formation of the actual collection have not been properly explored and still beg closer examination. It is worth questioning if the emperor in fact personally engaged with all the objects and if his skills in connoisseurship were directly linked to the quality of the collection. Viewing the formation of the collection as a collective institutional effort rather than a personal activity, has not been attempted. Such a perspectival shift can provide new ways of understanding imperial collecting practices.

Reconsidering *the* Collection

As demonstrated above, there has been extensive research published on the topic of Chinese imperial collecting, particularly the collecting activities at the Qing court during the Qianlong reign. Yet, in spite of the numerous existing studies that consistently describe and define its object of inquiry as 'the Qianlong imperial art collection', a fundamental issue remains obscure: what was *the* collection and how personalised was it? Present scholarship, in the West as well as in the East, often sees the collection as an assemblage of works of art directed by an individual and makes no distinctions between collectibles and furnishings, which in actuality have very different purposes and functions. As a result, several problems occur. First of all, the scale of the collection has been overestimated since collectibles—objects that actually enter the collection—and articles that are simply retained at the Qianlong court have all been discussed in one breath, as part of a single collection. Secondly, the collective effort of court members who contributed to the formation of the collection has been overlooked. The amount of work required to select collectibles and to separate them from other objects in order to create a collection has not

59. Chi 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, in *Dongwu lishi xuebao* 東吳歷史學報 [Soochow Journal of History] (2006): 53–105; Feng Ming-chu 馮明珠, 'Yuhuang anli wangzhe shi—lunjie Qianlong huangdi de wenhua guwen' 玉皇案吏王者師——論介乾隆皇帝的文化顧問, in *Qianlong huangdi de wenhua daye* 乾隆皇帝的文化大業 [Emperor Ch'ien-lung's Grand Cultural Enterprise], ed. Feng Ming-chu 馮明珠 (Taipei: National Palace Museum, 2002), 241–58; 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 Qianlong emperor Gaozong] (Taipei: National Palace Museum, 2013), 85, 121.

been given enough attention, as most discussions have focused on the personal connoisseurship skills and taste of the emperor. Thirdly, 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. These objects have not been properly situated within the context of the collecting activities in the eighteenth-century Chinese imperial court. Finally, the concept of collecting in China has often been interpreted and studied from a Eurocentric point of view, which sees royal collections as functioning in part in the display of power and the instilling of 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 kept out of sight. Assuming they were on view is a presumption made about the collection that has coloured its interpretation. For these reasons, it is necessary to reconsider how we describe and approach the objects assembled at the Qing imperial court during the Qianlong reign and how we define this assemblage.

Aspiring to clarify these issues, the research presented here mainly takes a contextual approach, which reads objects in relation to their roles within the eighteenth-century Qing imperial household and its collecting activities. It is therefore my deliberate decision to include discussions of objects made of various materials and techniques in order to situate them within this context. It is not the purpose of this research to conduct a formal or stylistic analysis of the objects assembled and commissioned at court during the Qianlong reign, although these methodologies are adopted in various sections. 'The painting collection' or 'the bronze collection', as often categorised in present scholarship where such information is relevant to the discussion, are reconsidered as various parts of the overall assemblage of objects at the imperial household in order to shed light on contemporary ideas towards collecting at the Qianlong court. Their validity as separate 'collections' is thus challenged. As this book wishes to explore the broader concept of imperial collecting, it also does not apply a biographical methodology, which approaches objects in relation to the collector's life and personality. In this book, imperial collecting is seen as an institutional activity as the redefinition of the collection necessitates. The emperor is perceived as one of the members of the institution, the head of the state and of the imperial household. Issues regarding the personal aesthetic taste of the Qianlong emperor are not the primary concerns of this study.

This book begins by redefining what is known as *the collection*, which in this study refers to 'the collection of the imperial household in the Qianlong reign' rather than 'the imperial art collection of the Qianlong emperor'. Chapter 1 explains this new definition through a philological and historiographical analysis of the widely used phrase 'imperial art collection', which, as will be demonstrated, is in fact imprecise and consequently misleading. By

examining the language used in Chinese primary sources, it is noted that all three words in their Chinese origins contain intricate meanings and historical references which are crucial to the understanding of the eighteenth-century view of the collection but which are lost in translation. 'The collection of the imperial household in the Qianlong reign', as will be explained, is a more accurate description of *the* collection as it actually was in the eighteenth century. It will be proposed, also through philological and historiographical analysis, that collectibles which are assembled to form the actual collection fit all three of the following criteria. First of all, they may or may not be what would be described as 'works of art' today. Secondly, they were possessed by the imperial household and handled by the Imperial Household Department and did not include objects owned and managed by the outer court, which is a detail that is not normally acknowledged in current scholarship. Finally, they were intentionally chosen and hidden away from public gaze, even from the eyes of those who were working and living at the Forbidden City. This new definition, which reinstates original meanings and contexts rather than imposing modern, Eurocentric interpretations, not only explains the wide variety of objects collected by the Qing imperial household but also demonstrates the relations and differences between collectibles and the other objects merely retained at the Qianlong court. Ultimately, this reveals that the actual collection, although still impressive in scale, was in fact not as monumental as previously portrayed. The present perception of a single collection encompassing nearly all objects, as will be argued, actually developed much more recently in the early twentieth century due to the decline of the Qing imperial household and the rise of nationalism. In light of the redefinition of the collection in its restored context, the criteria which separate collectibles from other objects are once again clearly defined, and this builds the foundation upon which relevant discussions associated with the collection can be advanced.⁶⁰

Chapter 2 focuses on the institutional and processual aspects of the collection of the Qing imperial household in the Qianlong reign and highlights practices associated with this particular collection, such as the assessment, identification, inscription, ranking, cataloguing, labelling, and storing of objects. It will be demonstrated that these actions, often presented as indications of the emperor's connoisseurship skills and taste, do not always reflect his personal affinity for certain objects. It will be argued that these actions constituted part of the institutional scheme of managing the objects retained at the Qing imperial household. I argue instead that it was through the process of selection—a collective effort of various specialists—that collectibles were separated from

60. A large section of chapter 1 was first published in Nicole T. C. Chiang, 'Reconsidering an Imperial Collection: Problems of Modern Impositions and Interpretations', *Journal of Art Historiography* [online] no. 10 (June 2014). Available at <https://arthistoriography.files.wordpress.com/2014/06/chiang.pdf>.

other objects, and boundaries for determining what could enter the collection were drawn. Evidence suggests that rather than being personally engaged with individual objects, the emperor seemed to be more concerned with how the collection as a whole was managed, preserved, and interpreted. In addition, it is my argument that the process of selecting and assembling *was* the act of forming the collection. The ranking, cataloguing, labelling, and storing of objects were not merely activities of organising and documenting a pre-existing collection, as is often perceived, but constituted the on-going process of creating the collection.

Meanwhile, the emperor exercised tight control over another category of objects that formed part of the institutional collection but which has often been misinterpreted: the objects produced in the imperial workshops, for which the emperor gave many precise instructions relating to their manufacture, design, and function. Chapter 3 explores the emperor's attitude towards such commissioned works and how they relate to the collection of the imperial household. It will be demonstrated that, also contrary to the usual assumption, relatively few final products of commissioned works actually entered the collection. What the research presented here reveals is that, compared to complete works, the emperor seemed to give much more weight to preliminary drawings, patterns, models, and prototypes that were used in the process of creating commissioned works. These were among the few items to which the emperor actually paid special attention. In addition, as it will be demonstrated, they were specifically chosen, assembled, and put out of sight along with other collectibles of the Qing imperial household. Thus for the first time, it is proposed that these preliminary drawings, patterns, models, and prototypes should be considered as part of the collection of the imperial household. Furthermore, it will be argued that the purpose of collecting such objects was to establish a repertoire of standardised models which functioned as a practical and useful tool for the emperor to administer the imperial household.

That the collection of the Qing imperial household was not normally on view is also most often overlooked but extremely significant fact. Chapter 4 re-examines the function and agency of the collection of the imperial household in relation to its visual perceptibility. As will have been demonstrated in previous chapters by this point, while furnishings remained on display, collectibles were boxed up and removed from view most of the time. The collection therefore could not have been used to make a public political statement as has often been assumed. Consequently, through comparative studies, it will be argued in this chapter that expressing magnificence through the display of objects was not necessarily the universal goal of all rulers and was only partially true in eighteenth-century China. Viewing royal collections of objects as demonstrations of power and authority is a relatively recent and Eurocentric concept, which is not necessarily applicable in East Asia. As will be shown, even within

the context of eighteenth-century China, the scholarly view towards collecting was very different from that of the emperor. This chapter advances the alternative suggestion that the collection contained evidentiary objects embodying crucial information for the emperor to rule the empire, which was thought to be too confidential to be revealed to the public. The political significance and function embodied in the collection was internalised, and the collection was for the singular gaze of the emperor.

This book therefore questions and challenges the assumed popular identity of the so-called Qianlong imperial art collection. It reconsiders what actually constituted the collection of the Qing imperial household during the Qianlong reign, and in so doing, leads into a re-evaluation of the collection's historiography, function, significance and implication. This book also explores new ways to look at the objects assembled during the eighteenth century by the Qing imperial household and proposes an alternative approach to understanding the collection. The re-evaluation of this assemblage can have a profound impact on studies of imperial collecting in China and contribute to the further understanding of Qing material culture.

Conclusion

Given the large quantities of objects amassed and produced by the Qing imperial court, particularly during the Qianlong reign, including not only paintings and calligraphy but also objects made of various materials, such as ceramic, metal, cloisonné, jade, ivory, bamboo, and rhinoceros horn, one of its legacies is the establishment of the prevailing 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. The Qianlong emperor, seen as the principal driving force for gathering together this assemblage of objects, has been the central figure of many studies. How his personal preferences and tastes influenced the formation of the so-called Qianlong imperial art collection as well as the relation between the politics of imperial mega-collecting and the expression of absolute monarchy in China have been lively topics of scholarly debates for decades.

This book as a whole, however, has challenged the widely accepted identity of this so-called Qianlong imperial art collection. It questioned the common presumption that there was a single and readily definable assemblage which included every physical object that had once been kept in the imperial palaces. It also questioned the presumption that the objects in 'the collection' were viewed as works of art. Thirdly, this research challenged the pervasive notion that collecting at the Qianlong court was a highly individualistic pursuit and that the supposed collection reflected the emperor's personal preferences and tastes. Lastly, this research confronted the popular interpretation that the assumed collection's function was to display the emperor's authority and to project various political images to different groups of audience.

This study therefore explored three main issues. First of all, it investigated and re-established the definition and description of the actual collection. In Chapter 1, it was proposed that the actual collection referred to a specific group of objects which were deliberately selected from among the holdings of the Qing imperial household, intentionally assembled, and carefully hidden away from view. It was pointed out that, ever since the early twentieth century,

deliberate attempts to deconstruct the actual collection of the imperial household and to reconstruct a new collection for the new nation have obscured our perception and understanding of how the collection was actually understood in its original context. In reassessing the historiography of the collection, this study demonstrated that the common perception of the collection as a colossal group of objects was in fact a relatively recent creation, thus challenging the current understanding of this assemblage.

The implication of restoring the definition of the collection to its original context is that it becomes possible to reconstruct its contents as they existed at the time. This study showed that objects with high artistic value were not necessarily seen as part of the collection at the Qianlong court. For example, in Chapter 2, it was mentioned that paintings by old masters bearing imperial inscriptions and seal impressions were at times given away as gifts, which is to say that objects sometimes left the possession of the imperial household. It was also pointed out in Chapter 3 that, while current scholarship, to a greater or lesser extent, draws attention to the final products manufactured from the imperial workshops, relatively few final works in fact entered the collection of the imperial household. However, certain objects that are not necessarily seen as works of art today were perceived as part of the collection of the Qing imperial household in the eighteenth century. For instance, a selection of coins, not normally seen to possess much artistic value, was assembled in a book-form catalogue and entered into the collection. *Yang* and *gao*, or preliminary drawings, patterns, models and prototypes, as demonstrated in Chapter 3, were also perceived as collectibles even though many of them were not particularly aesthetically pleasing. The research demonstrated that these often-overlooked objects were intentionally chosen, deliberately assembled, and carefully stored, which made them part of the collection of the imperial household and significant to the ruling house. This study therefore challenged the notion of seeing the collection as an agglomeration of works of art and defied the normal impression of what the collection consisted of.

The second issue explored in this research was the institutional and logistical aspects of the collection. Chapter 2 argued that the collective effort of court members as well as the emperor's role within the institution, rather than as an individual, should be taken into consideration as examinations of their activities can shed new light on our perception on certain practices normally associated with collecting and connoisseurship. It was argued that imperial collecting was a collective and systematic endeavour rather than a leisurely activity for a single individual. The emperor, as the head of the institution, oversaw the project but was not always personally involved in the process, challenging the common belief that the personal taste and preferences of the emperor contributed directly to the formation of the entire collection.

It was also argued in Chapter 3 that, drafts and models, or *yang* and *gao*, as part of the actual collection, were extremely important to the emperor as the head of the imperial household, the most complex organisation in Qing bureaucracy. When investigating the responsibilities carried out by the Imperial Household Department, it was not difficult to realise that establishing a repertoire of standardised models was a pragmatic necessity and provided a useful tool for the emperor to govern this enormous and multifaceted organisation. Examining the institutional structure of the Qing imperial court, particularly the Imperial Household Department, therefore provided a point of departure for investigating the formation of the actual collection. As opposed to approaching the emperor as a collector with imperial status and imperial collecting as a leisure activity for this individual, this study argued that the Qianlong emperor should be seen as a member of an institution and that the collection of the imperial household should be examined within an institutional context.

The third issue explored in the book was the relation between the collection and its visual perceptibility. In Chapter 4, it was demonstrated that secrecy and concealment could be just as effective as visual displays in expressing superiority. While display pieces and furnishings could be exploited to project certain images and to exert their agency on the emperor's subjects and allies, the actual collection, which was hidden and not visible most of the time, had a different role. It was proposed that the collection represented a tangible expression of the emperor's vision of the Qing empire, which concerned the leader of the state rather than the subjects. The collectibles contained pieces of crucial information which served as reminders to the emperor of the empire's contemporaneous position in history and in the world. The collection helped the emperor assert his cultural and political leadership of the Qing empire, which was no longer just a Confucian state. Furthermore, the collection was for the eyes of the emperor and his successors. The clarification of the function of the actual collection thus has much wider implications for the general study of imperial collecting and its political applications in China and even in East Asia. As has been demonstrated in this book, the assumption that an imperial collection was displayed to manifest authority is in fact a Eurocentric concept gradually developed since the Renaissance. This presumption should not be imposed upon imperial collections in East Asia, where secrecy and concealment took precedence over visual perceptibility.

This research therefore re-evaluated and re-contextualised previously accumulated knowledge of the objects assembled and commissioned at the Qianlong court. It revised our concept and perception of the identity and definition of the collection of the Qing imperial household during the Qianlong reign. It also re-situated objects, some of which had been neglected in the past, within their original and correct context. Re-examining imperial collecting

activities at the Qianlong court also helped further the understanding of Qing institutional practices. While previous studies focused on how the emperor's personal preferences shaped the collection, this research challenged the facile but nonetheless tempting assumption, demonstrating instead how members of the court collectively contributed to the formation of the collection under the emperor's instructions and management. In addition, earlier studies have persistently described the function of the collection as a display of the emperor's authority and his desire to impress his subjects. This research, however, also challenged that widely accepted concept by taking into account the fact that many objects were in fact boxed up and stored away. It argued for an alternative way of looking at collectibles of the Qing imperial household in the context of secrecy and concealment. As such, this book is the first to propose exploring the nature of secrecy and concealment of the collection and its relation to emperorship.

There are yet more unexplored areas of imperial collecting activities to be situated in the original sociohistorical contexts of Qing China. One such topic is the status fluidity of objects. In Chapter 2, it was mentioned that a jade axe that had been ranked third class was rediscovered during the Qianlong reign and entered into the collection of the imperial household by the emperor. When discussing various types of boxes of many treasures, it was also mentioned that a Ge ware spittoon with a second-class mark was put into a *duobaoge*, boxes which usually contained first-class objects. In addition, in Chapter 3, it was pointed out that certain *tielu* paintings, which were initially seen as decorative and replaceable objects, were later detached, remounted, and came to be seen as collectibles of the imperial household. Towards the end of the Qing dynasty, many objects were sold and thus removed from the collection, a phenomenon briefly touched upon in Chapter 1. The status of objects therefore did not seem to be fixed and could change from time to time. This research has already pointed out that the formation of the collection was an ongoing process. However, further research is needed in order to explore how such changes might have corresponded with the changing visions of empire as the empire itself evolved and transformed during the long reign of the Qianlong emperor and over the course of the Qing dynasty.

Another field to be further explored is other groups of objects accumulated at the Qing imperial court. Demonstrating that imperial holdings should not be perceived as one entity, this research focused its argument on a very specific group: 'that which is collected/hidden by the imperial household'. Objects owned by the imperial state and managed by the outer court, for example, would have a completely different function and could provide a different insight into the material culture of the Qing imperial court. Other objects owned by the imperial household and managed by the Imperial Household Department should be explored further as well. 'Playthings', briefly

mentioned in Chapter 2, or objects inscribed with the characters *wan* 玩 (to play; plaything) or *shangwan* 賞玩 (to admire and play) could be an interesting group to investigate. Unlike collectibles, which provided crucial information for the ruling of the empire and were much associated with the emperors' work and duties, playthings imply that the objects were for leisurely activities. This group of objects, therefore, might provide a much better insight into the private lives of Qing emperors. In addition, the act of play suggests a closer physical contact with the objects. Unlike collectibles which were often assessed by specialists and then hidden away, playthings were probably meant to be played with and handled by emperors. They may therefore tell us more about the individual tastes and preferences of Qing emperors than other groups of objects are able to.

Ultimately, the research presented here has demonstrated that the collection of the Qing imperial household, although a much researched topic for decades, deserves to be re-examined using alternative approaches. It is hoped that by shifting the predominant paradigm and proposing a different framework, new light is cast on this well-established subject and a range of fresh discussions will be stimulated to further the understanding of the political and cultural agenda of the Qing dynasty during the Qianlong reign as well as the re-evaluation of imperial collecting in China in general.