



# Collecting Antiquity in Modern China

*Artifacts and  
Their Afterlives*

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*For Ted*



Intense love always incurs hefty cost; rich collection always results in heavy loss.

*DAO DE JING*<sup>1</sup>

Collectors are happy people.

ATTRIB. GOETHE<sup>2</sup>

Every beloved object is the center point of a paradise.

NOVALIS<sup>3</sup>



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## INTRODUCTION

### The King Loses His Bow

“Possession inevitably entails loss, and gathering, dispersion. This is the law in the nature of things. Someone loses a bow, someone else finds it. What is there worth saying about it?”<sup>1</sup> So wrote the poet and antiquarian collector Li Qingzhao (1084–1155) in her postscript to *Records of Metal and Stone*. Those familiar with the classics will immediately recognize her reference to an ancient anecdote: A king of the Chu state (c. 1030–223 BCE) lost his bow while out hunting; seeing his attendants anxiously searching for it, the king said, “Halt! A Chu person loses a bow, another Chu person will find it. Why bother searching?” Li’s readers would also know that the anecdote has two sequels. Confucius reportedly commented, “Omit the word ‘Chu,’ and the king’s remark remains valid.” The Taoist sage Laozi was said to follow up: “Omit the word ‘person,’ and the remark remains valid.”<sup>2</sup>

In other words: bow lost, bow found, what does it matter who owns it?

By placing this anecdote in the context of her personal experience, Li imbued it with a deep sense of poignancy. *Records of Metal and Stone*, preserving the titles of roughly two thousand ancient inscriptions, was compiled by Li and her husband, Zhao Mingcheng (1081–1129), while the Northern Song dynasty was threatened by imminent Jurchen invasion. The volume was the fruit of decades of loving collaboration and painstaking labor. But by the time Li penned these words, her husband was dead, most of their collection was gone, and her country as she had known it no longer existed.<sup>3</sup>

The bow anecdote provides the core inspiration for this book—although by writing it I challenge Li’s dismissal of the topic’s worthiness. First, this legendary but elusive bow serves as a symbol for the impermanency of ownership, reminding us that no matter how tightly people hold on to their possessions, change of hands is the rule, not the exception. Second, the anecdote alerts us to the problematic concept of ownership. What, after all, does it

mean to *own* something? Following Confucius's lead, we should ask: In what sense can a cultural or political entity claim ownership of a heritage? And, thanks to Laozi, we are reminded that when we say someone owns a bow, we are talking from the human point of view. But if we adopt the bow's point of view, then ownership is an alien concept that concerns it little. Shifting the perspective from the owner to the object not only helps us better understand the object *per se* but also allows us to see more clearly the relativity and limitation of the owner's view. Last but not least, an object's meanings are not fixed but rather constructed based on context and ownership. Once in circulation, regardless of whether it remains physically intact, its meanings inevitably enter an interactive flux as successive hands use and define it. Every encounter between a person and a historical object is a convergence or even collision of perspectives. As our thinking conditions the object's meaning, the object also alters our thinking.

On a macro level, human history is mired in a cyclical pattern of stability and unrest. Empires rise and fall, things are lost and found, and collections are assembled and dispersed as collectors live and die. The loss of Li's collection, nothing more than a small-scale instance in a stream of catastrophes that punctuate Chinese history, serves as a prequel to the events recounted in this book. Almost a millennium later, China entered a period no less turbulent than Li's. Within the short span of barely a century, the country saw the fall of its last dynasty, two world wars, numerous other armed conflicts, and a series of political campaigns culminating in the destructive Cultural Revolution. Against this background, an unusually large number of ancient artifacts came into the spotlight in quick succession. And they did not simply appear on their own. In each case, with extraordinary acumen, private collectors played an outsized role in identifying, salvaging, and reevaluating these artifacts, especially at moments when the state was either too dysfunctional or too distracted to do so effectively.<sup>4</sup> Simply put, these collectors oversaw the "lost and found" department of history.

This book follows the lives of these collectors as they built up and lost their cherished collections. Since the turn of the twentieth century, the oracle bones, bearing the earliest known systematic Chinese writing, caught the attention of Wang Yirong (1845–1900), Liu E (1857–1909), Luo Zhenyu (1866–1940), Wang Guowei (1877–1927), and Chen Mengjia (1911–1966) as they grappled with national and personal crises. In the 1910s, disillusioned by a revolution that seemed to have broken all its promises, Lu Xun (1881–1936) quietly immersed himself in collecting old books and copying obscure stele rubbings, something that his literary foe Shi Zhecun (1905–2003) would

reprise when he faced severe persecution during the Cultural Revolution. Upon the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC), just as the novelist Shen Congwen (1902–1988) was ready to commit suicide under political pressure, he regained strength thanks to his discovery of textiles and other everyday objects; hidden in plain sight and long neglected by connoisseurs, these artifacts suggested to Shen an unorthodox approach to Chinese history. In 1965, on the eve of the Cultural Revolution, the Marxist historian Guo Moruo (1892–1978) encountered two newly excavated epitaphic inscriptions and set off a contentious debate not only about the authenticity of the calligraphic masterpiece *Lantingxu* but also about the meaning of authenticity itself. These figures' diverse collecting activities are grouped into four case studies, each coalescing around a broad category of artifacts. But instead of treating these artifacts as static and finished, I regard them as embodiments of interactive and open-ended processes, both in terms of their original creation and their reception in the twentieth century, in which materiality and subjectivity constantly act upon each other. The four chapters are therefore entitled "Carving" (the oracle bones), "Rubbing" (imprints of inscriptions and old book editions), "Brushing" (*Lantingxu* and the brush-and-ink calligraphy tradition), and "Weaving" (textiles, decorative patterns, and costumes).

On the surface, these people were too heterogeneous to form a coherent group. Despite having access to the same antiques market and moving in interconnected circles, they cultivated diverse tastes and followed disparate intellectual paths. Their political orientations spanned the entire spectrum from the left to the right, from liberalism to communism, and from avowed monarchism to revolutionary iconoclasm. Some were overtly antagonistic toward others. That they shared any affinity at all might seem counterintuitive to those accustomed to the dualistic discourse of conservatism versus progressivism prevalent in modern China.<sup>5</sup> And yet these figures were linked on a deeper level by their passion for collecting ancient artifacts and their firm conviction in such artifacts' outsized contemporary relevance. In fact, precisely due to their polarized ideologies, their unexpected affinity demands an explanation. It should also be noted that while they were prominent figures in their respective professions, with the exception of Luo Zhenyu, collecting ancient artifacts was not their most visible undertaking and has only attracted marginal scholarly attention. It is one of the aims of this book to reassess this activity's importance in relation to their broader intellectual agendas.

Despite their incompatible worldviews, these collectors were connected by yet another key commonality: Much as with Li's tragic story, personal and

national crises shaped their encounters with ancient artifacts. For them, collecting was neither a pleasurable hobby nor a purely scholastic pursuit but an urgent attempt to rearticulate and preserve endangered cultural identities. It was no coincidence that many of them looked to their Song predecessors like Li and Zhao as role models, not only for their paradigm-setting contributions to Chinese antiquarianism but also for their acute sense of urgency during precarious times. When ancient artifacts emerged at such moments, they seemed like messengers of omens, warnings, and revelations meant to answer the distressed calls of the present.

Against this background, I present *Collecting Antiquity's* two core theses. First, arguably the most common attitude toward ancient artifacts is to treat them as *evidence* supporting one's preferred narrative of the past. And yet, ancient artifacts exist in a logic of their own and defy such simplistic instrumentalization. Subsuming them into a coherent narrative structure, often with a clear origin or starting point and a neatly constructed linear sequence that leads to the storyteller himself, is an act of manipulation and even violence that is frequently if not always politically motivated. Despite the fact that collections are routinely used to tell stories, their intrinsically synchronous structure contains heterogeneous possibilities that resist any singular narrativization. And unlike the storyteller who always manages to rationalize the myriad "evidence" through a thread, it is the collector who is most respectful of and sensitive to ancient artifacts' state of unresolved ambiguity.

In the case of twentieth-century China, due to the combined effects of its own crises and the challenges posed by the West as an apparently superior civilization, the value and even the authenticity of the country's past were put in doubt. The study of ancient artifacts was therefore driven by a desire to help the country's precarious cultural identity regain a secure historical footing. But while accumulating ever more ancient fragments did allow one to describe the past with increasing specificity, it did not yield a coherent and uninterrupted historical narrative; instead, as each case study in this book shows, each time this conglomerate of only half-decipherable fragments solved old problems, they generated at least as many new questions. And rather than producing an incontrovertible consensus about the past unperturbed by contemporary bias, they only triggered more intense debates among feuding ideological factions. Thanks to the availability of these artifacts, antiquity's alterity and heterogeneity became not less but more glaringly present. Accordingly, the collectors resisted the allure of storytelling and recognized ancient artifacts' own agency by treating them as equal partners in a dialogue, facilitating a negotiation of their ever-evolving meaning and relevance *in relation to* the present. In this sense, collecting ancient artifacts

amounted to a hermeneutic project not unlike the one Hans-Georg Gadamer articulated for the interpretation of ancient texts, in which true understanding of the past takes place in the constant adjustment of one's own perspective and the fusion of horizons across an insurmountable temporal distance.<sup>6</sup> And since narrativization is ultimately about the power to define legitimacy and orthodoxy, by disrupting dominant historical narratives the collectors, even those who held firmly to their conservative ideologies, became unwitting revolutionaries.

Second, this book provides a critical reassessment, conducted from the angle of ancient artifacts (or that of the lost bow, so to speak), of two closely related notions: that Chinese civilization enjoys a unique historical continuity, and that it is defined by a timeless "Chineseness." On the contrary, L. P. Hartley's statement that "the past is a foreign country: they do things differently there"<sup>7</sup> applies to China as accurately as it does to anywhere else. Unlike the image of continuity that China's enduring script system and long-standing historiographical tradition seem to suggest, ancient artifacts arouse a sense of illegibility and alienation that are unmistakable symptoms of rupture and heterogeneity.<sup>8</sup> And although collections of antiquities have been and continue to be used by rulers to create myths of power, orthodoxy, and continuity, private collectors showed that their endeavors could be equally effective tools in unraveling such myths. As a result, the authority to collect, own, and interpret cultural heritage also becomes highly contestable. It raises the following questions: How do we understand a political entity's relationship with the material culture it inherits? How does this relationship affect the present and the future? Here Confucius's comment about the king's bow proves to be especially revelatory. By asking these questions, I am not approaching the ownership problem from a practical or legal angle, as James Cuno has done;<sup>9</sup> instead, I use material cultural heritage as an entry point to reexamine debates on cultural orthodoxy, nationhood, ethnicity, diaspora, and the ongoing mythmaking of "Chineseness." I argue that the very desire to claim ownership of cultural heritage and assert nativist authority over its interpretation not only prevents us from attaining any truthful knowledge but inevitably leads to the distortion of history for the purpose of manipulating the present. A nation or a people that cannot free itself from the desire to *own* its past (pun intended) will only end up being *owned* by it.

I must state from the outset that *Collecting Antiquity*, with its focus on the twentieth century, makes no claim of providing new interpretations of ancient artifacts and their respective historical settings. Instead of comprehensively addressing the wide range of issues these artifacts could elicit, I limit the scope of my work to examining the effects of their reemergence in the

twentieth century. In other words, this book is about the *afterlives* of these artifacts. *Collecting Antiquity* is indebted to existing work on earlier periods, including archaeologically recovered textual and material evidence, to account for this overarching historical context.<sup>10</sup> In particular, it benefits from the substantial scholarship on pre-twentieth-century antiquarianism;<sup>11</sup> philology and epigraphic studies;<sup>12</sup> and collecting, connoisseurship, and general material culture.<sup>13</sup> Together, these historical practices laid the groundwork for modern collectors' engagements.

While the fascination with ancient artifacts in earlier periods—notably the Song, the Ming, and the Qing dynasties—has been extensively accounted for, the same cannot be said about the twentieth century. However, it is not my intention merely to fill a missing link and produce a history of twentieth-century Chinese antiquarianism in the scope outlined by existing scholarship, for as I will show, it could no longer encompass the unprecedented challenges posed by the intervention of Western thought, particularly Marxist historical materialism. The collecting of ancient artifacts in a volatile and contentious century of cultural clash is a highly potent topic, generating wide-ranging ramifications for various disciplines including literary studies, art history, historiography, and political theory, and it calls for an accordingly interdisciplinary treatment. Here I identify two aspects that are closely linked to my theses. The first concerns collecting's challenge to the conceptualization of stage-oriented historical time, which forms the narrative foundation of cultural orthodoxy and political legitimacy. The second concerns the tension between materiality and textuality as two key elements in the formation of historical memory. The remainder of this introduction will be devoted to explicating these issues.

### Collecting Versus Storytelling

China's encounter and clash with the West (as well as modernized Japan) instigated debates about civilizational development that fell into two stage-oriented modes: a cyclical return to an idealized past and a linear progress toward modernization and/or Westernization. Regardless of their intrinsic merits, stage-oriented interpretations of historical development are frequently used to legitimize a political regime and its actions. On the one hand, conservative political theories since at least the time of Confucius portray history as cyclical or following certain patterns based on what Wu Hung calls "dynastic time." Functioning as both "historical eras and structural keys," dynastic time still retains a powerful grip on conceptualizing Chinese history.<sup>14</sup> Relatedly, as Kun Qian argues, an "imperial-time-order" as "a deep structure

of Chinese intellectual thinking” has long normalized the expectation of a unified China, according to which turmoil (division) is a necessary stage that inevitably leads to peace and order (unification).<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, Prasenjit Duara, Viren Murthy, and Axel Schneider note that since the nineteenth century, linear and teleological temporality as defined by the European Enlightenment substantially restructured the perception of history in China.<sup>16</sup> I should add that Marxist historical materialism, which identifies successive stages in the development of human societies, became especially dominant in communist China. After the founding of the PRC and especially in the 1980s, the Communist Party also came up with the “primary stage of socialism” theory to justify its many failures.<sup>17</sup> And in the 2020s, we are witnessing in real time the Communist Party’s pivoting away from its initial rejection of traditional culture toward actively embracing it in an attempt to insert itself into a long lineage of political and cultural orthodoxy,<sup>18</sup> which in turn forms part of its effort to “tell the good China story.”<sup>19</sup>

It is against this prevalent stage-oriented thinking that collecting exercises its most disruptive force and that the figure of the collector emerges as an unexpectedly radical challenger. In the context of this book, an inquiry into the collector needs to be pursued in tandem with their close relatives: antiquarians, or those who devote their lives to collecting ancient things. There is already a well-established field of study that examines the historical origin and development of Chinese antiquarianism as a scholarly practice, which I will not retrace here.<sup>20</sup> Instead, I offer a conceptual intervention by asking: What is the defining quality that distinguishes the collector and the antiquarian from, say, the historian or the storyteller?<sup>21</sup> My answer, which is also my argument in this section, is that at their core, the collector and the antiquarian are characterized by a propensity toward synchronization and serialization at the expense of identifying any diachronic thread. This characteristic provides an effective tool to dismantle the stage-oriented explanation of historical development, thus positioning the collector and the antiquarian as the opposite of the storyteller. This characteristic only becomes apparent when we treat collecting and antiquarianism as manifestations of a general mentality rather than as specific historical practices.

Admittedly, the images of the collector and the antiquarian are loaded with not-so-positive connotations. Stories from different cultures describe collectors’ eccentric personalities and behaviors. Goethe was believed to have said that “collectors are happy people,” a simple yet vivid description of their spirit: They single-mindedly devote themselves to pursuing their beloved objects, creating an alternative space away from quotidian worries. In so doing, they tend to disregard commonly accepted values, and the money,

time, and energy they expend on their collections can seem absurd to an outsider. Hence Balzac's iconic portrayal of the collector (with the problematic assumption that they are all heterosexual men):

Often shall you meet in Paris some Pons, some Élie Magus, dressed badly enough, with his face turned from the rising sun (like the countenance of the perpetual secretary of the Académie), apparently heeding nothing, conscious of nothing, paying no attention to women nor shop-windows, walking at random, so to speak, with nothing in his pockets, and to all appearance an equally empty head. Do you ask to what Parisian tribe this manner of man belongs? He is a collector, a millionaire, one of the most impassioned souls upon earth; he and his like are capable of treading the miry ways that lead to the police-court if so they may gain possession of a cup, a picture, or some such rare unpublished piece as Élie Magus once picked up one memorable day in Germany.<sup>22</sup>

If collectors find happiness by escaping from everyday life into their collections, antiquarians take this flight to another level because, according to Jean Baudrillard, "no escape is more radical than escape in time."<sup>23</sup> Antiquarians may seem even more eccentric because, on top of being collectors themselves, they also show a stubborn untimeliness and an indifference to the present. Indeed, for a long time the term "antiquarian" held a negative connotation in certain cultures and was routinely disparaged as inferior to "historian." No wonder Nietzsche dismissed antiquarian collecting as "the repulsive spectacle of a blind rage . . . a restless raking together of everything that has ever existed."<sup>24</sup>

Confucius was probably the first known and most celebrated Chinese antiquarian.<sup>25</sup> He was said to have declared that "I transmit, I invent nothing. I trust and love the past [*haogu*]. . . . I am not endowed with innate knowledge. I am simply a man who loves the past and who is diligent in investigating it."<sup>26</sup> However, this image, as it has been generally received in Chinese culture, does not carry much negative connotation. Therefore, the first challenge in understanding Chinese antiquarianism in comparison with its European counterpart is finding an accurate Chinese term to render it. It is of course wrong to assume that everything European has a Chinese equivalent and vice versa. But European "antiquarianism" not only refers to a culturally specific practice but also suggests a common *mentality* across cultures, and it was this mentality, more than any specific practices, that irked Nietzsche. Among similar Chinese terms, neither *haogu* (loving antiquity) nor *kaogu* (investigating antiquity) fully captures the implications of "antiquarianism." Instead, I argue that the term *bogu*, meaning to acquire the widest possible range of

knowledge about antiquity, most accurately describes the antiquarian mentality. What is more, behind *bogu* is a series of long-standing intellectual debates that resonate strongly with those surrounding European antiquarianism.

#### BO AND YUE

The verb *bo* in *bogu* means “to widen” and “to expand.” At first glance, its meaning seems straightforward enough. But in classical scholarship, it needs to be understood as one side of a dichotomy at the center of centuries of protracted philosophical debates. *Bo* is frequently presented as the opposite of *yue*, whose meanings are at least twofold: to restrain or discipline and to summarize the core idea that connects or governs miscellaneous materials. The dichotomy starts with Confucius, who was recorded as making a remark that can be interpreted as either “A gentleman enlarges his learning through literature and restrains *himself* with ritual; therefore, he is not likely to go wrong,”<sup>27</sup> or “A gentleman enlarges his learning through literature and restrains *such enlarged learning* with ritual; therefore, he is not likely to go wrong.”<sup>28</sup> In the first interpretation, ritual restraint is applied to the person, whose behavior requires moral rectification. In the second, there is an implied concern about extensive but unstructured, fragmentary, and unregulated knowledge, which is why restraint is required. Mencius corroborated this latter view, stating unambiguously, “After extensive learning and thorough discussion, one should go back and express it concisely.”<sup>29</sup> While Confucius seemed to resort to moral principles to steer the enlargement of learning, Mencius pursued an intellectual path, using the same word *yue* but applying its other meaning—“to summarize” and “to make something concise.”

Ever since then, *bo* and *yue* have formed a problematic pair, and it is no coincidence that the duo resurfaced in two key philosophical debates, one in the twelfth century with an important sequel in the sixteenth century, and the other in the nineteenth century. The first debate took place between the Song-dynasty philosophers Zhu Xi and his long-term rivals, the brothers Lu Jiuling and Lu Jiuyuan. Zhu considered extensive knowledge of the external world (*bo*) as the basis of the formation of a summary view (*yue*). The Lu brothers contended, in contrast, that the summary view (which one must seek inwardly through intuition) should precede and guide the enlargement of knowledge. They criticized Zhu’s scholarship as “miscellaneous and fragmentary” and advocated for a “summary concision” as the ultimate goal.<sup>30</sup> A few centuries later, the influential Wang Yangming took up a similar position and argued that the two aspects essentially formed the same process. The summary moral principle is not arrived at *after* the exhaustion of external knowledge; rather,

it exists inherently in every bit of such knowledge, no matter how trivial or miscellaneous.<sup>31</sup>

While this debate took place mostly in the realms of epistemology, it also had implications for historiography, which found its most vocal expression since the rise of *kaozheng* or evidential scholarship in the seventeenth century. One of evidential scholarship's motivations was to keep in check the overemphasis on innate knowledge that Wang had promoted. At the outset, evidential scholarship was a timely rectification of the widespread practice of subjective speculations. But by the mid-nineteenth century, this approach was on the brink of collapse due to its increasing fragmentation and trivialization, or what Ying-shih Yu calls the "devolution from Confucian intellectualism to textualism."<sup>32</sup> It was at this juncture that historian Zhang Xuecheng published his magnum opus, *General Principles of Literature and History* (*Wenshi tongyi*), as a response to evidential scholarship as a whole, and especially its most prominent champion, Dai Zhen. Dai maintained that the classics were the ultimate source of Confucianism's philosophical message; a precise understanding through philology and material evidence of the original meaning in every textual detail was necessary for grasping that message.<sup>33</sup> Zhang's challenge was built upon his main argument that "all the classics are historical records."<sup>34</sup> By reaffirming the inherent historicity of the Confucian classics, he confined their validity to the context of specific past events, thus weakening evidential scholarship's claim that universal truth resided in each and every minute textual detail.<sup>35</sup>

Here again, the tension between *bo* and *yue* came to play a key role in the debate. *General Principles of Literature and History* includes an essay in three parts titled "Bo [and] Yue,"<sup>36</sup> where Zhang criticizes second-rate scholars for being "memorious like a flooding river that knows no boundary" and "recklessly wanting to seek literally everything."<sup>37</sup> It is telling that the example Zhang uses to illustrate his point is none other than the great Song antiquarian Wang Yinglin, whose work Zhang considered moderately helpful as a data source but not for scholarly insight. He observed: "The reason that today's erudite gentlemen put a great mental burden on themselves to study the classics, but to the end of their lives gain absolutely nothing in scholarship, is because they follow Wang Yinglin's model."<sup>38</sup>

According to Zhang, *bo* is characterized by an insatiable appetite for accumulating ever more knowledge without being attentive to coherent connections or unifying theses. *Yue*, on the other hand, is the ability to identify the thread that connects the miscellaneous items and that allows a person to develop an original and profound interpretation. Zhang concluded that, ultimately, the division of *bo* and *yue* can only be explained by a difference in

innate temperaments.<sup>39</sup> In this sense, a more exact explanation of *yue* needs to be sought in the character's literal meaning, namely a thread or a rope, which is then extended metaphorically as "to restrain," "to summarize," "to simplify," and "to identify a unifying or commensurate conceptual thread." The antiquarian who ardently but indiscriminately pursues the expansion of knowledge of antiquity (*bogu*) can be defined conversely as the one who lacks the ability or interest in finding this thread. *Bo* served as a target in Zhang's critique of the trivializing tendency that eventually undermined Qing philology. It is worth noting that the Chinese translation of "museum" is *bowuguan*,<sup>40</sup> literally "an institution for the purpose of expanding knowledge of things," which retains the sense of *bo* established by Confucius and continuously debated upon up to the nineteenth century.

#### SYNCHRONICITY AND DIACHRONICITY

The shortcomings of the antiquarian *bo* approach are readily apparent, but its positive and revolutionary potential invites careful consideration. A brief examination of a parallel situation in the European tradition provides a helpful frame of reference. Unlike the largely positive attitude toward *bogu* scholarship in China, antiquarianism has long carried a negative connotation in Europe, where it was regarded as a primitive and inferior shadow of more serious and critical historical research. Beneath the *Oxford English Dictionary's* general definition of an antiquarian as "a person who studies or is interested in the past or its remains" and "a person who studies or collects antiquities," one finds the following caveat: "From a relatively early period, [antiquarian] was sometimes used disparagingly to imply excessive fascination with the past or the mere uncritical collecting of ancient curiosities." A particularly spiteful example in this vein comes from John Earle, who commented in the seventeenth-century *Microcosmographie* that the antiquarian "is a man strangely thrifty of time past, and an enemy indeed to his maw, whence he fetches out many things when they are now all rotten and stinking."<sup>41</sup> But loving old things was not necessarily a sin in itself; it is the perceived triviality and fragmentariness of the antiquarians' collections that offended people. Writing in 1605, Francis Bacon called antiquarianism "imperfect history," comparing it to "pictures and images . . . [that] are mutilated and defaced by age."<sup>42</sup> Arnaldo Momigliano succinctly summed up the essence of the antiquarian as "the type of man who is interested in historical facts without being interested in history,"<sup>43</sup> echoing Zhang's point that an extensive repository or database does not automatically yield historical insight.

As one of the most eloquent advocates of the European antiquarian tradition, Momigliano was making this comment with some irony. He was fully aware of the changing meanings of “history” over time. His seminal essay “Ancient History and the Antiquarian”<sup>44</sup> provided an authoritative overview of the methodological opposition between antiquarians and historians from ancient Greece to the nineteenth century. By pitting “historical facts” against “history,” he goes a step beyond simply tracing a trend in the history of scholarship to arrive at two diametrically opposite mentalities that parallel *bo* and *yue*: the synchronic and the chronological.

The criticism of antiquarianism against so-called proper historical studies can be summarized as follows. First, antiquarians pursue erudition for erudition’s sake, accumulating everything ancient regardless of their relevance or usefulness. Preoccupation with fragments resulted in a state of fragmentation—hence Bacon’s metaphor that antiquarians collect “remnants of history which have casually escaped the shipwreck of time.”<sup>45</sup> Second, the disparate facts thus collected stand in opposition to more organized forms of inquiry. As Bacon went on to note, the fragments antiquarians delight in gathering include “genealogies, annals, titles, monuments, coins, proper names and styles, etymologies of words, proverbs, traditions, archives and instruments as well public as private, fragments of histories scattered about in books not historical.”<sup>46</sup> Taken together, these categories form the sum of unprocessed, raw materials that are the opposite of philosophical or interpretive approaches to history. Such abundant but excessive data might seem to add to our understanding of the past, but in reality it disrupts the construction of a coherent narrative. This leads to the third criticism, namely that antiquarians are uninterested in narrative or chronology. By way of contrast, the three kinds of “Perfect History” that Bacon preferred—chronicles or annals, lives, and narrations or relations—all center upon a linear order that can effectively connect historical details.

Thanks to changing concepts about historiography, the antiquarian’s passion no longer seems trivial or outlandish from today’s point of view.<sup>47</sup> Antiquarianism’s emphasis on raw data responded to historical Pyrrhonism’s radical skepticism by providing primary source material more solid and reliable than literary evidence.<sup>48</sup> In Momigliano’s overview, a reconciliation is possible: “The traditional subjects of antiquarian research can be transformed into chapters of the history of civilization with all the necessary apparatus of erudition.”<sup>49</sup> Indeed, one need not limit oneself to being only one of the two, and many scholars often display characteristics of both approaches.<sup>50</sup>

Nevertheless, the merging of methods aside, fundamental differences persist. As Momigliano reminded us, antiquarianism is not just a method or

a trend but also a “state of mind,”<sup>51</sup> as is its opposite. This understanding is strikingly similar to Zhang’s point about *bo* and *yue* being manifestations of different temperaments. A typical antiquarian mentality favors synchronicity over diachronicity, the preferred mode of the historian. These tendencies in turn correspond to two basic human impulses: to collect and to narrate. Collecting means to enumerate, juxtapose, categorize, and serialize, a process that can extend indefinitely.<sup>52</sup> Narration, on the contrary, means subsuming these components into the linear order of temporality, which is precisely *yue*’s “thread” that connects and restrains the miscellaneous materials.

In theory, these two basic impulses—to collect and to narrate—are not necessarily incompatible, but in practice, they often negate each other. To narrate means to present data selectively, and to exclude anything that distracts and digresses from the main line. To collect means an unwillingness to exclude anything, even if it blurs the main storyline. And when too much data becomes available, chronology crumbles. It is in this sense that Momigliano described the antiquarians as having a “fondness for *irrelevant* detail” and as “capable of appraising unrelated facts which to us seem entirely remote from any serious pursuit.”<sup>53</sup>

The tension between collecting and narrating underlies the intellectual profiles of the protagonists of this book. In different ways, they struggled to reconcile the competing roles of the antiquarian-collector and the historian-storyteller. This is why *bo* and *yue*, or synchronicity and diachronicity, remain stubbornly incommensurable. This conundrum also allows us to reconsider Nietzsche’s disparagement of antiquarianism in “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life,” where he described the field as plagued by an inability to deploy the power of forgetting:

Imagine the extremest possible example of a man who did not possess the power of forgetting at all and who was thus condemned to see everywhere a state of becoming: such a man would no longer believe in his own being, would see everything flowing asunder in moving points and would lose himself in this stream of becoming: like a true pupil of Heraclitus, he would in the end hardly dare to raise his finger. Forgetting is essential to action of any kind, just as not only light but darkness too is essential for the life of everything organic. . . . *There is a degree of sleeplessness, of rumination, of the historical sense, which is harmful and ultimately fatal to the living thing, whether this living thing be a man or a people or a culture.*<sup>54</sup>

In Nietzsche’s perspective, forgetting is not an inability but rather an indispensable *ability* for the formation of memory. Remembering an event does not mean registering every detail of every occurrence in its duration. Rather,

it means choosing and highlighting certain details, then connecting them either causally or chronologically to form a narrative. By definition, a memory is the product of selective inclusion, which is itself inseparable from the simultaneous act of exclusion, namely forgetting. Without forgetting, we would have no memory.<sup>55</sup>

For Nietzsche, the inability to forget is the antiquarian's malady. Antiquarians cannot remember *properly*, not because they have too little to remember but because they have too much. The sheer weight of unselected details from the past cripples their ability to construct a coherent memory, trapping them in the rubble of synchronicity. Nonetheless, this same shortcoming has a positive side, seldom fully appreciated: A collection's synchronic structure challenges the regime imposed by narrative's erasure, manipulation, and distortion. The totality of the collector's raw and unprocessed materials, with their many disorienting detours and digressions, preserves more innocent truth, or at least more *possibility* of truth, than a well-organized but selective narrative. In their inability to forget anything, antiquarians dream of preserving the totality of what is left of the past, but the radical effect of this exhaustive documentation often lies beyond their control. Simply put, although the antiquarian conveys the impression of conservatism, in reality they often open the door to disrupting and even dismantling the tyranny of historical narrative. This insight helps explain why some ideologically conservative antiquarians in modern China facilitated revolutionary shifts in historical understanding, often against their own intentions.

#### COLLECTING: FROM OBSESSION TO RADICAL INTERVENTION

In many ways, collectors share the characteristics of antiquarians, particularly the propensity toward synchronicity at the expense of diachronicity. Approaches to collecting can be divided into two main categories: a research method and a personal obsession. As a research method, collecting is closely linked to such fields as the history of science, art history, and museum studies.<sup>56</sup> When examined historically, collecting overlaps substantially with antiquarianism and the *bogu* approach. It is also linked to studies of taxonomy (as seen in the case of the *Wunderkammer* and, more generally, natural history) and the encyclopedia. In classical Chinese scholarship, *mingwuxue* (the study of names and objects), as a branch of philology, also falls into this category. Collecting as a research approach often translates into an epistemological inquiry, as seen in Michel Foucault's seminal *The Order of Things*, and it also appears in parodies of the human vanity to master all knowledge—one

thinks of Gustave Flaubert's *Bouvard et Pécuchet*. Though not irrelevant to this book, this approach will not be the focus of the present section. Instead, I take a closer look at the second category, often found in literary depictions, that treats collecting as an eccentric personal obsession. Here, the collector is associated with unhealthy and excessive attachment to objects. As I aim to show, this very eccentricity helps to cement a radical intellectual profile.

Numerous examples in world literature paint a portrait of the collector as an eccentric who often negatively impacts the lives of those around them.<sup>57</sup> In Henry James's *The Spoils of Poynton*, the collector's obsession corrupts family relations; in Salman Rushdie's "The Prophet's Hair," it upsets both religious and secular orders; in Stefan Zweig's "The Invisible Collection," it becomes a person's sole solace that irresponsibly subsumes more pressing needs.<sup>58</sup> Then there is the legend of Don Juan, who objectifies women as the target of his pathological collectomania. In Balzac's *Cousin Pons* the collector-protagonist is a product, a victim, and a resister of modern capitalist society all at the same time. Chinese culture has no shortage of similar depictions. The fictional account of Emperor Yang of Sui's ghost reclaiming his beloved books<sup>59</sup> and the historical tragedy of Emperor Yuan of Liang burning his collection of precious ancient volumes, mentioned by Li Qingzhao in her "Postscript," demonstrate the collector's extreme degree of identification with their collection. "The Ethereal Stone," a tale about obsessive entanglements between a person and a strange stone, is included in Pu Songling's *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio*, a book propelled by nothing less than Pu's "fascination with the strange as an uncontrollable passion" and associated with "the paradigm of obsessive collecting."<sup>60</sup> In the modern writer Lao She's "Attachment," the protagonist's collection threatens the seemingly unquestionable principle of national pride and loyalty.<sup>61</sup>

This unusual human-object relationship is captured in the Chinese term *wanwu*, meaning "to play with things" or, in Wai-ye Li's translation, "to take wanton pleasure in things,"<sup>62</sup> which lends an air of non-seriousness and triviality to the enterprise and carries the negative connotations of indulgence and excess. When taken to the extreme, the aftermath of *wanwu* can be grave, as it "was regarded as the symptom as well as the cause of the individual's problem in a disintegrating society and therefore blamed for undermining the equilibrium of the self and the polity,"<sup>63</sup> even sharing the blame for the tragic fall of the Ming dynasty. In fact, the ancients had long taken notice of this dangerous scenario, issuing the warning *wanwu sangzhi*, or "taking wanton pleasure in things deprives one of a striving will,"<sup>64</sup> a phrase that continues to be current in today's Chinese language.

The same sense of excess resonates in a related set of concepts, *chi* and *pi* (addiction, obsession), which John Hay translates as "pathognomonic"<sup>65</sup> to

highlight their shared radical 癡 that indicates “pathology.” Similarly, Judith Zeitlin examines the formation of the Chinese concept of obsession (*pi*) from the angle of medical discourse, pointing out that it is a conceptual extension of the notion of a pathological blockage within the human body. Despite this negative connotation, in the minds of Ming literati such as Yuan Mei *pi* was “an ideal of unswerving commitment and genuine integrity incompatible with worldly success and conspicuous consumption” and “an act of alienation and withdrawal from conventional society.”<sup>66</sup>

It is precisely this *alienation* that constitutes the collector’s most powerful intervention into the human-object relationship: According to Baudrillard, an object becomes part of a collection when it is abstracted from its functionality.<sup>67</sup> By including an object in their collection, the collector in essence disregards its generally accepted values as declared and guaranteed by a political-economic regime. Such values are concentrated expressions of the sum total of the social relations and political orders that regulate human life. By encircling objects in a collection, the collector insulates them from their social and historical fabric, turning them into what Susan Stewart calls a “self-enclosure” whose purpose “is not the restoration of context of origin but rather the creation of a new context, a context standing in a metaphorical, rather than a contiguous, relation to the world of everyday life.”<sup>68</sup> Similarly, Alain Schnapp describes collecting as affording “an undefinable pleasure that drives people of all ages, origins, and religions to select and *remove from their natural environment* objects or even simple natural aggregates in order to preserve, study, exhibit, and categorize them.”<sup>69</sup>

The high stakes of such “self-enclosure” and “removal” become most apparent during moments of social rupture. Walter Benjamin was among the first to observe that such times were especially conducive to an intensified drive for collecting: “Perhaps the most deeply hidden motive of the person who collects can be described this way: he takes up the struggle against dispersion (*Zerstreuung*). Right from the start, the great collector is struck by the confusion, by the scatter (*Zerstreuungheit*), in which the things of the world are found.”<sup>70</sup> It is worth noting that *Zerstreuung* has two interconnected meanings, and “dispersal” captures only one of them. On the one hand, the word refers to the scattering of material ruins caused by social upheavals; on the other hand, it also means the loss of an effective structure of signification in which things retain their conventional meanings. It is in this sense that Bainard Cowan translates *Zerstreuung* as “divestment,”<sup>71</sup> a process that causes artifacts to no longer convey their conventional meanings, thus becoming strange and alien.

In many ways, twentieth-century China found itself in the same situation: It was not only a time of incessant wars, revolutions, political

campaigns, and economic failures, but also one of rupture in cultural transmission. Radical changes resulted in the loss of meanings attached to material cultural heritage and the disintegration of traditional value systems. The casualties also included people who were committed to maintaining the very value system that nurtured them. Seemingly extraordinary events such as the New Culture Movement and the Cultural Revolution were in fact only climaxes in this extended period of disruption. This situation created two tasks for collectors. Not only did they need to salvage the material remains, but they also had to recover their lost meanings and reestablish their fractured value system. But some damage cannot be undone, and the past can never be fully reconstructed. Accordingly, the collectors were faced with a vacuum that could only be filled by creatively looking toward the future. As Giorgio Agamben puts it, "Precisely because he makes alienation from the past into a value, the figure of the collector is in some way related to that of the revolutionary, for whom the new can appear only through the destruction of the old."<sup>72</sup>

Quite paradoxically, it is during turbulent times (or in Agamben's more positive wording, "times of break from tradition and exaltation of renewal") that the collector thrives, because chaos leads to dispersion, and dispersion opens the possibility for re-collection and reevaluation. Collectors in modern China were not only responding to their present-day situation; they were also products of that situation, in a manner reminiscent of Emma Bielecki's observation that the French Revolution was an event "without which the modern collector could not exist."<sup>73</sup> For these Chinese collectors, the twentieth century might not have been a happy time; yet they would not have come to occupy such an influential position and leave such a profound impact had their days been more peaceful.

In creating a new configuration for ancient artifacts, these collectors' most crucial contribution comes down to the restructuring of historical time. As the French auctioneer and art historian Maurice Rheims observed, "A phenomenon that often goes hand in hand with the passion of collecting is the loss of any sense of the present time."<sup>74</sup> Elaborating on this point, Baudrillard says:

The collection's fundamental function [is] the resolving of real time into a systematic dimension. . . . Indeed, it abolishes time. More precisely, by reducing time to a fixed set of terms navigable in either direction, the collection represents the continual recommencement of a controlled cycle. . . . What man gets from objects is not a guarantee of life after death, but *the possibility, from the present moment onwards, of continually experiencing the unfolding of his existence in a controlled, cyclical mode, symbolically transcending a real existence the irreversibility of whose progression he is powerless to affect.*<sup>75</sup>

Baudrillard's reading constitutes the foundation of my interpretation of collecting. He liberates the collection from narratives and linear temporality, and from the conventional expectation that it is created in the service of museums for the purpose of storytelling. One needs only to think of the widely adopted chronological order that governs the display of objects in major institutions.<sup>76</sup> Nevertheless, the fact that collections are used as such does not mean that this is what collections are always meant to do. As I argued above, collecting means to enumerate, categorize, classify, serialize, and juxtapose, none of which can be translated into a chronological order, which is foreign to the collection. In other words, a collection unfolds "horizontally" in a conceptual realm rather than "vertically" through time. When it does unfold vertically through time, it ceases to be a collection and becomes subservient to a narrative.

Admittedly, Baudrillard conceives collecting as a rather regressive and self-centered undertaking: "Between the world's irreversible evolution and ourselves, objects interpose a discontinuous, classifiable, reversible screen which can be reconstituted at will, a segment of the world which belongs to us, responding to our hands and minds and delivering us from anxiety."<sup>77</sup> Nevertheless, by allowing seriality to dislodge the linear and chronological order central to the stage-oriented interpretation of history, collecting also harbors explosive and revolutionary potentials.

#### BENJAMINIAN HISTORICAL MATERIALISM, OR "EXPLODING THE CONTINUUM OF HISTORY"

In the twentieth century, one of the most influential examples of the stage-oriented interpretation of history was historical materialism, touted by followers of Marxism as a scientific truth. The original articulation of this theory can be traced to the "materialist conception of history" in Karl Marx's *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*:

In the social production that men carry on, they enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material forces of production. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure, and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production in material life determines the general character of the social, political, and intellectual processes of life. It is not the consciousness of men which determines their existence; it is on the contrary their social existence which determines their consciousness.<sup>78</sup>

This theory holds two key implications for the present discussion. First, if material production is the foundation and determinant of both the superstructure and all intangible cultural products that fall under the broad umbrella of social consciousness, then ancient artifacts wield a decisive advantage over the written record in their ability to reveal the true face of history (at least to the extent that it has been interpreted by Marxist theorists in China). For the Chinese collectors, this seemed like a blessing. But it also proved to be a curse, as ancient material culture quickly became politicized into a battlefield for competing agendas. Keen Marxists wasted no time seizing on archaeological findings to support their views. Most influential among these was Guo Moruo, a prominent archaeologist and a pioneer in applying historical materialism to identify various stages of development in Chinese history.<sup>79</sup>

On the opposite side, conservative scholars such as Luo Zhenyu and Wang Guowei, who held a deeply hostile stance against Marxism as early as 1919,<sup>80</sup> also made use of archaeological findings to support their own valorization of antiquity. Meanwhile, a third camp led by Li Ji and Fu Sinian distanced themselves from both sides. Scholars in this third camp founded Academia Sinica's prestigious Institute of History and Philology and carried out excavations using scientific methods, replacing antiquarianism with the modern discipline of archaeology. But with the Communist Party's victory and Academia Sinica's relocation to Taiwan, historical materialism became the dominant theory on the mainland, exercising an outsized and unhealthy grip over the interpretations of both history and material culture.

The second implication of Marx's thesis follows from the first and holds that, like an unstoppable engine, technological advancements in material production lead to class struggle, which drives history forward through various stages, eventually culminating in the inevitable destiny of communism. In other words, history progresses along a linear scheme. As Walter Benjamin, Karl Löwith, and others have pointed out, this interpretation of history shares a striking resemblance to Christian theology. Benjamin famously compared "historical materialism" to Wolfgang von Kempelen's hoax, the chess-playing automaton. A fake precursor to artificial intelligence, the automaton always beat its opponent, but hidden beneath it was a human master. Here historical materialism is placed in quotation marks; according to Michael Löwy, it refers to "the chief spokesmen of Marxism in his [Benjamin's] period, that is to say the ideologues of the Second and Third Internationals. In Benjamin's view, historical materialism actually becomes in their hands a method that perceives history as akin to a machine leading 'automatically' to the triumph of socialism. For this mechanical materialism, the development of the productive forces, economic progress, the 'laws of history' lead necessarily to the

last crisis of capitalism and the victory of the proletariat (Communist version) or to the reforms that will gradually transform society (Social Democratic version).<sup>81</sup> In communist China, we witness an even more mechanical and primitive reading of historical materialism, which was then put to violent use. For Benjamin, the automaton was “historical materialism” as such and the chess master symbolized theology, “which today, as we know, is wizened and has to keep out of sight.”<sup>82</sup> Similarly, Löwith argued that “the real driving force behind this conception (that all history is a history of class struggles) is a transparent messianism . . . the whole process of history as outlined in the *Communist Manifesto* corresponds to the general scheme of the Jewish-Christian interpretation of history as a providential advance toward a final goal which is meaningful.”<sup>83</sup>

While historical materialism was new to 1920s China, this linear and stage-oriented scheme was not. A similar case can be found in the “Three-Generation Theory” originating in the Gongyang School commentaries on the classics, which, according to some influential interpretations, envisioned history as moving through chaos before returning to order in a continuous three-part process.<sup>84</sup> A long line of thinkers, from Dong Zhongshu and He Xiu in the Han dynasty to Kang Youwei in the twentieth century, have used the Gongyang method to serve their political agendas. In this way, the progressives and the conservatives shared at least one thing in common, namely their belief in the linear and stage-oriented nature of historical development, which provided structural commensurability for two opposing ideologies.<sup>85</sup>

The pivotal intervention by the collectors should be assessed in this context for its impacts to be fully revealed. As they removed artifacts from their original contexts and reconstituted them in a new one governed by synchronicity and seriality, in so doing bringing them into a dialogue with the here and now, they were facilitating a dynamic and open system that allowed schematic thinking to be dismantled or circumvented.

To better understand this dimension of collecting, we may again take our cues from Benjamin. Collecting is a recurring theme in his extensive intellectual output, and its early iteration can be traced to *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, where he examined the notion of the “ruin” and linked it to collecting and the beginning of European archaeology.<sup>86</sup> This line of inquiry was then expanded to include modern culture under the spell of capitalism, where the collector, alongside the allegorist, took center stage. These themes eventually converged in his analysis of the dichotomy between historicism and historical materialism, a crucial problem that preoccupied him up to his suicide in 1940. Although in general usage historicism lacks a precise and commonly accepted definition, Benjamin critiqued it in the sense according

to the German historian Leopold von Ranke, who famously claimed that his goal was to reconstruct history to show “how it really was.”<sup>87</sup> For Benjamin, historicism as such promises a historical truth that is ultimately unattainable. It is based on the false assumptions that, first, the past is static and reconstructable and, second, that historical time is linear and positivist. Countering Ranke, he presented his own version of “historical materialism,” here referring to the dynamic and ever-renewed encounter between the past and every instance of the present.<sup>88</sup> In this encounter, the past is very much fluid and dynamic, and new meanings are constantly being conjured and illuminated by the gaze of the now-time (*Jetztzeit*)<sup>89</sup> in the same way that the collector of the present engages with artifacts of yore.

It should be noted that Benjamin’s own version of historical materialism diverges from the aforementioned Marxist version (insofar as it has been interpreted and utilized by some political parties) that, alongside Rankean historicism, is the target of Benjamin’s critique. And this brings us back to the Kempelen hoax, which Benjamin used as a metaphor to unmask Marxist historical materialism’s theological essence. Behind Rankean historicism and Marxist historical materialism, on the one hand, and Benjaminian historical materialism, on the other, are two incompatible modes of historical time: one linear, homogeneous, continuous, positivist, and progressive but “empty,”<sup>90</sup> the other disruptive, fragmentary, and punctuated by unexpected moments of crisis. Contrary to the former’s homogeneity, the latter “appropriates a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger . . . [and] wishes to hold fast that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to man singled out by history at a moment of danger.”<sup>91</sup>

It is no coincidence that so many modern Chinese collectors had an acute sense of being “singled out by history at a moment of danger” to carry out a critical mission; they saw themselves as the few chosen ones who understood the significance of the endangered remains of an endangered culture. In this book, we will encounter many such moments of reckoning. Benjamin called them the “messianic” moment, which does not occur at the endpoint of a linear history (which in theological terms is the Second Coming, and in political terms is communism); rather, it could appear at any instant, triggered by a crisis that conjoins past and present in a state of synchronicity. It is the moment when *his* historical materialist “recognizes the sign of a messianic arrest of happening, or (to put it differently) a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past.”<sup>92</sup> The following passage vividly depicts Benjamin’s vision of the historical materialist-turned-collector: “The historical materialist blasts the epoch out of its reified ‘historical continuity.’ . . . Historicism presents the eternal image of the past, whereas historical materialism presents a

given experience with the past—an experience that is unique. . . . The immense forces bound up in historicism’s ‘Once upon a time’ are liberated in this experience. To put to work an experience with history—a history that is originary for every present—is the task of historical materialism. The latter is directed toward a consciousness of the present which *explodes the continuum of history*.<sup>93</sup> In this way, Benjamin transformed the messianic moment from a theological concept into a secular, historical, and political one, making it structurally relevant to our study of antiquarian collecting in crisis-ridden modern China. Faced with the bewildering coexistence of ancient artifacts in the present, the collectors saw history in a synchronic light, and the “here and now” that the collectors inhabited became an opportunity for revolution: a one-of-a-kind chance to recover, redefine, and reignite the past to form a meaningful relationship with the present.

In part thanks to his long-standing fascination with the collector, Benjamin was able to free the materialist conception of history from orthodox Marxism. His version of historical materialism provides a theoretical framework that allows us to understand the significance of modern Chinese collectors of antiquity: They recognized in ancient artifacts the potential for liberation from the tyranny of stage-oriented thinking and in so doing carved out a trajectory contrary to that of the storytellers. Their endeavors came close to what Benjamin, in a different but not altogether dissimilar historical and cultural context, prophesized would take place in a future realm.

### The Materiality of *Wen*

Among the broader complications generated by the collecting of antiquity in modern China is another crucial aspect closely linked to my overall theses, namely the tension between materiality and textuality. This tension arises from the distinction, as Jeffrey Moser succinctly puts it, “between the world as is and the world as said.”<sup>94</sup> It raises the question about the relative strengths and weaknesses of written records versus artifacts for maintaining cultural continuity and historical memory. In its narrower sense, history is mainly recorded in writing, with objects or artifacts serving a complementary role. The written word is no doubt more capable of expressing a variety of ideas, but it is also fluid, manipulable, prone to misunderstanding, and easily falsifiable. In contrast, the artifact’s solid materiality and the absence of interpretive manipulation lend it an aura of honesty and reliability, yet its silence does not easily translate into legibility. To varying degrees, all civilizations rely on both means to sustain their cultural identities. In the case of China, we need to take several caveats into account.

Despite near-constant disruptions in the transmission of historical knowledge—even at the time of Confucius, memory of the past was already fragmentary<sup>95</sup>—there is a popular perception that Chinese civilization was able to maintain its continuity largely thanks to a robustly enduring script system and an uninterrupted written record. Frederick Mote, for example, observes that while the West tends to equate “the antique presence with authentically ancient physical objects” and spends enormous wealth and manpower to maintain them, successive generations of foreign visitors to the great Chinese city of Suzhou (Soochow) noticed that many of its historical structures were not built to last. What they saw were not ancient “originals” but far more recent replacements, both in Suzhou and elsewhere in the country. Mote concludes:

The point most emphatically is not that China was *not* obsessed with its past. It studied its past, and drew upon it, using it to design and to maintain its present as has no other civilization. But its ancient cities such as Soochow were “time free” as purely physical objects. They were repositories of the past in a very special way—they embodied or suggested associations whose value lay elsewhere. The past was a past of words, not of stones. China kept the largest and longest-enduring of all mankind’s documentations of the past. It constantly scrutinized that past as recorded in words and caused it to function in the life of its present. . . . In short, we can say that the real past of Soochow is a past of the mind; its imperishable elements are moments of human experience. The only truly enduring embodiments of the eternal human moments are the literary ones.<sup>96</sup>

Thomas Kelly rightly critiques this idea of permanence, with its underlying assumption that materiality is “by implication inert, immovable, or deathly.”<sup>97</sup> But Mote’s reverence for words is equally problematic. Even with such an enduring writing system, there was no guarantee that knowledge would be preserved and transmitted faithfully. By the tenth century, knowledge about ancient rituals had become so sketchy that speculations filled Nie Chongyi’s *Collected Annotations of Illustrations of the Three Ritual Classics* (*Sanlitu jizhu*),<sup>98</sup> itself based on then still-extant sources. Only by consulting actual ritual objects were the authors of the *Illustrated Catalogue of Antiquities of the Xuanhe Hall* (*Xuanhe bogutu*)<sup>99</sup> able to extract more accurate information. Making matters more challenging, the strength of the written record in China is seriously compromised by successive regimes’ persistent, systematic, and often brutal efforts to monopolize and manipulate the writing of history. These acts remain in effect even in the present information age. At its worst, writing has served as a powerful tool for deception and persecution,

destroying more than it is supposed to preserve. As the following chapters make clear, such abuse of the written word was a prominent recurring theme in the twentieth century.

Therefore, the fabled continuity of Chinese civilization is in fact relative, resting on a dynamic but fragile equilibrium between forgetting and remembering, with writings and artifacts supplying different types of support. Their entanglement forms a closed circuit: Because artifacts are prone to destruction, “time-free” words are needed to ensure long-term continuity, and yet since words tend to mislead, artifacts are needed to rectify them.

These two elements converge in a third category that ideally combines the strengths of both: the inscribed object. If anything makes the collecting of ancient artifacts in China stand out among other cultures, it is the former’s fixation on objects with inscriptions. Simon Leys observed that “in China, the taste for antiques has always remained closely—if not exclusively—related to the prestige of the *written word*.”<sup>100</sup> *Jinshixue*, which refers to the collecting and study of inscriptions on ancient metal vessels and stones, occupied such a dominant position in Chinese antiquarianism that the two were almost synonymous, demonstrating a close symbiosis between textuality and materiality. In Shana Brown’s words, the “preference [for objects with inscriptions] animated many forms of Chinese connoisseurship.”<sup>101</sup>

However, the significance of the inscribed object goes beyond the practical need for an enduring medium to carry transitory messages, a point made clear in the prologue to Cao Xueqin’s *Story of the Stone* (also called *Dream of the Red Chamber*). Having mended the sky, the mythical goddess Nüwa discards an odd, unused stone. Following prolonged self-cultivation in the wilderness, this stone develops human consciousness and begs a Buddhist monk and a Taoist priest to bring it into the human realm. Carefully observing it, the monk says, “Now you do look like a precious thing, but still lack real value. I must inscribe some characters on you so that people can instantly recognize your uniqueness.”<sup>102</sup> This comment reveals the curious idea that an object is somehow incomplete *unless* it bears an inscription. Common sense would consider such acts to be vandalism. But instead of being seen as disturbing the pristine surface, the inscription is considered indispensable for the completion of the object’s identity. It brings the stone, an embodiment of primordial nature and immeasurable temporality, into culture and history. Or to put it in another way: The script inscribes historicity onto the material world.<sup>103</sup>

Ultimately, the explanation for the primacy of inscribed objects in Chinese culture needs to be sought in the crucial concept system of *wen* 文. I should state up front that *wen* is not presented in this book as a transcendental

and timeless concept, invented by a single person all at once; on the contrary, different historical periods imbued it with a variety of meanings.<sup>104</sup> Nevertheless, while it is important to historicize *wen* to account for its fluidity and hybridity, one should also recognize that by the twentieth century, *wen* had been consolidated into an accumulative concept with two main components. This duality can be traced to Xu Shen (c. 58–c. 148), according to whom the character's shape signifies interlocking patterns, thus simultaneously containing a material-decorative and a textual-literary dimension.<sup>105</sup> In this interpretation, *wen* becomes a reminder that textual culture is intimately related to materiality. Furthermore, legend has it that Cangjie, scribe to the Yellow Emperor, was inspired to create the Chinese script by observing patterns, textures, and traces in nature.<sup>106</sup> The mythical quality of this account notwithstanding, the close connection between nature and culture it symbolized greatly influenced subsequent discourses on *wen*, which evolved into a wide-ranging concept system. In the abstract dimension, it covers a spectrum of interrelated meanings (some more recent than others) such as cosmological order (*tianwen*), civilization (*wenming*), culture (*wenhua*), script (*wenzi*), literary text (*wenzhang*), and, most notably, historical artifact (*wenwu*).<sup>107</sup> In the concrete dimension, its original meaning of “pattern” is attested in the character 文 (also pronounced *wen*, with the addition of the radical 纟 meaning “thread”) that denotes both natural and human-made textures, ornamental patterns, embroidery patterns, and so on. The closeness between natural and artificial *wen*, and that between material and abstract *wen*, shapes the way objects are produced, looked at, appreciated, and categorized. Natural patterns are being “read” with the same scrutiny as artificial patterns.<sup>108</sup> Similarly, an inscription can seamlessly merge with an object's natural texture, and if the object is to bear any cultural and historical importance, such merging becomes necessary.

As *wen* develops from this historical link between textuality and materiality into a multilayered system, its influence radiates toward many directions, bringing such divergent discourses as cosmological harmony, calendar management, ritual, legislation, governance, social hierarchy, literary style, visual culture, design, and material production all under the same umbrella. In other words, *wen* provides a commensurability between the natural and human orders and between the tangible and the intangible, with the proper functioning of one presumably dependent upon and correlated with the other. This unifying power is expressed in Liu Xie's sixth-century *Carving Dragons with the Literary Mind* (*Wenxin diaolong*), which also gives literary style an elevated importance: “The human being is . . . the mind of Heaven and Earth. When mind came into being, language was established; and with

the establishment of language, pattern became manifest. This is the natural cause of things, the Way."<sup>109</sup> As such, in David Der-wei Wang's words, *wen* is "not a sign so much as an articulation of the meaning of the world through a set of correlating ideas, objects, or doings."<sup>110</sup>

Only with *wen*'s complexities fully delineated can we properly explain its extraordinary yet perplexing developments in the twentieth century. During China's encounter with the West and the process of appropriating Western ideas into the Chinese language, a concept so crucial and yet so hybrid as *wen* posed serious challenges. The incommensurability between *wen* and its various near counterparts in other languages was never properly resolved; lacking an exact Western equivalent, the multidimensional *wen* became increasingly associated with narrower meanings of "literature" (*wenxue*)<sup>111</sup> and "script" (*wenzi*). As a result, both *wenxue* and *wenzi* were made to assume *wen*'s role as guarantor of the polity's well-being. Hence, in the case of literature, the tendency to view literary revolution in tandem with political revolution dominated the better part of the twentieth century. The prominent reformer and literary scholar Liang Qichao was voicing what would become a popular opinion when he proclaimed that "To renovate the people of a nation, the fictional literature (*xiaoshuo*) of that nation must first be renovated."<sup>112</sup> Although this argument was new in its provocative elevation of the traditionally lowly *xiaoshuo* (meaning "fictional literature," with a hint of being vulgar and un-serious, but more often translated as "novel"), it was not so new in its nod to Liu Xie's equation of *wen* with the Way. It also partially accounted for the incommensurability between Chinese and Western concepts of literature, with the latter initially evolving around the issue of representation.<sup>113</sup>

In the meantime, the Chinese script became a prime target of the reform-minded camp. Seeking to rejuvenate the country, reformers began to view the script as a culprit of China's backwardness, and hence a major obstacle standing in the way of modernization and Westernization. Most notable among these critics was Lu Xun, a modernist writer with solid training in classical textual scholarship, who exclaimed that "if the Chinese script is not abolished, China will certainly perish!"<sup>114</sup> Others, however, remained firmly convinced of the script's unique and enduring value, loyally defending it and tirelessly advocating for its preservation.<sup>115</sup> The debate became further politicized during the government-led script reform from the 1950s onward, which has repercussions to this day.<sup>116</sup>

Arguments such as Liang's and Lu Xun's were symptomatic of a contradictory process that compartmentalizes and generalizes *wen* at once. On the one hand, this process created the mostly misguided impression that Chinese literature and the Chinese script were isolable elements, amendable and

dispensable without frustrating a much wider fabric of cultural coherence. On the other, the centuries-old veneration of *wen* as “a vessel of the Way”<sup>117</sup> was now transferred to literature and the script, forcing them to shoulder disproportionate responsibility for national revival. These shifts in perspective help us understand why, in twentieth-century China, both literature and the script were subjected to repeated politicization that eventually reached a disastrous extreme. Ironically, with the same mentality that overloads meanings onto what started as a tool of communication, the Chinese script again became a symbol of national pride in the twenty-first century, an era of seemingly limitless media possibilities, as Andrea Bachner demonstrates in her reading of the 2008 opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympics.<sup>118</sup>

A substantial amount of recent scholarship has greatly advanced our understanding of the multifaceted complexities of the Chinese script, which continues to attract controversy and pose new challenges as we enter an age dominated by information and artificial intelligence.<sup>119</sup> *Collecting Antiquity* contributes to this ongoing discussion by foregrounding *wen*'s material dimension, which is indispensable for understanding the Chinese script, just as the study of ancient artifacts cannot be considered thorough without also accounting for their inscriptionality. Therefore, it should not surprise us that some of the most nuanced and pivotal contributions to modern debates about script reform and the related project of literary revolution came from those immersed in the practice of collecting ancient artifacts. Some of these collectors demonstrated a deep-seated “script-centrism,” while others deconstructed and nullified that centrality. Some reaffirmed the importance of the written word; others operated against the grain. Still others counterbalanced the written word by highlighting the materialist side of *wen*, particularly when the written word had ceased to be an effective means of cultural expression and preservation, instead becoming a tool of ideological control and perversion. From their distinct vantage points, these collectors recovered older, richer, and more heterogeneous ideas of *wen* to inform modern China's remaking of its own cultural identity and historical memory.

## Carving

Everything happens to a man precisely, precisely now. Centuries of centuries and only in the present do things happen; countless men in the air, on the face of the earth and the sea, and all that really is happening is happening to me.

JORGE LUIS BORGES<sup>1</sup>

One of the most consequential discoveries in twentieth-century China was a large number of turtle shells and animal bones from the Shang dynasty (also known as Yin, c. 1600–c. 1046 BCE). Collectively known as the oracle bones, these ancient fragments bore inscriptions that revealed them to be relics of an ancient divination practice. The ritual was mentioned in early texts such as the *Rites of Zhou* and the *Book of Documents*. The *Classic of Poetry*, the oldest existing collection of Chinese verses, contains lines pertinent to these artifacts:

“Here we will make a start; here take counsel,  
Here notch our tortoise.”  
It says, “Stop,” it says, “Halt.  
Build houses here.”<sup>2</sup>

In “Biographies of Turtle-(shell) and Stalk (Diviners),” the penultimate chapter of the *Grand Scribe’s Records*, a text dating to the late first century BCE, the author describes this practice as follows:

Selecting a day to fast and purify himself, the days *chia* and *yi* were most favorable. Then he killed a white pheasant and added a black sheep, and with their blood he bathed the turtle on the center of the altar. With a knife, he cut away [the plastron] and the body was entirely uninjured. With sweetmeats and wine he paid homage to it and turned its midsection perpendicularly. With the tip of a [hot] branch he divined it and it was necessary to control what he created. Patterns extended into patterns and the markings all met

with each other. He had a craftsman prognosticate it and all that he said came true. The country was blessed with doubled treasures and was renowned in neighboring regions.<sup>3</sup>

This practice, remarkable as it is, appears to have faded into oblivion by the onset of the Han dynasty. Other than sporadic written records, no evidence from subsequent centuries indicates that any of the objects used in the ritual were ever found, let alone studied—until the twentieth century.

Since their unexpected rediscovery, these bones and shells have substantially reshaped our knowledge of Chinese antiquity. Their inscriptions remain the oldest form of systematic Chinese writing hitherto known to us, offering rare insights into this ancient script's origin and early development. Simultaneously, they provide material evidence for the existence of the Shang dynasty, corroborating long-standing but vague and often unreliable historical records. Because the inscriptions deal with a wide range of matters—from ritual sacrifice, succession, and warfare to climate and agriculture—they offer a treasure trove of detailed information on the Shang dynasty itself and to a certain extent on the Zhou that succeeded it. Since the Shang-Zhou transition was believed by some to have entailed major changes in China's system of governance, with the Zhou laying much of the groundwork for subsequent political and cultural institutions, the oracle bones also offer a crucial missing link in the narrative about Chinese civilization's continuity.

For over a century, scholars have been continuously studying the oracle bones, offering more and more insights on their multifaceted historical significance.<sup>4</sup> It is beyond the scope of the present chapter to survey this vast and well-trodden field and to comprehensively address its myriad issues; nor do I attempt to add any new insights to the inscriptions' deciphering and interpretation. Instead, this chapter adopts the "cultural biography of objects" approach proposed by Chris Gosden and Yvonne Marshall, who write: "Not only do objects change through their existence, but they often have the capability of accumulating histories, so that the present significance of an object derives from the persons and events to which it is connected. . . . At the heart of the notion of biography are questions about the links between people and things; about the ways meanings and values are accumulated and transformed."<sup>5</sup>

If objects have lives, then objects can also die when they cease to fulfill the purpose for which they were made. In this sense, the present chapter can be more accurately described as a biography of the oracle bones' *afterlife*. Buried and unknown to the world for roughly two millennia, they suddenly

generated new meanings as they began their twentieth-century afterlife. Most intriguingly, they did not reappear sooner or later, but precisely when China was in the middle of an existential crisis. Strong sentiments of self-doubt and self-negation had gripped the country in the face of the West's undeniable technological superiority; at the same time, emerging intellectual trends had thrown long-held beliefs into doubt, prompting critical questions about the authenticity of historical records.<sup>6</sup> In this milieu, the oracle bones' reappearance sparked heated discussions not only about what they meant in their original context, but also what they meant here and now. As Bachner puts it, the "oracle bones constituted a new way of connecting with the past that allowed a leap into the future. . . . [T]hey offered the possibility of transcending the limits and strictures of time itself."<sup>7</sup> From its inception, then, the modern study of the oracle bones contained both a scientific and a hermeneutic dimension, and revisiting this moment reminds us that the study of the past—including scientific archaeology—cannot be easily divorced from such politicized and value-laden discourses as nationalism.<sup>8</sup>

Although the oracle bones effectively jumpstarted scientific archaeology as an academic discipline in China, the initial work of excavating, collecting, cataloguing, deciphering, and interpreting these artifacts was spearheaded not by academically trained archaeologists but by a group of private antiquarian collectors who also happened to be prominent writers and historians. The multiplicity of their identities was no coincidence. Indeed, over time the oracle bones became inextricably tied to the intellectual trajectories and personal fates of their collectors. The legacies of these pivotal yet underappreciated figures urgently require reevaluation. Moreover, the afterlife of these artifacts cannot be sufficiently accounted for apart from the influence and presence of their finders. Thus, the oracle bones are treated in these pages not as isolable entities trapped in their original historical context but as active participants in a dialogue between objects and their collectors—and between the past and the present.

To examine the oracle bones' twentieth-century afterlife is to begin grappling with a core theme of the present study: the symbiosis and tension between *wen* (the textual) and *wu* (the material). Mythic and historical discourses alike pointed to the pervasive understanding that the origin of the Chinese script was linked to signs, patterns, and shapes observable in nature. According to *Shuowen*, "In the early stage when [the mythical sage] Cangjie invented writing, he used the shapes of things as models for the characters, which was called *wen* . . . *wen* is rooted in the thing's image."<sup>9</sup> As the Shang divination practice shows, the boundary between written texts and natural patterns was indeed fluid; both belonged to what would come to be known

as *wen*. “Scorch the turtle [plastron] [so as to] observe the cracks,” writes the author of “Biographies of Turtle-(shell) and Stalk (Diviners).”<sup>10</sup> In a similar vein, commenting on the *Rites of Zhou*’s section on divination, Qing-dynasty scholar Hu Xu explains, “Asking the turtle is called *buzhao*, which means to interpret the signs derived from scorching the turtle [plastron].”<sup>11</sup> In other words, to discern messages from heaven, the diviners would literally *read* the cracks alongside the questions they carved onto the plastrons. Both the carved script (文) carrying questions from humans and the cracks (紂) relaying answers from the gods fell into the category of *wen*. The materiality of the Chinese script motivated the desire to perfect artificial signs so as to simulate the divine—to the point that the two seemed indistinguishable. Two telling details help illustrate this phenomenon. First, villagers in modern-day Xiaotun, where the oracle bones were unearthed, were said to confuse the characters for natural patterns.<sup>12</sup> Second and conversely, archaeological findings show that Shang diviners decorated and modified the natural cracks to satisfy their aesthetic preference.<sup>13</sup> In other words, the line between artificial and natural patterning was blurry (see fig. 1.1).

Hu’s *Bufa xiangkao* records a pair of plastron diagrams and a list of explanations of crack patterns from “Wuzhong bufa” (Divination methods in the Wu area) (figs. 1.2–1.3) in *Yuling miben* (Esoteric text of the divine jade), a popular divination text of recent vintage.<sup>14</sup> Acknowledging that such texts could not be considered reliable historical sources, Hu contended that they still preserved traces of ancient interpretative methods that were otherwise nowhere to be found. Setting aside the question of authenticity, we can detect here a long-standing and living belief within Chinese culture: Heaven conveys its message through natural patterns, which are themselves a kind of divine *wen* and call for proper efforts to decipher.

In addition, according to *Shuowen*, some of the aforementioned characters related to divination appear to retain telling clues about the ancient practice. For instance, it is possible that the character *zhao* 兆 depicts cracks on scorched plastrons,<sup>15</sup> but it later acquired the much more common meaning of “omen” or “prognosis.”<sup>16</sup> Also, divination in Chinese is called *zhanbu*. *Shuowen* explains that the character *bu* 卜 is a pictograph signifying either “the shape of a plastron being scorched” or “the vertical and horizontal cracks on a plastron” (see fig. 1.1).<sup>17</sup> The character *zhan* 占, a composite of 卜 and the radical 口 signifying “mouth” or “speech,” means “asking by observing the cracks.”<sup>18</sup>

For the modern mind grappling with these new yet also very old ideas, the oracle bones vividly visualized the intricate ancient interrelationship of the divine, the natural, and the human *wen*. These artifacts raised vexing



FIGURE 1.1. Oracle bone, with inscriptions, cracks resulting from baking, and carvings imitating and complementing those cracks. Courtesy of the Institute of History and Philology, Academia Sinica.

questions and inflamed highly contentious debates. Textual records on the bones confirmed certain long-established historical discourses while refuting others. New excavations or old documents—which was the more reliable path to an accurate reconstruction of the past? To what degree could the oracle bones be trusted? Did they reaffirm or discredit traditional narratives about China's history? Simultaneously, the oracle-bone script provided

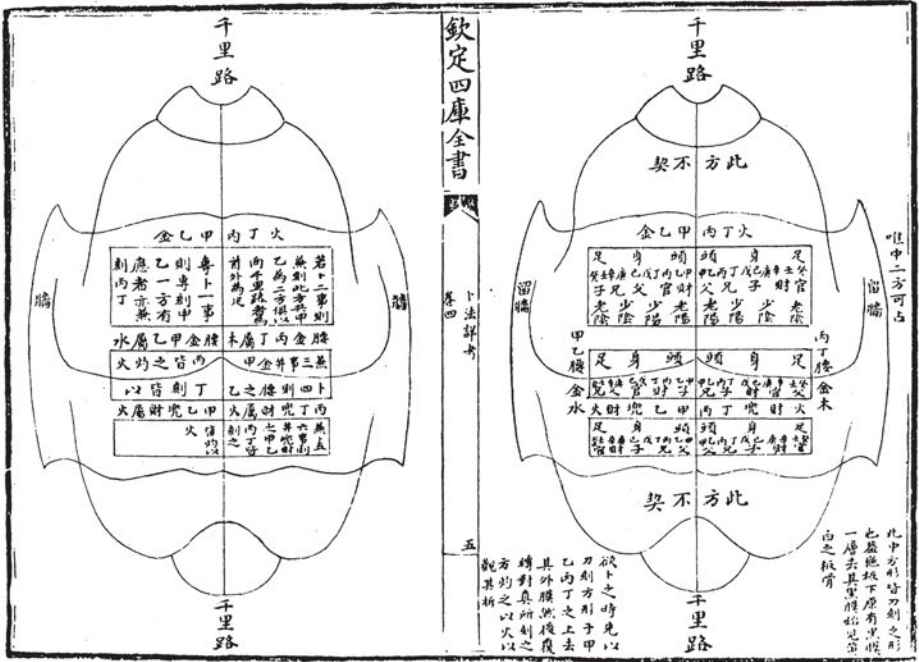


FIGURE 1.2. Plastron diagrams in “Wuzhong bufa” 吳中卜法 from *Yuling miben* 玉靈秘本, as recorded in Hu Xu’s 胡煦 *Bufa xiangkao* 卜法詳考, in *Siku quanshu* (Taipei: Commercial Press, 1982), 909.

頭高足蹶	諸事蹊蹺	頭低足高	泉川自勞
頭高足伏	官災不速	頭高足滯	莫爭閒氣
頭高足起	諸事莫理	頭高足直	多施見識
頭高足高	口舌多招	頭高足低	陰人是非
此後當為腰金丙丁形			
頭仰身高足又發	見貴求官必通達	頭直身伏足又伏	即利求財俱不足
頭伏身起卦高稍	病者驚狂訟得招	頭高身滯足高瓶	行藏必定見蹊蹺
頭高身旺足又發	所謀行用皆脫滑	頭直身滯足還落	官病無凶朋友托
頭伏身低足又低	病人官訟必遲遲	頭伏身高足後垂	官訟不可托相知
頭直足管	財利貨緩	頭低足管	正好憂疑
頭直足低	事不廢機	頭直足直	求財利益
頭直足管	財利貨緩	頭直足搖	虛詐動輒
頭低足管	正好憂疑	頭曲足曲	事多反覆

FIGURE 1.3. Interpretations of plastron cracks in “Wuzhong bufa” 吳中卜法 from *Yuling miben* 玉靈秘本, as recorded in Hu Xu’s 胡煦 *Bufa xiangkao* 卜法詳考, in *Siku quanshu* (Taipei: Commercial Press, 1982), 932.

a powerful testimony to the prestige, longevity, and endurance of the Chinese writing system, precisely at a time when this system was accused of obsolescence and threatened with abolition. Yet the script also challenged the very foundation of traditional Chinese philology. What kind of message did these visitors from the distant past bring to linguistic debates that were already increasingly politicized? At the very least, a cultural biography of the oracle bones' afterlife can provide us with a framework to address these issues.

### Wang Yirong Visits the Pharmacy

Although ample sources have testified to the modern reemergence of the oracle bones,<sup>19</sup> it is no longer possible to reconstruct a definitive account of their discovery. We do know that it all started when residents of Anyang's Xiaotun village found fragments of turtle shells and animal bones with inscriptions in their fields. Located in northern Henan Province, Anyang is the site of one of the Shang capitals. Unaware of the significance of their discovery, the villagers used these objects for practical purposes, such as filling dried wells.<sup>20</sup>

In the most well-known version of the oracle bones' discovery, Wang Yirong, head of the Imperial Academy, was the first to notice the inscriptions on these objects in 1899 when he was prescribed them as medicine.<sup>21</sup> In traditional medical practice, powdered animal bones and turtle shells were used to cure malaria and wounds.<sup>22</sup> According to James Mellon Menzies (1885–1957), a Canadian missionary living in Anyang at the time and the first non-Chinese scholar to study the oracle bones, a local barber called Li Cheng specialized in trading these bones as medicine.<sup>23</sup> Some were sold in neighboring provinces and reached pharmacies in Beijing. A philologist and connoisseur collector of antiques, Wang was intrigued by his discovery and started searching for more. An antique dealer by the name of Fan Weiqing monopolized the oracle-bone trade for some time and sold many of them to Wang. At this point, Wang still didn't know the bones' place of origin, because Fan had lied about it to protect his monopoly.<sup>24</sup>

Unfortunately, a catastrophic event cut short Wang's pursuit of the oracle bones. In 1900, in what became known as the Battle of Peking, the Eight-Nation Alliance attacked the capital to break the siege of their legations and in retaliation for the Qing government's opportunistic support of the Boxer rebels. Wang was responsible for defending the capital. When he found

himself unable to stop the army from marching into the Forbidden City, he threw himself into a dried well in a gesture of loyalty, ending his life in the same kind of resting place that the oracle bones had inhabited. Wang's death also marked the beginning of a pattern: misfortune seemed to follow those who came into close contact with the oracle bones.

The Battle of Peking had a profound impact on the bones' afterlife. During his brief encounter with them, Wang did not publicize his find. It would fall to Liu E to make the bones known to the world. In the aftermath of the siege, Liu entered the capital hoping to do charity work for devastated locals. Liu had studied with Wang and shared the same hobby of collecting antiques. After Wang's death, Liu purchased a substantial portion of his late friend's collection and became especially intrigued by the oracle bones.<sup>25</sup> Upon careful examination, he realized that these fragments were very likely the lost script of the Shang dynasty. Fully aware of their importance, he went on to publish their rubbings as *Tieyun's Collection of Turtles* (*Tieyun cang gui*) in 1903. By making them available to the public for the first time, Liu saved these precious but still little-known objects from another cycle of loss.

In hindsight, the rediscovery of the oracle bones at precisely this moment in history, and their arrival in the hands of Wang and then Liu, can be seen as both highly coincidental yet explainable by a certain historical logic. Thanks to his own background and the general intellectual milieu of his time, Wang did not let these strange bones and shells slip through his fingers back into oblivion. Although few of Wang's writings have survived, reprints of rare books from his library under the title *The Pavilion of Heaven and Earth Series* (*Tianrangge congshu*) have been preserved, and a short collection of notes, *Miscellaneous Notes from the Pavilion of Heaven and Earth*, bears witness to his character as a tirelessly searching collector. He never missed an opportunity to visit fellow local collectors, private libraries, or antique dealers during his travels, and he meticulously noted minute details of various objects he encountered, including books, manuscripts, steles, bricks, potteries, coins, seals, and anything else that bore inscriptions or suggested traces of ancient origin.<sup>26</sup> It is true that Wang was not ranked among the most accomplished scholars of the time, yet his philological training was substantial. In this sense, he was a product of the Qing intellectual tradition, which was characterized by great advancements in philological research and textual scholarship.

Liu was a more colorful figure than Wang and left a legacy both less conventional and harder to categorize.<sup>27</sup> He had many identities and a host of eclectic talents that defied what was traditionally expected of a literatus. Today he is best known as the author of *The Travels of Laocan*, a semi-autobiographical

novel and realist exposé of Chinese society. Its notable literary merits secured him a place in modern Chinese literature. But writing fiction was hardly his main focus: he practiced medicine for a while, served in the local government as a low-ranking official, and was an enthusiastic and successful hydraulic engineer. He was also a philanthropist, a less successful businessman, an accomplished zither (*guqin*) player, a mathematician, an antiquarian collector, a philologist, a publisher, and, last but not least, the first person to introduce the oracle bones to the world.

Although he seldom found the critical acclaim or level of success he deserved, Liu maintained a broad social network and traveled comfortably across overlapping circles—government officials, businessmen, scholars, collectors, and antique dealers. He first made his name as a hydraulics expert by successfully curbing the 1887 Yellow River Flood in Zhengzhou. This achievement brought him into contact with Wu Dacheng, overseer of the hydraulics project and someone who just happened to be a leading late-Qing philologist and calligrapher.<sup>28</sup> Liu's social network also proved to be of crucial importance for the preservation of the oracle bones: His connections put him in contact with Wang Yirong's son, leading him directly to the bone collection. Were it not for Liu, these objects might never have seen the light of day in the twentieth century.

The scant writings that Liu left behind reveal a passionate, persistent, and even compulsive antiquarian collector. His playful poem “Self-Mockery” paints a vivid self-portrait:

Mr. Tie's<sup>29</sup> love of antiquity is comparable to his love of sex,  
 His connoisseurship is broad and his laughter profound.  
 The devil antique dealers come visit like a queue of swan geese,  
 Their oversized bunches of antiques occupy much of their seats.  
 Once the books are open at dawn, he sits there until dust,  
 Selecting the best and bargaining over their values.  
 Prices can be low and high, so he doesn't always get what he wants right away;  
 Then he would stay awake all night, thinking that he must have them.  
 Shang's Yi, Zhou's Ding, Qin and Han's steles,  
 Tang, Song, Yuan, and Ming's famous calligraphies and paintings,  
 Exquisite editions and royal reprints hoarded by families,  
 All pile up on shelves and beds like mountains.  
 Searching during the day, carefully wiping [his acquisitions] at night,  
 The spirit is exhausted [but] the sacks filled.  
 One following another like clouds, creditors now come with threats,  
 Alas!  
 Although the heart is not yet satiated, the energy is already depleted,  
 Only now can the Mister take a short break!<sup>30</sup>

The “antiquity” that Liu loved was less an abstract concept than a tangible presence embodied in each material artifact he encountered. Another poem, “Stanzas on Currencies,” gives a glimpse into his antiquarian expertise. “On a shoulder pole, I carried over a basket full of knife-shaped currencies, / these are all ancient belles lettres eroded by moss.”<sup>31</sup> It goes on to explain how Liu analyzed the scripts of the Warring States (c. 476–221 BCE) based on the inscriptions on the currencies he had collected. The last stanza is especially revelatory: Liu noted that certain uncredited interpretations mistook the character *shang* 商 as two characters, *jing* 京 and *chui* 垂. But as shown on currencies in his collection, the inscription provided clear evidence that it was indeed the single character *shang*, the name of the Shang dynasty. In Liu’s opinion, the mistaken reading had nearly deprived the Shang reign of four hundred years.<sup>32</sup> Like other scholars of his time, Liu searched far and wide for evidence in his continuous attempt to amend and rectify historical records.

If some of his poems describe Liu’s antiquarian undertakings in a generalized context, others take place against a specific historical background, such as the following composition set during the catastrophic 1900 Battle of Peking:

*The Way Is in Tiles and Shards*

In the Gengzi year (1900), the long rainbow strikes across the night sky,  
 Incense ashes mixed with blood fill ancient Peking.  
 After a few cannon shots, the Capital has fallen.  
 It is said that Prince Duan<sup>33</sup> has lost his formidable power.  
 Outside the Donghua Gate, the market is now open;  
 Countless heroes instantly become rich.  
 Only the obsessive Mr. Liu, the Old Tie,  
 Picks up broken bricks and wrecked tiles.  
 There is also the obsessive Bian Zixin,  
 Who treats tiles and shards like rare gems.  
 With a blanket and an ink ball,  
 Sitting there facing the bright window, they are busy proofreading and making rubbings.<sup>34</sup>

This poem sheds light on a significant yet seldom-noted detail at that chaotic time. During the battle and the foreign alliance’s subsequent occupation, the capital was sacked and the gates of the Forbidden City forced open. A large quantity of items from both royal and private collections was dispersed into the marketplace. The space outside the Donghua Gate, the east entrance to the Forbidden City, was one of the antiques-trading locations that benefited from the upheaval. Liu found an unexpected chance to participate

in this exciting process of redistribution. His diaries show his keen interest in the marketplace's goings-on.<sup>35</sup> His chronology lists seven titles of Song-dynasty editions and five titles of Yuan-dynasty editions, as well as a number of bronzes, paintings and rubbings that he acquired during this time.<sup>36</sup> He became a frequent visitor to antique markets across the city, and the vast majority of his diaries in this period attend to his antiquarian dealings. When Wang's collection was sold to settle his debts in 1902, Liu acquired around one thousand oracle bones. He subsequently expanded this collection with approximately three hundred more pieces from his antiquarian friend Fang Yaoyu and another three thousand from an unnamed antique dealer.<sup>37</sup>

The title of the poem "The Way Is in Tiles and Shards" comes from the "Knowledge Roams North" chapter of *Zhuangzi*. This quotation illuminates Wang's philosophy regarding the enterprise of antiquarian collecting. Zhuangzi was having a conversation with Dongguozi:

Dongguozi inquired of Zhuangzi  
 "Where is it, that which we call the Way?"  
 "There is nowhere it is not."  
 "Unallowable unless you specify."  
 "It is in molecrickets and ants."  
 "What, so low?"  
 "It is in the weeds of the ricefields."  
 "What, still lower?"  
 "It is in tiles and shards."  
 "What, worse than ever!"  
 "It is in shit and piss."  
 Dongguozi did not reply.<sup>38</sup>

No wonder Dongguozi fell silent. We can imagine the speechless expression on his face. The most striking effect of this conversation comes from Zhuangzi's deliberately counterintuitive and provocative rhetoric equating the most elevated with the filthiest, a theme that Liu adopted for his poem to achieve the same contrasting effect, proudly boasting of his against-the-grain taste in "tiles and shards."

This cleverly borrowed trope reveals another important aspect of the Qing intellectual tradition that was in fact hardly against the grain: there is no such thing as irrelevant historical data. Advances in textual and philological accuracy since the eighteenth century partly rested on a substantial enlargement of the scope of materials being studied. Traditional media such as books, steles, and ritual bronzes were supplanted by a new variety of quotidian sources: currencies, potteries, tiles, bricks, and so forth. When the physical

forms became more lowbrow, the textual contents, if they existed, likely became more quotidian as well. It might be true that the name of a construction work unit's supervisor and the year of a city wall's construction carved into a brick<sup>39</sup> were no comparison to a lengthy and stately decree by the Son of Heaven inscribed on a Zhou-dynasty bronze basin, yet as Momigliano noted, antiquarians made use of both sources: "[Antiquarians] were capable of appraising unrelated facts which to us seem entirely remote from any serious pursuit. . . . [They] loved disparate and obscure facts. But behind the individual, seemingly unrelated items there was Antiquity, mysterious and august. Implicitly every antiquarian knew that he was supposed to add to the picture of Antiquity. In practice that meant that the individual facts were collected and set aside with a view to a future general survey of those institutions, customs, cults. . . ."<sup>40</sup>

Furthermore, Luo Zhenyu observed that "only since the Jiaqing (1796–1820) and Daoguang (1820–1850) Reigns [of the Qing dynasty] had scholars started to collect ancient artifacts beyond ritual objects."<sup>41</sup> And as Shana Brown points out, the most original aspect of the research conducted by Liu's one-time superior, Wu Dacheng, was "his work on ancient systems of linear measurement. He collected and studied a variety of jade pieces and used them to determine the basic standards of Zhou lengths, one of the first research projects to intentionally focus on uninscribed materials."<sup>42</sup> In other words, in the eyes of true antiquarian collectors, all things ancient contain useful historical information. The question is simply how to place any given object in the right context. This is precisely where Qing scholars made their mark. Unlike the remains of Pompeii, before the great advancement in philology became a reality, these strange bones and shells lacked the cultural legibility that would have allowed their meanings to be recognized immediately. After all, they belonged more to the world of tomb robbers, farmers, medicine traders, pharmacists, and physicians than to the studios of the literati. In particular, the blurry and mottled surface of the shells and bones obscured the boundary between natural pattern and human inscription, representing a primal state of *wen* not immediately recognizable by the untrained eye. As such, only collectors with extensive experience involving a wide range of materials—in other words, only the most *bogu* minds—would possess the necessary sensitivity to register their potential significance.

Liu was precisely such a *bogu* person—and a true antiquarian as defined by Momigliano. The fragmentary legacy he left behind helps confirm it: were it not for *The Travels of Laocan*, he would probably be remembered today, if at all, for the four sets of rubbings he compiled from his collections: *Tieyun canghuo* (*Tieyun's collection of currencies*), *Tieyun cangtao* (*Tieyun's collection*

of potteries), *Tieyun cangyin* (*Tieyun's collection of seals*), and most importantly, *Tieyun canggui* (*Tieyun's collection of turtles*). These were intended to form a series, collectively titled *The Three Epochs' Scripts from the Collection of the Studio "Embracing the Damaged and Holding on to the Incomplete."* Liu's studio name, "Embracing the Damaged and Holding on to the Incomplete," or *baocan shouque*, casts light on his own self-perception. *Baocan shouque* is often used as a derogative description of those who stubbornly cling to the outdated and refuse any change. To use it as a studio name intended to summarize his life philosophy was no doubt a rhetorically defiant gesture. Liu seemed to know, not without irony, that what he cherished was broken beyond repair, and he wholeheartedly embraced it nonetheless.<sup>43</sup>

Like Wang, Liu was a product of the Qing intellectual tradition, a fact that explains why the appearance of the oracle bones at precisely this historical juncture was as logical as it was coincidental. Hu Houxuan noted that as early as the Song dynasty, many ritual bronze objects were discovered in the Shang royal tombs in the Anyang area, with Song scholars carefully documenting and researching them. It is hard to imagine that they failed to see a single piece of oracle bone while undertaking this work, but the truth is that no mention of these objects appears in their documentation.<sup>44</sup> In his seminal work *Anyang*, which detailed the scientific excavation of the Shang ruins, Li Ji noted the intellectual preparation necessary for this seemingly accidental discovery:

There is evidence indicating that when the Sui dynasty (581–618) people dug holes in this place (Anyang) for burying their dead, they frequently found inscribed oracle bones hidden underneath. If at that time some scholars, as cultivated as the paleographers of the nineteenth century, had come upon this hidden treasure, oracle bone inscriptions might have been known to Chinese scholars thirteen centuries earlier! This assumption is based on the fact that modern excavations of Sui tombs have uncovered more than once, in the stratum overlying these tombs, many fragments of inscribed oracle bones. I mention this interesting underground stratification to show only one fundamental point: that is, in intellectual development there are definite stages which follow each other in a certain order. That the oracle bone inscriptions were recognized at the end of the nineteenth century as a significant discovery which academicians continue to cultivate was not merely accidental. There was a long intellectual history preparatory for what took place in 1899. It is important to take into consideration the intellectual history of the Manchu (Ch'ing) [Qing] dynasty, which provided and nourished scholars to a mature stage ready to appreciate and acknowledge the importance of oracle bone inscriptions.<sup>45</sup>

As the oracle bones' afterlife slowly unfolded, a number of circumstances are worth noting for our biographical exploration. First, the initial collectors and researchers of the bones—Wang Yirong, Liu E, Fang Yaoyu, Wu Changshou, and Luo Zhenyu—were learned but relatively peripheral figures at the time, though Luo's status would later change. Remarkably, among the older generation of accomplished philologists, of which the Qing dynasty produced many, only Sun Yirang, near the end of his life, took the oracle bones seriously.<sup>46</sup> Zhang Binglin (also known as Zhang Taiyan), a towering figure in classical learning, was a fierce and lifelong denier of the artifacts' authenticity.<sup>47</sup> In other words, the study of the oracle bones arose from the periphery of the intellectual landscape, making a slow and arduous entry into mainstream discourse.

The peripheral nature of the bones' first admirers is closely related to a second circumstance that warrants our notice: The oracle-bone script contradicted a long and prestigious tradition of philology anchored in Xu Shen's *Shuowen jiezi*. Xu's text, which was subsequently lost and had to be reconstructed, was naturally not infallible in itself. Although he had access to and preserved a substantial number of ancient materials, gaps persisted in his sources, and later scholars had to make substantial efforts to fill them. A notable endeavor was undertaken by none other than Wu Dacheng, who compiled over three thousand pre-Qin characters on bronze vessels, stones, currencies, and clays that were not found in *Shuowen*.<sup>48</sup> Several of Liu's 1902 diary entries mention that, upon seeing the oracle-bone script, Liu started to compare its characters with Wu's compilation and eventually reached an important conclusion. In his preface to *Tieyun canggui*, Liu traced the history of Chinese writing tools backward from brush through lacquer to knife, and argued that *Shuowen* was written *without* the knowledge of knife-carved writings—that is, without the oracle-bone script.<sup>49</sup> If that was the case, he argued, then some of *Shuowen's* interpretations were flawed, and hence certain fundamental aspects of a well-established linguistic discourse needed to be revised or even abandoned. It was probably for this very reason that Zhang, an authority on *Shuowen*, never accepted the authenticity of the oracle-bone script, preferring to stay loyal to the old philological tradition.

A third circumstance also deserves mention. From the very beginning, as I have argued, the oracle bones' journey through the twentieth century was followed by both national crisis and personal trauma. It is easy to forget that while the bones have substantially reshaped our present understanding of China's antiquity, their very availability in modern times was a highly accidental event given the precarious conditions within which their discovery

and interpretation took place. Like Wang's, Liu's own endeavor was cut tragically short, as feuds with powerful people in the government led to his exile to Xinjiang in 1908. He died in Ürümqi the following year, in the dwindling hours of the Qing Empire. The treasured collection of ancient artifacts that he spent most of his adult life amassing went on sale in 1910. The first item listed on the advertisement was twelve thousand pieces of oracle bones.<sup>50</sup> They were eventually sold off in lots and dispersed around the country.<sup>51</sup>

### Luo Zhenyu Goes into Exile

Before the oracle bones became a recognized national treasure and were taken under the care of public institutions, their fate depended on private collectors who often shared close personal connections. As Liu collected and studied the bones, he shared his findings with his longtime friend, fellow collector, and in-law Luo Zhenyu,<sup>52</sup> with whom he communicated regularly on antiquarian matters. The two men had both grown up in the town of Huai'an in Jiangsu Province, and Luo later wrote one of the three prefaces for *Tieyun canggui*. While we are lucky that Liu inherited Wang's oracle bones, we have Luo to thank for carrying on the project after Liu's passing.

Luo's engagement with the oracle bones would prove to be much more sustained and fruitful. After Liu's death, he started to build his own collection. Tirelessly pursuing new leads for several years, he finally traced the bones' place of origin to the ancient capital Anyang, thus ascertaining that they were indeed the lost writings of the Shang dynasty.<sup>53</sup> In so doing, he stepped beyond the role of an armchair antiquarian content to deal with antique sellers and moved in the direction of modern archaeology based on fieldwork, a shift acknowledged and praised by archaeologist Li Ji.<sup>54</sup> In 1910, Luo published *An Investigation of the Yin-Shang Oracle Script* (*Yin-Shang zhenbu wenzi kao*). Although not the first study on the subject (that honor goes to Sun Yirang's *Qiwen juli*), Luo's treatise was a major breakthrough. It offered a convincing outline of the oracle bones' position in the history of China's written culture; it managed to correctly decipher some inscriptions, shedding important light on the complicated history of the Shang and Zhou dynasties; and it laid the groundwork for an entire field of study, setting a direction for future scholars to follow. His work remains a valuable reference today.

However, political upheaval once again intruded into the oracle bones' afterlife. About a year after the publication of *An Investigation of the Yinshang Oracle Script*, the Xinhai Revolution broke out, leading to the founding of the Republic of China in Nanjing. In early 1912, the last Qing emperor, Puyi, abdicated. A loyal supporter of the Qing monarch and the institution he

embodied, Luo resolutely refused to accept the legitimacy of the new republic, which he considered an assault on China's Confucian orthodoxy. While receptive to new ideas from the West and from a modernized Japan in his earlier years,<sup>55</sup> Luo now fully embraced a conservative agenda. In response to the regime change, he went into a self-imposed eight-year exile in Japan, bringing with him his books and antique collections. He thus became what some would describe as *yilao*, an anachronistic relic of the preceding dynasty.

Although his self-exile made an unequivocal political statement, Luo's cultural motives for fleeing to Japan comprised an even stronger driving force. He was deeply immersed in researching the oracle bones when his country's political situation imploded. The crisis colored his understanding of the artifacts and aroused in him a sense of urgency coupled with a strong desire to preserve an endangered tradition. Shortly before the fall of the dynasty, Luo voiced his anxiety about working within a foreshortened time frame:

My work on the oracle script [treatise] began in February [of 1910]. Quotidian matters forced me to engage in it only on and off. I said to myself: These ancient objects did not appear earlier, nor did they appear later; they appeared exactly during my lifetime. They have been buried for three thousand years, and even in my suitcase they have been lying for a decade. Each time I took them out to examine, I found some damage. After a few decades, I'm afraid not one out of thousands would remain. Thinking of this, I felt chillingly alarmed, and urged myself [to resume working on them].<sup>56</sup>

To fully understand Luo's sentiment, we can look at Borges's fictional Chinese spy Yu Tsun, who expresses the same feeling about how strangely opportune certain events take place: "Everything happens to a man precisely, precisely now. . . . [A]ll that really is happening is happening to me."<sup>57</sup> Indeed, the oracle bones could have appeared at any point and to anyone during the lengthy millennia they spent beneath ground. By what kind of divine plot did they "choose" to show themselves to that one person, of all people, and during his nation's greatest crisis? Struck by this sense of fate, Luo saw it as his personal mission to preserve the oracle-bone script for posterity—and, more importantly, to sustain the cultural tradition he cherished.

In 1913 Luo published the first installment of the monumental *Inscriptions from the Yin Ruins* (*Yinxu shuqi*) in Japan, which consisted of rubbings of oracle-bone inscriptions selected from his collection. In 1915, he finished a more comprehensive study, *An Investigation and Interpretation of Inscriptions from the Yin Ruins* (*Yinxu shuqi kaoshi*), offering detailed information about the Shang rulers' ancestors along with the dynasty's capitals, geography, ritual institution, and divination method. In Luo's view, the bones carried two

crucial messages. The first was indicated by a moving aphorism he handwrote onto a copy of the *Investigation*'s first edition: "Although turtles have longevity, [it is no more than] three thousand years; true immortality resides in the written word."<sup>58</sup> Here again, we encounter the notion articulated by Frederick Mote and Simon Leys, namely that "life-after-life was not to be found . . . [in] artefacts: man only survives in man—which means, in practical terms, in the memory of posterity, through the medium of the written word."<sup>59</sup> In other words, the Chinese script, an intangible, intellectual, and spiritual invention, transcended the country's transient material existence. No matter how many physical destructions and transformations it had to endure, "China" lived on in the writing of its people. This must have been a deeply consoling thought for Luo, who had just witnessed his ideal China crumbling before his own eyes. The same outlook also provided a concrete and viable theoretical basis for Luo's fiercely held political conviction that China's future still resided in the immortal Confucian culture and institution.

A second crucial message Luo believed the bones carried revolved around their capacity to prove the veracity of older traditions. As I mentioned earlier, since the rise of Qing-dynasty textual scholarship, certain scholars had raised doubts about the facticity of some historical records.<sup>60</sup> Since Confucianism was rooted in the glorification of the Zhou ritualistic institution, and since the Zhou was believed to be a reaction against the Shang, if records of these traditions could not be trusted, what reason was there to adhere to the ethical and philosophical teachings supposedly derived from them? A major goal in Luo's research thus involved using these Shang relics to confirm and validate the often incomplete and incomprehensible ancient texts. He insisted that, instead of doubting the ancient texts, one should find the right method to decipher them.

Luo's antiquarian pursuits were thus both integral to and inseparable from his political stance, on which he never wavered. He went so far in his loyalty to the Qing monarchy as to serve in Manchukuo, a puppet state established by Japan in 1932 with Puyi reinstated as the sovereign. This decision became the most glaring stain on Luo's legacy, effectively making him a traitor to the Chinese nation. But from his own point of view, devotion to the Manchu monarch and preserving the oracle bones were both important ways to guard the lifeline of Chinese civilization, which was built on an unbroken thread of cultural continuity stretching from the Qing back to the Shang and Zhou kings. In his view, it was the republic, not the Manchu dynasty, that had usurped orthodoxy. It is worth noting that the Xinhai Revolution's slogan was to "expel the northern barbarians and restore [the ethnic Han-ruled] China," whereas for Luo ethnicity, like all physical and hence transient elements, was not the ultimate parameter in defining China.

Luo's political views attracted intense animosity from his contemporaries. They also presented a baffling contrast to his surprisingly progressive historiographical views. Throughout his lifetime, he wielded a controversial yet commanding presence as the antiquarian collector par excellence, leaving omnipresent traces in the study of antiquity. His vast collection covered all major categories of artifacts and represented them with some of the finest and most comprehensive examples.<sup>61</sup> He was gifted with an extraordinary ability to identify crucial historical materials that others overlooked or failed to understand. As important as his work with the oracle bones was, Luo's achievements extended well beyond them. He participated in at least three more major archaeological projects in the twentieth century, playing a pivotal role in all of them: the preservation and study of the Dunhuang manuscripts, the Han-dynasty bamboo slips from the western frontiers, and the Qing Grand Secretariat documents.<sup>62</sup> Still, for the better part of the twentieth century, he was remembered less for this legacy than for his reputation as a dynastic relic and a traitorous collaborator. As Yang Chia-Ling notes, "History portrays Luo Zhenyu and his loyalist circle as traitors twice over: first as obsolete remnants of an incompetent Qing government, then as collaborators in the Japanese puppet state of Manchukuo."<sup>63</sup>

How might we characterize the true nature of Luo's engagement with the oracle bones and his larger historiographical vision? I suggest that we consider how this vision was received and appropriated by those who despised his political views. Ironically, two of Luo's greatest antiquarian projects were taken over by his ideological foes and became the foundation of their own success story. The Institute of History and Philology, a division of Academia Sinica, the Republic of China's national academy, owed its initial prestige to the highly successful scientific excavation of the Shang ruins and the acquisition of the Qing Grand Secretariat documents.<sup>64</sup>

The Institute's 1928 founding was a watershed event in modern Chinese intellectual history. It was the brainchild of Fu Sinian (Fu Ssu-nien), a leader of the May Fourth Movement, an iconoclastic crusader against traditional scholarship, and a fierce advocate for scientific and democratic ideals.<sup>65</sup> With academic training at Peking University and various European institutions, Fu represented the exact opposite of Luo. He promoted a positivist approach to the study of history, arguing that "the progress of historiography lies in its shift from a subject in the humanities toward one like biology and geology."<sup>66</sup> Facilitating this shift meant realizing that "modern historical studies are simply the studies of historical materials [*shiliao*]."<sup>67</sup> In this vein, Fu formulated his famous slogan: "Instead of reading books, we search everywhere in heaven and the underworld, move our hands and feet to find [historical] materials."<sup>68</sup>

*Shiliao* or *lishi cailiao* means “historical source materials” or, more literally, “historical raw materials.” As Brown observes, “*cailiao* carries connotations of other kinds of raw material, like food or hardware. Its adoption underscores the emergence of history as an empirically based, social-science oriented discipline in the first decades of the century.”<sup>69</sup> *Lishi cailiao* was thus reminiscent of nineteenth-century European positivism and historicism as promoted by the philosopher August Comte and the historian Leopold von Ranke. Aiming to achieve this ideal, the newly founded Institute of History and Philology immediately devoted its limited resources to the scientific excavation of the Shang ruins in Anyang, hiring Harvard-trained anthropologist Li Ji to lead the project. Li’s mastery of then cutting-edge methods resulted in multiple rounds of highly successful expeditions. Ushering in the era of modern archaeology in China, these expeditions rectified Luo’s unsystematic and overly script-focused approach, ensuring that not just the inscriptions, but all the historical, geological, and biological data of the ruins were exhaustively documented. In doing so, Li earned accolades for not permitting “political considerations either to permanently halt the project, or to color his findings as a scholar.”<sup>70</sup>

Both the Shang ruins and the Grand Secretariat documents were *lishi cailiao* that belonged to the archive broadly conceived—a place where primary sources of the past were stored, organized, regulated, and erased when necessary, so that “knowledge” could be constructed. The Institute’s interest in these historical archives directly resulted from Fu’s belief in science and positivism. But a question arises for later readers: how was it that Luo turned out to be the initiator of this radical project that aimed to revolutionize an archaic tradition? With his limited and presumably outdated intellectual background, Luo would not have been able to do full justice to these important historical materials. Yet it is equally undeniable that the two pillars of modern China’s foremost institution in historical research owed their very existence to his foresight. Such an unexpected affinity shows that political conservatism and historiographical progressiveness somehow managed to coinhabit in Luo’s intellectual universe.

To understand this situation, we must turn to the antiquarian-collector mentality, which is always on the lookout for more source materials, always ready to compile more lists and gather more primary data. This constant accumulation makes it difficult if not impossible to settle on a definitive narrative, because such a narrative would have to be subject to constant revision and even repeal when new data emerge.<sup>71</sup> Although Luo always hoped that his antiquarian findings would authenticate and reaffirm the classics, he had no control over what new ruptures these findings might actually open. Instead of strengthening the traditional narrative, new evidence could dislodge old

ideologies and destabilize the power structures embedded therein. Luo thus found himself in an impossible situation, effectively becoming both a conservative *and* a revolutionary, his life embodying the sharp disconnect between the antiquarian collector's ideology and the unintended revolutionary effects this very same mentality caused.

Luo encountered the oracle bones at a peculiar moment in history characterized by Agamben as "the destruction of the transmissibility of culture." This destruction, ironically, constituted the very basis of the collector's activity. An object typically becomes "collectible" when it is deprived of its original use value or, in the case of the oracle bones, is cut off from its original context. The destruction of transmissibility that Luo witnessed was not only the result of immediate events such as colonialism and revolution, but also the accumulated effect of the textual scholarship and critical philology that had been paving the intellectual way for over two centuries. Agamben again vividly depicts the situation:

Loss of tradition means that the past has lost its transmissibility, and so long as no new way has been found to enter into a relation with it, it can only be the object of accumulation from now on. . . . [I]t is the transmissibility of culture that, by endowing culture with an immediately perceptible meaning and value, allows man to move freely toward the future without being hindered by the burden of the past. But when a culture loses its means of transmission, man is deprived of reference points and finds himself wedged between, on the one hand, a past that incessantly accumulates behind him and oppresses him with the multiplicity of its now-indecipherable contents, and on the other hand a future that he does not yet possess and that does not throw any light on his struggle with the past. The interruption of tradition. . . . opens an era in which no link is possible between old and new, if not the infinite accumulation of the old in a sort of *monstrous archive*.<sup>72</sup>

Devoting his life to the transmission of antiquity, Luo was unwilling to accept the fact that this antiquity had become a monstrous archive that was losing its legibility, while he himself was losing a vital connection to a future that, paradoxically, he had helped to initiate.

### Wang Guowei Turns from Schopenhauer to the Shang Kings

Truthful words are not beautiful; beautiful words are not truthful.

DAO DE JING<sup>73</sup>

I cannot love what I trust, and I cannot trust what I love.

WANG GUOWEI<sup>74</sup>

When Luo exiled himself to Japan, accompanying him on the boat was his younger friend and lifelong intellectual partner Wang Guowei, who would go on to become a towering figure in his own right. Luo played a transformative role in Wang's development. In fact, Wang's work became so inextricably linked to Luo's that their achievements came to be known collectively as *Luo Wang zhi xue* (the Luo-Wang scholarship). Yet the two men initially followed very different paths. Whereas Luo maintained a relatively consistent worldview, Wang went through some drastic changes. In his early years, he pursued the study of Chinese and European literature, philosophy, and aesthetics; after the Qing Empire collapsed, he completely abandoned these fields and turned to antiquity, especially the oracle bones. These artifacts would spark a deep spiritual reckoning for him, which forms another key chapter in our biography of the oracle bones' afterlife.

Born in the seaside town of Haining in Zhejiang, Wang received a standard classical education. Like most intellectuals of his time, he was shaken by China's humiliating defeat in the 1894 war with Japan. That event prompted him to realize that a whole system of thought, separate from China's indigenous tradition, existed in the West, the adoption of which was understood as the reason behind Japan's dramatic modernization.<sup>75</sup> After the war, Wang moved to cosmopolitan Shanghai to work as an assistant editor for the pro-reform newspaper *Chinese Progress* (*Shiwu bao*). In the same year, Luo established the Japanese Academy (*Dongwen Xueshe*) to train translators for the transmission of Western knowledge via Japan to China. Recognizing Wang's talent, Luo invited him to enroll in the academy. Soon Luo came to regard Wang as his intellectual equal.

During this period, Wang studied mathematics and English in Shanghai and then in Japan. Although he initially intended to focus on Western technologies, Wang's poetic sensibility soon drew him to philosophy and aesthetics. In Japan, he immersed himself in the works of Emmanuel Kant, Friedrich Schiller, Arthur Schopenhauer, and Friedrich Nietzsche, reading these thinkers in Japanese and English translations. Schopenhauer's pessimistic worldview struck a particularly deep chord.

The years between 1903 and 1910 marked a period of great productivity for Wang and saw the publication of most of his writings on literature and philosophy. Gathered into the *Collected Writings of Jing'an* (Jing'an being one of Wang's courtesy names), they firmly established him as a leading literary critic in modern China. Representative works included "Commentary on *Dream of the Red Chamber*" and *Renjian cihua*, which elegantly fused Schopenhauerian metaphysics with China's own philosophical and poetic tradition. *Renjian cihua* became Wang's most influential masterpiece.

A carefully chosen collection of aphorisms on *ci* poetry, its themes ranged from poetic technique, style, and taste to general reflections on human sufferings, metaphysics, and the universe. Many of its most insightful ideas were Schopenhauerian musings with hints of Buddhism, yet he crafted them in such an effortlessly idiomatic and elegant classical vocabulary that they might as well have been written by an eleventh-century literatus.

Despite these successes, Wang's career would soon take a dramatic turn in a different direction. According to Luo's account, after they settled in Japan, the two men engaged in a soul-searching conversation that fundamentally transformed Wang's views:

[With the fall of the Qing dynasty,] I urged Mr. Wang to focus on classical Chinese learning, starting with philology as the basis. I also discussed the merits and shortcomings of different learnings with him, saying that [the essence of] Confucius's scholarship lies in his trust of antiquity, whereas contemporaries trusted modernity but doubted antiquity; . . . what the scholars of our Dynasty doubted was not inappropriate; but when Cui Shu wrote *Kao Xin Lu*, he was doubting what should not be doubted. In more recent times, it deteriorates to the point that [some scholars] regard all classics to be forgeries. Western philosophy, on the other hand, holds views that are not unlike thinkers of the Zhou and Qin periods; Nietzsche's teachings, for example, dismiss kindness, justice, restraint and modesty, wanting to replace the old culture with the new, thus creating many problems. . . . The [Chinese] culture of three millennia now hangs only by a thread, and without serious rectification, the classical tradition could not be restored. Living at such a time, there is nothing we scholars can do except to rescue [tradition] from falling and returning to the classics and believing in the ancients. You are still young, and I'm not yet old and feeble. I hope that we can support each other in keeping tradition alive and passing it on to posterity.

Upon hearing this, Mr. Wang was deeply shaken and moved, feeling regretful of himself. Realizing that his previous scholarship was immature, he picked up the more than a hundred copies of *Collected Writings of Jing'an* and burned them all. . . . Such was Mr. Wang's courage to change himself to follow the righteous! Living in Japan, Mr. Wang abandoned all his previous scholarship and turned to the study of ancient philosophers' works I had given him previously. I then also shared with him all the five hundred thousand volumes from my own Dayun Library, thousands of rubbings of inscriptions, and more than a thousand ancient ritual vessels and other antique objects, letting Mr. Wang freely study them.<sup>76</sup>

Among the various factors named in Luo's account that appeared to trigger Wang's change, "doubting antiquity" stands out, pointing to a recurrent

concern of Wang's: How can we know the metaphysical, epistemological, and historical bases of truth and objectivity in the world? As we shall see, Wang's change did not happen suddenly but was the result of a lengthy and deep-seated struggle to attain such objectivity. Whereas Luo interpreted the objectivity crisis in political and historical terms, Wang initially approached it from a philosophical angle. An autobiographical passage from 1907 records his frustration as he grappled with these questions:

I have been worn out by philosophy for quite some time. Most of its arguments are either beautiful but not truthful, or truthful but not beautiful. I know what is true, but I love what is false. The grandiose metaphysics, sophisticated ethics and pure, absolute aesthetics are what I love. But if one is looking for what is truthful, then one should go for positivism in epistemology, the pleasure principle in ethics, and empiricism in aesthetics. *I cannot love what I trust, and I cannot trust what I love.* This is the greatest frustration I have been experiencing in the recent two to three years. The reason my interest gradually shifts from philosophy to literature is because I want direct consolation from the latter. My natural disposition being such, I am too emotional and not intellectual enough to be a philosopher, but on the other hand, I am too rational and not emotional enough to be a poet. Poetry? Philosophy? To which will I devote the rest of my life? I do not know. Or maybe be something in between?<sup>77</sup>

The key statement "I cannot love what I trust, and I cannot trust what I love" bears a striking resemblance to an aphorism in the *Dao de jing*: "Truthful words are not beautiful; beautiful words are not truthful."<sup>78</sup> The questions Wang was grappling with here play out on fundamentally epistemological terrain: How is truth possible? What is its basis? And what place, if any, should ethical and aesthetic concerns occupy within this conversation?

The weight of these questions can be felt with Wang's repeated reference to the philosophical implications of the verb *guan*. Covering a spectrum of meanings related to the sense of sight, including "to look," "to see," and "to observe," *guan* is best rendered as "to contemplate," which combines visual and spiritual implications. Confucius first established the verb's importance when he described it as a major function of the poetic process: "Poetry enables [us] to observe/contemplate" (*shi keyi guan*).<sup>79</sup> Wang's early writings are filled with reflections on *guan* as an objective, unmediated, and impersonal path to truth: "Those who have true emotions are able to contemplate objects unobstructed;"<sup>80</sup> "In tranquility, there is no obstacle in contemplating the self."<sup>81</sup> In *Renjian Cihua*, "guan" appears multiple times:

In the self-infused state, objects are contemplated through the self, so everything takes on the color of the self. In the selfless state, objects are contemplated through objects, so it is impossible to tell which is the self, and which is the object.

Each word describes the object as if it is right in front of the eyes—this is called “unmediated.”

Regarding the universe and human life, the poet should penetrate inside them, but also stand outside them: penetrating inside, so as to describe; standing outside, so as to contemplate.<sup>82</sup>

Wang was on a quest for the unmediated truth, which he once believed could be reached through philosophy and poetry’s purification of external, utilitarian, sensual, and historical contingencies. As Ondřej Dadejík, Olga Lomová, and Vlastimil Zuska observe, “Wang Guowei presents truthfulness (*zhen*) as one of the fundamental qualities of *jingjie*,”<sup>83</sup> with *jingjie* (translated variously as “the ideal state” or “atmosphere”) being the core of his aesthetics. Nevertheless, an intrinsic dichotomy remained unresolved: “In Chinese tradition *zhen* is related to the cognitive quality of emotions. Wang Guowei, however, reframes this concept when he demands respect for the laws of nature . . . [which] puts us in an epistemological quandary.”<sup>84</sup> Eventually, he had to accept that the well-crafted metaphysics and aesthetics did not reflect the cruel and vulgar reality, whereas positivism and pragmatism, though truthful, were detestable to him. His frustration was not purely personal, but reflective of a general sense of uncertainty that permeated the Chinese intellectual sphere. Therefore, he was not just asking for himself when he wondered, “Poetry? Philosophy? To which will I devote the rest of my life?”

Very soon, Wang would find his answer in the study of history—or more specifically, Chinese antiquity as seen through the oracle bones. Luo’s grandson Liu Huisun (whose paternal grandfather was Liu E) lived with Luo during his exile and provides us with a firsthand account of a memorable incident. At that time, Wang was both intellectually lost and economically impoverished. Eager to help, Luo hired Wang to make a fair copy of his recently finished oracle-bones treatise *Yinxu shuqi kaoshi*. For this modest amount of work, he paid Wang the vastly inflated sum of two hundred yuan. He also used the task as an opportunity to persuade Wang to follow a different intellectual path. The oracle bones made a compelling case to support the argument that antiquity deserved to be trusted. Luo must have been convincing, because Wang did embrace Luo’s proposal and never turned back. He went so far as to burn the remaining three hundred copies of his early work *Jiàn’àn wenji* right

in front of Luo, demonstrating his resolute conversion to a new—or old—way of looking at things.<sup>85</sup>

As it turned out, only the oracle bones were able to satisfy Wang's persistent and restless quest for truthfulness as an intellectual *terra firma*. He abandoned Schopenhauer and Kant and delved wholeheartedly into the oracle-bone texts. Soon enough, he superseded Luo as the most accomplished scholar in the field. But it is important to remember that his newfound interest owed much to his mentor: His insights into the bones were sparked by his work copying Luo's *Yinxu shuqi kaoshi*. The final version of that treatise was filled with Wang's considered additions, which Luo fully acknowledged. Building on Luo's work while examining the ancient artifacts directly, Wang went on to produce a number of truly groundbreaking and influential works of his own, including the two interconnected treatises "Investigations of the Early Dukes and Kings Seen in the Yin Oracle Texts" (*Yin buci suojian xiangong xianwang kao*)<sup>86</sup> and "On the Political Systems of the Yin and the Zhou" (*Yin Zhou zhidu lun*).<sup>87</sup> These seminal works combined archaeology, philology, textual scholarship, and institutional history to advance Wang's political philosophy. As Brown aptly puts it, "He could access material evidence and inscriptions like an antiquarian, but his purpose was to write theoretically complex and analytical accounts like a modern historian."<sup>88</sup> In this way, Wang's accomplishment as a historian of antiquity "effectively transformed antiquarianism into history."<sup>89</sup> They also demonstrate how the oracle bones, carved three thousand years ago, played a role in twentieth-century political debates.

In the paleographic research by Luo and the Japanese scholar Naitō Torajirō, Wang noticed that the two characters *Wang* 王 and *Hai* 亥 repeatedly appeared on the oracle bones. He soon came to the realization that they formed the name of an early Shang clan leader mentioned in multiple ancient texts under widely varied forms, including the mythical *Classic of Mountains and Seas* and the *Bamboo Annals* of disputed authenticity. Dong Zuobin hailed Wang's insight as a major discovery in the early stage of oracle-bone studies, which required equal measures of knowledge, intuition, and imagination.<sup>90</sup> Following this clue, Wang searched for other names on the oracle bones and matched them with those found in the fragmentary and often indecipherable royal lineage. In the process, he also recovered many forgotten and unknown names. Through painstaking detective work, he reconstructed a genealogy of these past leaders. He went on to argue that the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* might be mythical, and the *Bamboo Annals* might indeed be inauthentic, but that did not mean they contained no authentic historical information. This declaration, founded as it was on artifactual evidence, was a powerful rebuke of the doubters of antiquity.<sup>91</sup>

At first sight, Wang's work on archaeological-philological reconstruction might seem like a technical pursuit, of interest only to specialists and too far removed from the present to have any real significance. But this work played an anchoring role in Wang's radical political theory, which formed the subject of "On the Political Systems." The genealogy of the Shang rulers as he had reconstructed it showed that the throne was passed down variously to a deceased king's brother or son, and not necessarily the eldest in either case. Furthermore, a king could have more than one wife, all of whom could bear him descendants. Sacrificial records on the oracle bones showed that the same ritual was performed for all half brothers, indicating that no distinction was made regarding their hierarchical status. In other words, during the Shang dynasty the line of succession had no ritually or institutionally encoded rules to distinguish the status of the same sovereign's many male descendants.

In theory, such a lax and non-formalized system could allow the ablest descendant to ascend the throne, but in reality, it often resulted in endless maneuvers, intrigues, and infighting that destabilized the dynasty.<sup>92</sup> Small wonder, Wang argued, that the system was abolished by the great Duke of Zhou, son of King Wen and younger brother of King Wu. King Wu died soon after defeating the Shang dynasty and founding the Zhou in the eleventh century BCE. Wang pointed out that following long-standing Shang practice, the Duke of Zhou could have legitimately inherited Wu's throne, but he chose instead to serve as regent to his young nephew King Cheng. Most importantly, the duke stipulated two fundamental rule changes: henceforth, the throne would only be passed to the deceased sovereign's son; and the *Di-Shu* system (*dishuzhi*) would be established, wherein the sovereign would have only one "official wife," whose eldest male offspring would be the heir to the throne. Wang summarized these changes as "status precedes seniority, and seniority proceeds virtue."<sup>93</sup>

Wang went on to declare that, because of this new succession principle, "no political or cultural change in Chinese history was more radical than that between the Shang and the Zhou."<sup>94</sup> Until that point, dynastic changes had been nothing but bitter power struggles. But when the Zhou replaced the Shang and the Duke of Zhou changed the succession principle, "an old culture was abolished and a new culture was born."<sup>95</sup> Born of careful reflection on lessons from the past, this reform thus set the succession principle as its anchor and comprehensively revamped the entire political and cultural institution, which then became a key principle of China's system of governance for over two millennia. It took into consideration human kinship ("brothers are not as close to each other as a father and a son; an elder brother does not hold the same authority over a younger brother as a father over a son")<sup>96</sup> and externalized it into a power structure, thus balancing natural and social relations.

Wang noted that key elements in Chinese culture, including complex ancestral rituals, strict hierarchy within all families (not just the royal family), the relationship between the sovereign and the ministers, and the feudalist structure of a state could be traced to and explained by the original intention behind this Zhou succession principle. With this idea also came lengthy requirements regarding the crafting of material culture—costumes, ritual vessels, and architecture—to help make the newly hierarchical system visible and tangible. Altogether, Wang observed, these rules constituted *li* or the ritual institution, which became the core of Confucianism and the main distinction between orthodox “China” and the “barbarians.” This is why Confucius idolized the Duke of Zhou as a sage legislator, lamented the crumbling of the *li* institution in the waning days of the Zhou, and made its restoration his life’s work.

To Wang’s disappointment, he found himself in a similar situation. After the revolutionaries overthrew the Qing emperor and founded a democratic republic (at least nominally), the *li* institution that had upheld Chinese civilization for so long was no more. With the oracle bones as its starting point, Wang’s scholarship sought to respond to this crisis by clarifying the original intention behind the ancient institution, just as Confucius had done in his own time. In addition to the two treatises mentioned above, Wang wrote numerous articles investigating the names and designs of Shang and Zhou ritual vessels as well as mourning practices.<sup>97</sup> To regard these as purely technical exercises in philological virtuosity would be to miss the forest for the trees.

Accordingly, it should not surprise us to find a thinly veiled attack on the revolutionary camp in the middle of an archaeological treatise. In “Political Systems,” Wang writes:

No benefit for the world is greater than stability, and no harm is greater than infighting. If we let Heaven decide, we have stability; if we let people decide, we have infighting. . . . This is why successors to the Son of Heaven and the feudal lords were decided by the said principle, and the selection of government officials were decided according to seniority. The idea was to follow Heaven’s will and exclude human intervention so as to maintain stability and avoid conflict. *Not that the ancients didn’t understand the reputational advantage of meritocracy over aristocracy, or the strength of virtue over family ties, or that of ability over seniority.* But they still ended up not trading one for the other, because they worried that reputations could be abused, infighting would be unavoidable, the resulting disadvantage infinite, and the suffering of the people endless. After weighing both options, they chose the one with more advantage and less harm, namely the said succession principle, for the benefit of future generations.<sup>98</sup>

Here Wang was conveying two core messages. First, he had a deep trust not necessarily in the ancients but in *historical experience* itself, and a conviction that the ancients, after extensive experimentation and continual accumulation of lessons learned, would settle on the most sensible solution. This explained why the Zhou people *reverted* from a meritocratic system to an aristocratic one that now went against modern wisdom. Second, when such a solution was put in practice for too long, people tended to forget its original intention and dismissed it as archaic and senseless—precisely what the revolutionaries thought about China's tradition. In a comment on himself written in Luo's voice, he expressed the idea as follows:

[Mr. Wang's] scholarship applies philology and phonology to investigate ancient institutions and their material culture; it explains *why* they were designed to be the way they were. His method starts with eclecticism and eventually attains concision; it starts in doubt and ends in trust; its goal is to eliminate all contradictions and confusions, and [it] stops only when the reason is fully explained. This is also his attitude toward the theories of the ancients. Mr. Wang used to say that there is nothing about the ancients' political systems, cultures, material designs, and theories that has not been doubted by today's scholars, and yet these scholars refuse to doubt the basis of their own theory. Ah, savoring these words by Mr. Wang, one understands why his scholarship has changed in the past two decades.<sup>99</sup>

It should be acknowledged that Wang's characterization of the Shang-Zhou transition has been challenged and might no longer stand up to the test of newly available evidence.<sup>100</sup> After all, it is only natural that many aspects of his research, whether archaeological or philological, continue to be improved upon. However, from the present study's point of view, whether claims in "On the Political Systems" remain valid or not is beside the point. Rather, its significance lies in the fact that it represents a rather counterintuitive twist in the modern reception of antiquity: as Wang set in motion a revolution in historiographical methodology, he simultaneously reverted from a modern and Western worldview to a deeply conservative and, some would argue, anachronistic ideology.

Wang returned to China to continue his research in 1916. With numerous influential publications, he transformed several traditional fields of study: histories of the Shang, the Zhou, and the Mongol; paleography, philology, and historical phonology; the Dunhuang documents; the bamboo and wooden slips; and more. His masterly application of archaeological evidence to elucidate textual materials, or what he called the "method of dual-layer evidence" (*erchong zhengju fa*),<sup>101</sup> became accepted as the new norm. He gained

universal admiration from the old guard and the new camp alike—and he earned these accolades within a heavily polarized political climate. On the one hand, he remained loyal to the deposed emperor Puyi, from whom he earned an honorary title, and moved within the circle of monarchists. On the other, leaders of the New Culture Movement such as Hu Shih and Lu Xun praised him as one of the very few genuinely serious scholars of the time.<sup>102</sup> Top research institutions Peking and Tsinghua Universities offered him prestigious professorships, but he turned down the former and accepted the latter only reluctantly and after much hesitation, owing to their status as national institutions run by the republic, from which he unequivocally kept his distance. Ideologically, he remained committed to monarchism, but intellectually, he became a beacon for a younger generation of scholars who embraced democracy, science, and critical thinking. His influence even appears in a major debate that took place four decades after his passing (see chapter 3).

Wang's illustrious life was cut short by a tragic event. In 1927, at the age of forty-nine, he drowned himself in the lake of the Old Summer Palace. The reasons behind his suicide are a mystery and have become a subject of protracted debate. Two recent events may have contributed to his action: in 1924, Puyi was evicted from the Forbidden City and went into exile in Tianjin; and in 1927, the Kuomintang's Northern Expeditions army was advancing toward Tianjin, which some believed would put Puyi in danger. Wang's testament contained a crucial yet enigmatic statement that might be referring to these events: "Having been through this radical change, one's dignity cannot endure a second humiliation."<sup>103</sup> Although family quarrels with Luo might have also played a role, it is safe to say that disillusion with the situation in China, and especially the continued humiliation of the deposed emperor, comprised a key factor in Wang's decision to take his own life.

Upon his death, both camps immediately sprang into action in an attempt to control the narrative and claim Wang as their own. The authors listed in *Remembering Wang Guowei*, an extensive collection of tributes and reminiscences, included most of the major scholars of the time, both senior and junior, conservative and progressive.<sup>104</sup> Leading the tribute from the monarchists, Luo eulogized Wang as an exemplary subject who had sacrificed his own life to guard the honor of his master. He wrote a farewell letter on Wang's behalf to Puyi, who then bestowed on Wang a posthumous title. Luo also immediately began putting together a comprehensive collection of Wang's works. Simultaneously, a tribute from the young and iconoclastic historian Gu Jiegang became the representative narrative from the opposing camp. Gu was the main founder of the Doubting Antiquity School, which applied scientific and critical methods to analyze revered ancient texts and concluded that

many of them were fabrications. This antitraditional attitude stood in direct contradiction to Wang's belief, and yet Gu named Wang as a major influence: "Ostensibly, Mr. Wang was a representative of old thinking; but under scrutiny, he was in essence a destroyer of old thinking."<sup>105</sup> This unexpected praise demonstrated the complexity of Wang's deeply divisive intellectual legacy and reflected the progressive camp's uneasy struggle to reconcile his revolutionary scholarship and his conservative ideology. Even in death, Wang refused to be pinned down by his commentators.

We should bear in mind, however, that this unresolved contradiction had its origin in the reappearance of the oracle bones right in the middle of a national crisis. Without these bones, Wang probably would not have become such a paradigm-setting historian. And without his achievements in the latter phase of his career, modern historical scholarship would have looked different. Wang constituted a key chapter in the biography of the oracle bones' afterlife. And while he opened the floodgate for competing interpretations of antiquity, the oracle bones as physical artifacts were the one constant factor that remained unchanged and unaffected as an endless river of arguments streamed on.

### Chen Mengjia Stumbles Upon a Manuscript

The repercussions of Wang's suicide lingered well into the 1950s. In contrast to the widespread posthumous admiration Wang inspired, Luo earned a negative reputation for supposedly corrupting the pure mind of a great scholar. His alleged "crimes" included the "purchase" of *Yinxu shuqi kaoshi*, which was said to be Wang's work, to place under his own name. High-profile figures such as Fu Sinian<sup>106</sup> and Guo Moruo<sup>107</sup> promoted this allegation, with Guo calling Luo "despicable and shameless" and Wang "selfless and grateful." In 1951, Chen Mengjia came across the original manuscript and purchased it from Luo's son. He later published his findings in *A Summary of the Divination Texts from the Waste of Yin (Yinxu buci zongshu)*, confirming that Luo had indeed written the work from beginning to end in his own hand, including detailed editorial notes and instructions to Wang, who was preparing a fair copy.<sup>108</sup> On the manuscript, Chen inscribed the following: "This is my fellow townsman Mr. Luo Shuyan [i.e., Luo Zhenyu]'s manuscript, which came into my possession in mid-autumn, September 1951. Noted by Chen Mengjia of Shangyu in Beijing."<sup>109</sup> Finally, Luo's name could be cleared of at least this one posthumous allegation.

This highly symbolic encounter between Chen and Luo's manuscript ushers in the last episode of the oracle bones' biography. These artifacts seemed

quite capable of connecting otherwise unrelated people, inspiring in them a common sense of devotion and even leading them to a similar fate. As they were for his collector predecessors, the life and death of Chen Mengjia, the main character in this episode, were intimately connected to the oracle bones. Chen calls our attention to another key aspect of the oracle bones that entangled them with China's troubled present, namely the importance of the Chinese script. This entanglement, in turn, testifies to the omnipresent and multifaceted impact of *wen* on this period of national turmoil.

A poet, historian, archaeologist, philologist, connoisseur collector of Ming-dynasty furniture and, last but not least, a leading oracle-bones specialist, Chen belonged to a different generation from the scholars we have surveyed so far. Born into a Christian family in Nanjing in 1911, shortly before the Qing emperor's abdication, Chen was nurtured in the milieu of the new republic and especially the New Culture Movement that advocated for democracy, science, and Western modernity. For Chen, these ideas were more a given than a contested theory. Even with these differences, however, Chen's life bore some striking similarities to Wang's—particularly the fact that they were both passionate poets in their early years. Chen first made his name as a youthful and romantic poet, though his fresh, vernacular, and modernist style bore no resemblance to the sophisticated *ci* idiom that Wang championed. As an active member of the Crescent Moon Society, Chen befriended such major modernists as Wen Yiduo and Xu Zhimo, and by his early twenties, he already ranked among the foremost poets in China. His wife Zhao Luorui, daughter of the prominent Protestant theologian Zhao Zichen (also known as C. T. Chao), was also an accomplished poet and a translator of Walt Whitman and T. S. Eliot.

Chen's interest in poetry turned out to be short-lived. By the age of twenty, he had already declared his youthful passion to be shallow and immature: "I think from now on, I should no longer allow myself to waste time in groundless illusion; I want to carefully contemplate this world in silence, and not to exhibit my emptiness for nothing. Therefore, let [my poetry] gradually fade into oblivion in people's mind."<sup>10</sup> In 1935, he republished selected poems from his entire oeuvre as his last collection and formally bade farewell to the poetic phase of his life.

In 1934 Chen enrolled in Yenching University as a graduate student to study philology under the mentorship of Rong Geng, who had studied with Luo and Wang. A direct scholarly genealogy thus existed between Chen and the early authorities of oracle-bone studies.<sup>11</sup> He possessed an intuitive talent for swiftly grasping key issues in a dauntingly difficult field, as demonstrated by the scholarly articles he started publishing soon after entering it. In these

publications, he provided meticulous and insightful analyses of Shang and Zhou religions, rituals, the design of bronze vessels, and the decipherment of individual characters. Most of the topics he chose were generated by a close reading of his predecessors' work. Already, the oracle bones had come to occupy a central place in Chen's research, as testified by the name he gave to his studio: *Mengjiashi*, or the studio of "dreaming of [turtle] shells," a pun of his name Mengjia. His expertise gained quick recognition, and he was soon invited to inspect archaeological findings across the country alongside his mentor Rong.

The Japanese invasion of northern China in 1937 interrupted Chen's course of study at Yenching University. Like many of his colleagues (including Shen Congwen, the protagonist of chapter 4), Chen spent the war years in Yunnan at the National Southwestern Associated University. Despite material hardship, he continued to make rapid progress in his study and remained highly productive. His research on antiquity progressed to a point where the direct examination of artifacts became an imperative. In 1944, on the recommendations of Jin Yuelin and John King Fairbank, Chen was hired by the University of Chicago to teach Chinese philology and paleography and to compile a comprehensive catalogue of Chinese bronzes in American and European collections. Between 1944 and 1947, he traveled extensively across North America to visit museums and meet with collectors, curators, and dealers (see fig. 1.4). In 1947, he also traveled to Britain, France, the Netherlands, and Sweden to gather materials related to Chinese bronzes.<sup>112</sup>

In 1947, Chen returned to Beijing to teach at Tsinghua University, where he also played a leading role in founding the Ancient Artifacts Exhibition Room.<sup>113</sup> To help build the collection, Chen facilitated the purchase of a number of important objects and secured the donation of the magnificent Warring States *Sizi* Vase from the influential yet controversial art dealer C. T. Loo.<sup>114</sup>

Chen could not have returned to his home country at a more contentious moment. As the civil war between the ruling Nationalist Party and the revolting communist forces reached a tipping point, China stood at a crossroads. The two warring factions represented widely polarized political and cultural visions, though not everyone at that moment had the foresight to understand what lay ahead. In late 1948, the Nationalist Party offered to transport professors in Beijing to the south and eventually to Taiwan; Chen decided to stay on.<sup>115</sup> With the victory of the communists and the founding of the PRC in 1949, millions of lives were about to be completely transformed, including Chen's.

In the first years under the new regime, Chen published most of his major works on ancient history and archaeology, notably *Yinxu buci zongshu*,

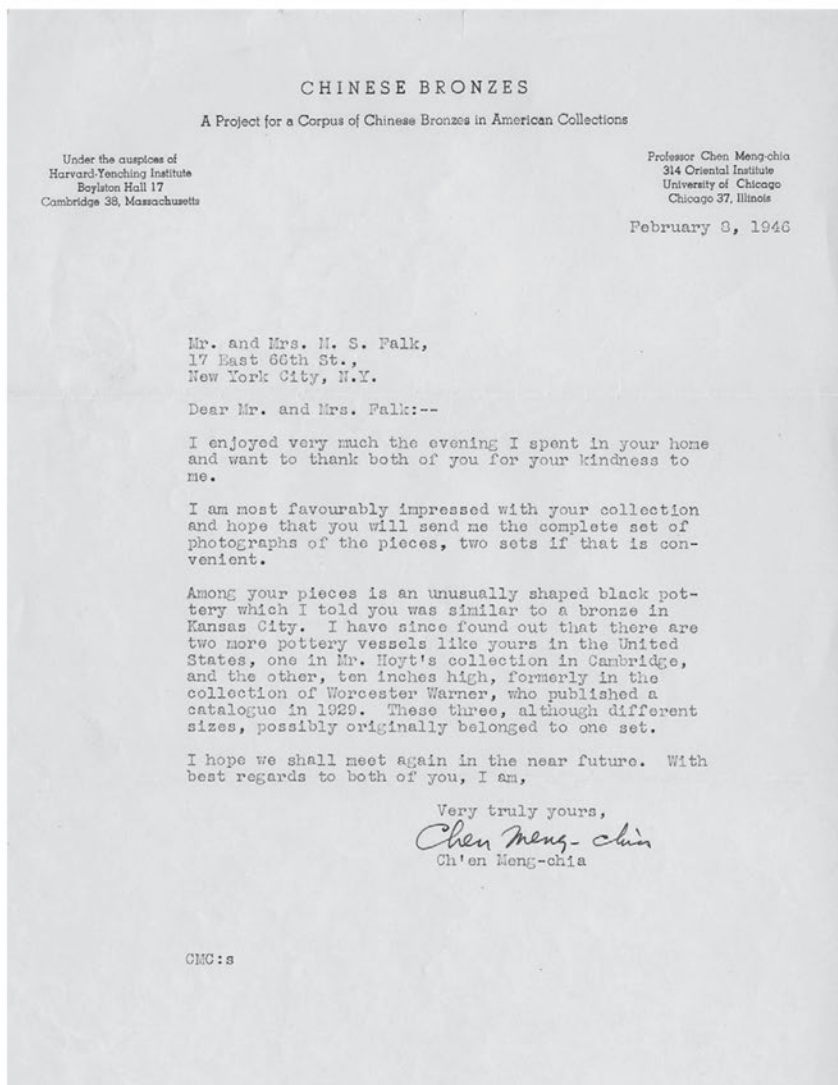


FIGURE 1.4. Chen Mengchia (Chèn Meng-Chia), letter to Pauline B. and Myron S. Falk. Chèn Meng-Chia / National Museum of Asian Art Archives, Smithsonian Institution, The Pauline B. and Myron S. Falk, Jr. Papers, FSA-2025-013952.

an overview and criticism of the first five decades of oracle-bone studies. Other works included *General Remarks on the Book of Documents* (*Shangshu tonglun*), *Periodization of Bronzes from the Western Zhou Dynasty* (*Xizhou tongqi duandai*), *An Overview of Chinese Bronzes* (*Zhongguo tongqi zongshu*), and the monumental *Chinese Bronzes in American Collections: A Catalogue*

(*Meiguo suocang zhongguo tongqi jilu*), the fruit of his research in the United States. In this period, he also developed a refined taste in Ming furniture, frequenting antique shops in Beijing to acquire several exquisite masterpieces. This was long before Ming furniture became sought after on the international art market. It was also during this time that Wang Shixiang, later a world-renowned authority in the field, first acquired his knowledge under Chen's mentorship.<sup>116</sup>

However, beneath this veneer of productivity, Chen found his intellectual and personal life disturbed by the politics of the PRC. In the "Three-Anti Campaign" (anticorruption, antiwaste, and antibureaucracy), he was wrongly accused of misusing research funds to purchase art objects for the university. As a result, he had to make several rounds of apology and self-criticism, and was forced out of the leadership team of Tsinghua's Ancient Artifacts Exhibition Room.<sup>117</sup> His American connections also came under scrutiny.<sup>118</sup> Like other intellectuals, Chen was required to receive "reeducation" in Marxism and Leninism and to learn Russian;<sup>119</sup> he was asked to apply Marxism and Leninism to philology, and to approach ancient history from the angle of the slave society.<sup>120</sup> In 1951, Chen was overheard saying, "1984 is arriving, and so soon!"<sup>121</sup> In 1952, universities across the country were restructured after the Soviet model, and Chen was reassigned to the Chinese Academy of Sciences' Institute of Archaeology. He appeared to be unhappy about this transfer.<sup>122</sup>

Soon enough, he became embroiled in yet another controversy, this time concerning the implementation of a major government policy. The fallout took a devastating toll on his career. In 1956, the government published the "Plan for the Simplification of the Chinese Script" (*Hanzi jianhua fang'an*), which was followed by numerous newspaper articles supporting the reform. There was a wide range of opinions, with the more radical commentators suggesting the total abolition of the Chinese script and its replacement with the Latin alphabet.<sup>123</sup> Such proposals betrayed what Yurou Zhong calls "phonocentric antinomies," in which "the allegiance to phonocentrism reduced the Chinese script to an inadequate technology for transcribing speech sound, stripping it of any civilizational value and exacting indisputable violence against Chinese culture, philosophy, and epistemology in general. At the same time, such epistemic violence was registered as a necessary sacrifice because of its modernizing and revolutionizing tendencies, both technological and political."<sup>124</sup> These ideas triggered a strong reaction from Chen, who had always been concerned about the future of the Chinese script. In a separate move, the government also launched the Hundred Flowers Campaign in early 1957 to encourage citizens to offer their opinions—especially critical ones—of

its own work. Chen, like many others, took this invitation at its word. He actively voiced his dissent of the script-simplification plan in various high-profile forums. He criticized the proposal as too radical and, in some cases, unpractical, arguing that although the Chinese script had many problems, it was still efficient as a tool of communication, much more so than any artificial inventions being floated at the time. He also maintained that reforming the script was a serious matter that required extensive discussion and thorough deliberation and should not be pushed through forcefully and hastily.<sup>125</sup>

The Hundred Flowers Campaign elicited widespread criticisms of the government, and the latter sharply reversed its attitude toward open speech soon afterward. In June, Mao Zedong started to call his critics “rightists” and condemned their alleged hostility toward his regime. In the days that followed, the Hundred Flowers Campaign quickly turned into the Anti-Rightist Campaign. Most of those who criticized the government were declared “rightists,” a deeply stigmatizing and insulting label in the political language of communist China. Soon all public discourse, including the debate on the script reform, became irrevocably politicized. In this campaign, Chen earned himself a “rightist” title and endured serious accusations, personal attacks, and vicious slanders, most of which centered on his opposition to the script reform. Some of these attacks came from eminent colleagues, including his own mentor Rong Geng.<sup>126</sup>

From this point on, Chen’s career was in free fall. He and Zhao Luorui went through many hardships, including forced labor, though thanks to the protection of Xia Nai, deputy director of the Archaeology Institute, he still participated in some archaeological excavations. These formed the basis of yet another important work, *The Han Bamboo Slips from Wuwei* (*Wuwei hanjian*). A collection of Chen’s articles, *Collected Essays on the Han Bamboo Slips* (*Hanjian zhuishu*), was published posthumously. Like the oracle bones, Han bamboo-slip studies had come to comprise a new field first spearheaded by Luo and Wang, together with Édouard Chavannes and Marc Aurel Stein.<sup>127</sup>

In early 1966, Chen indicated to a friend that he wished to donate his cherished Ming furniture collection to the Shanghai Museum.<sup>128</sup> In June of the same year came the disastrous Cultural Revolution, and Chen immediately became a target in struggle sessions, one of his major “crimes” still being his opposition to the script reform. After enduring repeated humiliation and torture by the Red Guards, Chen attempted suicide on August 24. He survived that first try, but died during his second attempt, on September 2, at the age of fifty-five.<sup>129</sup> Today, visitors to the fourth floor of the Shanghai Museum will see some of the finest examples of Ming furniture in the world, notable for their delicacy, elegance, repose, and simplicity. But few are aware

of their history: these silent artifacts bore witness to one of the most barbaric moments in the entirety of human history.

Despite the brevity of his poetry career and his vocal abandonment of it, Chen is best remembered today as a handsome, youthful, and romantic poet. The more heavyweight contributions he made to archaeology and philology are not well known outside specialist circles, and even fewer people are aware of his pioneering championing of Ming furniture. His eclectic legacy thus presents a complicated and peculiar case: how might the different facets of one man be reconciled to form a coherent whole? The best way to address this question, I argue, is to place Chen and Wang in comparison within the broader context created by the discovery of the oracle bones.

The first noteworthy point is the obvious similarities between the two men's intellectual trajectories. Both shifted their interests from poetry and Western modernity to Chinese antiquity and particularly the oracle bones. Despite their forty-year age difference and divergent political views, they both belonged to the same era troubled by the same question: Is Chinese culture, as embodied by its language, artifacts, and institutions, still a living entity? If so, how can this aging and ailing entity be rejuvenated? Wang made several attempts to address this question before settling on studying antiquity. He devoted considerable efforts to collecting materials related to ancient popular drama and wrote a pioneering history on the subject.<sup>130</sup> Countering the general perception that these works were vulgar and low-quality, he praised their authors as "capable of representing human emotions and depicting vivid sceneries; their language was outstandingly brilliant yet born out of nature."<sup>131</sup> The subject of his most celebrated work, *Renjian cihua*, was the *ci* poetry of the late Tang and the Northern Song periods, which was full of vernacular elements of its time. For Wang, such an organic and lively means of expression was crucial for the healthy continuation of an ancient culture. This was why, as later scholars note, he preferred "transparent language over stylistic refinements."<sup>132</sup> An example is the crucial aesthetic principle that Wang summed up for *ci*, namely, "immediacy" (*buge*, literally "without obstruction" or "not veiled").<sup>133</sup>

Between the times of Wang and Chen, a watershed event reshaped the discourse on Chinese literature. Beginning in the late 1910s, as part of the New Culture Movement, scholars and writers advanced the Vernacular Literature Movement (*Baihuawen yundong*), which aimed to inject vitality and democracy into China's aging and elitist literary culture by adopting a modern, colloquial idiom used by living people.<sup>134</sup> Chen's poetry was a product of this sweeping reform.<sup>135</sup> Four decades later, the script reform marked a continuation and offshoot of this general effort to democratize the Chinese

language.<sup>136</sup> And yet this vision of a new culture had its origin in the vernacular language of the past, particularly the Song *ci* and Yuan dramas.<sup>137</sup> In this sense, Wang's reevaluation of both genres showed remarkable foresight and helped lay the groundwork for the Vernacular Literature Movement, and he deserves to be considered a precursor to the new generation of writers and poets that included Chen.

In its essence, Wang's view on Song and Yuan literature was consistent with his understanding of the Zhou political institution. He did not see tradition as a dried-out fossil, but as an organic, living heritage that continued to converse with the present; thus it could and should serve as the basis of a new China. And the exact same thing can be said about Chen; as he turned from vernacular poetry to oracle-bone inscriptions, he realized that the latter was at least as alive as the former. In 1940 he wrote an essay aptly titled "Remarks on [Chinese] Characters from the Studio of Dreaming of [Turtle] Shells" (*Mengjiashi zihua*), which begins with the following observation:

When talking about the [Chinese] script, for foreigners and natives alike, the opinion is that it is too archaic and strange, and too difficult to recognize. In fact, "archaic" it is, but "strange" it is not. If we know more about the Chinese script's history, we will understand that there is nothing strange about it. As to the difficulty in recognizing and writing it, both are true, but there are ways to mitigate them. The Chinese writing system is a coherent organism; if we patiently follow its logic, it isn't hard to figure out a good method to use it.<sup>138</sup>

Chen then traced the development of this system, naturally starting with the oracle-bone script. With this important and previously missing link now fully restored, he argued, the inner logic and continuous evolution of a long-lasting system became transparent.

Chen never swerved from this conviction about the oracle bones' centrality. Seventeen years later, it became the anchor of his stance on the script reform. While he fully supported the government's goal of simplifying the Chinese script to increase efficiency and enhance the general population's literacy, he maintained disagreements with the push for complete Romanization and with certain methods of simplification. Regarding the latter, he considered these tactics to be rash, crude, and uninformed owing to a lack of understanding of the script's inner logic.<sup>139</sup> The basic assumption of the reform echoed the critics of China's monarchic institution: Both treated the past as a dead entity. In contrast, Chen noted that the Chinese writing system had in fact simplified itself through history, using practicable means to adapt to new needs. Because these means were natural and practicable, they should now serve as the model for modern reform.<sup>140</sup> This bird's-eye view of the history

of the script could only be achieved through a deep knowledge of the oracle-bone script. It would not be too far of a leap, I would argue, to hold the bones at least partially accountable for Chen's dissenting opinion—and thus to link them, even if indirectly, to the tragic ending he eventually faced.

As we look back on this debate from a twenty-first-century vantage point, it is obvious that Chen's argument was nuanced, reasonable, and well-intentioned, while the government-led reform, wide-ranging in its scope, had considerable strengths—Chen only disagreed with certain hasty aspects of the latter, in any case. However, given the overly politicized manner into which the debate devolved, it is off the mark to get pedantic over the merits of individual arguments. During the Anti-Rightist Campaign, attacks on Chen and anyone else who had expressed dissatisfaction were often nothing more than smear tactics and character assassinations. The cult-like strategy through which the Communist Party provoked and coerced the masses into a collective frenzy meant that everyone was expected to make clear their stance, and no one could afford to dissent.<sup>141</sup> For this reason, although several prominent scholars offered their criticisms of Chen, these should not be taken as serious contributions to academic debate.<sup>142</sup>

Instead, the overarching moral of this episode is the fact that the Chinese script was perceived to play such an outsized role in the well-being of a nation. As I noted in the introduction and will discuss more in chapter 2, the Chinese script has a lengthy history of mythologization and fetishization. Supporters see it as indispensable for preserving the essence of “Chineseness,” while detractors consider it a major obstacle to the redemption of a declining civilization. As Jing Tsu observes, attempts to mitigate the gap between Chinese and Western writing systems lie “at the core of China's modern identity,”<sup>143</sup> and yet the Chinese script has stubbornly remained “China's first and last Great Wall.”<sup>144</sup>

Ultimately, behind the Chinese script looms the larger issue of *wen*, which brings us back to the theme of this chapter. Here *wen* needs to be taken both concretely, as *wenzi* (script, character), and abstractly, as *wenhua* (culture, civilization). As a concept that accumulated layers of meanings in the twentieth century, *wen*'s overall importance for a political entity exceeded the sum of its individual elements. The fact that the Great Cultural Revolution, or *Wenhua dageming*, a violent crusade provoked by an ignorant hatred of culture, was first and foremost directed toward *wen* itself, is striking proof that, for better or worse, *wen*'s centrality in twentieth-century Chinese cultural politics cannot be overstated. The belief that a writing system was somehow responsible for the fate of a nation demonstrates the degree to which *wen* in its narrower sense as a tool of communication had

become conflated with its broader meaning as the harmonizer of human, natural, and cosmological orders.

Ironically, this overloading of *wen* did not end up expanding its capacity. On the contrary, *wen* wound up being squeezed into its own negation, namely a signifying void: with the Cultural Revolution, even the most basic function of *wen*—honest and meaningful expression of thoughts and feelings—became impossible. But the greatest irony was the fact that empty revolutionary slogans were written in the same language as Wang's and Chen's refined poetry, and all of them shared a common ancestry in the oracle-bone inscriptions. This was why, around the same time, so many writers stopped writing, terminating their intimate relationship with language and turning to artifacts and collecting. We have observed this shift in the story of Chen Mengjia; we will see it appear again in the life and work of Shi Zhecun (chapter 2) and Shen Congwen (chapter 4). When words fail, objects speak. Under duress and pressure from all sides, these Chinese writers turned away from *wen* (the textual) to embrace *wu* (the material) as a way to preserve their dignity and their humanity. The intense spirituality behind Chen's collecting of Ming furniture can only be fully appreciated in this broader context.<sup>145</sup>

Chen's suffering through the Anti-Rightist Campaign and the Cultural Revolution was not a singular incident. It was an inescapable fate shared by most intellectuals after 1949, many of whom succumbed to absurd, fabricated thought crimes. But Chen was probably unique for being an involuntary martyr of the Chinese script. In this sense, and following in the footsteps of Wang Yirong and Wang Guowei, he became the last of the great antiquarian collectors to sacrifice their lives for the cause, thus concluding the biography of the oracle bones' troubled afterlife in modern China.

## Rubbing

New Year's Eve.

Sat up alone at night, transcribing

Stele inscriptions. No feeling of year's changing.

LU XUN'S DIARY, JANUARY 22, 1917<sup>1</sup>

### Before Zhou Shuren Became Lu Xun

In the wake of the 1911 Revolution, Luo Zhenyu left his job at the Qing administration's Ministry of Education in Beijing and fled to Japan. A few months later, Lu Xun arrived in the capital to start working at the same ministry, now part of the new republic's Beiyang government. Having settled in Japan, Luo delved into the oracle bones and other ancient artifacts, many of which he collected from Beijing's antique markets. Lu Xun, meanwhile, had terminated his study of Western medicine in Japan just a few years ago, and he, too, ended up spending a lot of time in these antique markets. The two men had effectively swapped locations.

Once we take into account their cultural and political orientations, Luo's and Lu Xun's change of locales during this first year of the Republic of China starts to assume great symbolic significance. As I discussed in chapter 1, Luo was an ultraconservative and ardent monarchist. Lu Xun was the polar opposite: with an unrivaled status as the preeminent cultural icon of revolution and progress, he was known for his sharply critical exposés of China's national character. That these two men, holding utterly incompatible worldviews, nearly rubbed shoulders in the same locales, raises an important question: What effect did these spaces have on their thoughts? This question takes on particular urgency in the case of Lu Xun. What did the iconoclastic cultural hero have to do with the antique markets? As we are well aware, history does not take place in a spatial vacuum, but in concrete places—or, to put this in

another way, concrete places actively shape the contours of history. Lu Xun would not have become who he was had he not spent time at the capital's Ministry of Education and in its renowned antique market Liulichang, two sites that shared an antagonistic yet close-knit relationship. I argue that an intimate acquaintance with these two spaces allowed him a glimpse into written history as a fabricated amalgamation of empty signs, an understanding that served as the basis of his fierce critique of traditional Chinese culture at large.

According to Lu Xun's diary, in the afternoon of May 12, 1912, seven days after arriving in Beijing, he visited Liulichang for the first time.<sup>2</sup> However, the phrase "Lu Xun visited Liulichang" is in fact anachronistic, because "Lu Xun," the pen name of Zhou Shuren, was not adopted until 1918 in his groundbreaking masterpiece "Diary of a Madman." I highlight this fact because it is easy to forget that there were two personas—the one *before* the "Diary of a Madman" and the one *after*. Before that, there was Zhou Shuren, the quiet, reclusive scholar-collector who, after his daily bureaucratic routine at the ministry, would frequent Liulichang and preoccupy himself with obscure old editions, steles, rubbings, coins, bronze vessels, and terracotta figurines. During this period, Zhou was by no means keen to write fiction or to voice his social critique.

But then there was Lu Xun, who after 1918 became one of the foremost authors of twentieth-century China. Lauded for his sharp understanding of the illnesses plaguing traditional culture, he crusaded against these suffocating ideologies and provided spiritual leadership for the modernizing New Culture Movement, earning himself the posthumous title "the soul of the nation." He was especially lionized in the PRC, with Mao Zedong declaring him "the pioneer of national liberation" and "the premier sage of China."<sup>3</sup> In the enormous scholarly output on Lu Xun's life and works, much has rightly centered on his antitraditionalism, but it overshadows an element that is no less significant: the backward-looking Lu Xun as an antiquarian collector.<sup>4</sup> When this element does receive attention, it is often treated as one item on his long list of achievements, giving an impression of his erudition and intellectual versatility. However, such a narrative risks glossing over a significant shift in Lu Xun's life, which can be traced to his antiquarian interests and his immersion in the milieu of Liulichang. By zooming in on this shift, the present chapter foregrounds the dialectic relationship between his two facets—as a vocal participant in the modernization campaign and a quiet purveyor of the old imperial capital's antiquarian landscape. I will then explain how these experiences shaped some of his most celebrated literary creations.

Although Liulichang was the most famous antique market in Beijing, it is more appropriate to treat it as a metonymy for the city's busy antique trade.

Throughout the present study, we repeatedly see the effects of this trade: in chapter 1, Liu E benefited from the influx of artifacts into the marketplace in the aftermath of the 1900 Battle of Peking and stumbled upon the oracle bones there; in chapter 4, we will see that Shen Congwen considered the city's antique markets to be his alma mater, the university where he learned about Chinese culture and history. After the fall of the Qing dynasty, a general reshuffling of social status and wealth meant that an enormous number of artifacts changed hands. Only a small portion of these, however, found their way into public museums: most were dispersed into the market, boosting Liulichang's role as the preeminent destination of its kind in the country.

In both allegorical and literal senses, the antique market can be seen as a manifestation of the decay, dispersion, and recycling of material history—and as a key facilitator of thriving collectorship. Walter Benjamin's observation that "Perhaps the most deeply hidden motive of the person who collects can be described this way: he takes up the struggle against dispersion"<sup>5</sup> is an especially apt description of this symbiosis between the collector and the market. Unlike the world of museums and auction houses, origin or provenance is not a prerequisite in the antique market. With the original context of the object often missing, the collector has both the need and the freedom to re-contextualize, reinterpret, and reevaluate. The antique market is thus the place where ostensibly coherent system knowledge is disrupted, buried cultural memory stirred up, and history subject to multiple, sometimes mutually contradictory, interpretations. As such, the antique market makes the collector a combination of two incompatible poles, the traditionalist and the revolutionary, as was certainly the case for Lu Xun.

A glance at Lu Xun's diary helps bear out this point. When he was not at home, he was either working at the ministry or roaming the streets of Liulichang. Forming a stark contrast to the unpredictable excitement of the antique market, the ministry was seemingly a place of authority, order, and dull bureaucracy. This popular image did not tell the whole story, however: through a seldom acknowledged chain of cause and effect, Liulichang left its mark on the formation of the Republican Ministry of Education and many other cultural institutions. It could very well be said that these two locales—the ministry and the city's antique market—were alter egos. They were connected, among other things, by two remnants of the empire: the Grand Secretariat documents and the monumental *Siku quanshu*, or the "Complete Library of the Four Treasuries." Lu Xun was acquainted with both. Together they provided him with profound insight into both the fragility of Chinese history's material foundation and the hopelessly dysfunctional role that the state played in their preservation.

As we recall from chapter 1, the documents of the Qing court's Grand Secretariat were saved from total loss by Luo Zhenyu at great cost. Originally stored in warehouses located within the Forbidden City, these archives included official documents—memorials, edicts, reports, and diplomatic communiqués—that were burned at regular intervals to make room for new materials. In itself, this routine was not particularly problematic, as most institutions would need to do the same with files deemed superfluous or outdated. But from a specific historiographic point of view, these documents were of great value. Luo, who was serving at the Qing Ministry of Education when one such burning routine was about to be carried out in 1909, happened to hold exactly this view. He actively lobbied to overturn the order, thus initiating a protracted battle for the documents' preservation that dragged well into the Republican era. During this complicated process these important historical documents, weighing a few dozen tons, were stuffed into approximately eight thousand sacks and put away in various locations. Worse still, the archives continuously suffered from theft by all kinds of people with access to them, and a substantial portion of them ended up in the antique market. Luo repeatedly expressed his wish to create a space to properly store, catalogue, and research them. His hope would not be realized until the Academia Sinica's Institute of History and Philology, under Fu Sinian's leadership, acquired the documents.<sup>6</sup>

When these documents fell under the purview of the new Ministry of Education, they were transferred from the Forbidden City to the Confucian Temple and then to the Guanghua Temple. Proposals were put forward to use the archive as the basis of a future National Museum of History. Just like its predecessor, however, the Republican government struggled to determine how to deal with these bulky and dusty papers. Administrators sensed that they had some value, but without the necessary historiographical awareness, they failed to understand exactly what use they could have. Rumors had it that the archives contained “concubines' embroidered shoes and princes' skulls.”<sup>7</sup> Clearly, these artifacts had lost their cultural legibility, becoming both an administrative inconvenience and a useless curiosity. No wonder some officials proposed—yet again—simply destroying the archive.

Working at the ministry's Division of Social Education, Lu Xun witnessed firsthand the ordeal of these valuable materials. After leaving his job, he wrote an essay entitled “On the So-Called ‘Imperial Archive’” (*Tan suowei Danei Dang'an*). Filled with his trademark sarcasm, the essay gave candid behind-the-scenes details about how, across its ranks, the administration failed to live up to its responsibility. He began with the observation that the archives had been languishing in the Confucian Temple for approximately a decade, and

no one had paid the slightest attention; now, when reports emerged that Luo was about to sell them to Japanese buyers, suddenly there was uproar all over, as if the whole nation's fortune were in danger. Lu Xun compared the archives to trash thrown away by a once rich but now declining family: it was trash, after all, and yet even *that* would surely contain treasures for the commoners. This was especially true when something had a "royal" label attached to it.

Hu Yujin, an administrator charged with planning the Museum of History, was anxious about the archives as a potential fire hazard. He knew well from dynastic days the typical fate that befell such public properties: those responsible for safeguarding them often stole from them, then would set fire to the whole place to cover up their crime. Hu was eager to have the archives relocated or sorted out to avoid such troubles. However, Lu Xun's own boss Xia Zengyou held the opposite opinion; he understood that, as with most affairs in China, one should never try to "solve" anything. He argued that if the archives were left alone to rot, all would be fine. But once someone tried to "solve" them, all sorts of controversies would follow, and the person who actually did any work would become the target for all criticisms. Somehow the two men reached an unspoken mutual understanding, and the archives were left untouched.

But that wasn't the end of the story. Next came the new education minister, Mr. F, an antique book connoisseur (Lu Xun used the initial *F* in to avoid trouble, but this person was easily identifiable as Fu Zengxiang). Mr. F somehow caught wind of the existence of extremely rare books hidden among the trove of papers. All of a sudden, the minister became very interested in the archive and ordered Lu Xun and another employee to sift through the sacks. In his typically cynical tone, Lu Xun reported that there was nothing remarkable to be found, and if anything noteworthy had been housed in that archive, it would have been stolen already. Still, several other senior officials, whose names Lu Xun only hinted at, also suddenly became "concerned experts." And "whenever we put anything onto the table, they [Fu and others] would always take them away, saying that they needed to 'take a look.' When they were returned, something always went missing. I swear to God, this is true."<sup>8</sup>

There followed several rounds of governmental interventions trying to find a solution, all of which came to nothing. In 1921, short of money, the ministry sold them to a local paper shop, which resold selected items to the antique market and planned to sell the rest to pulp shops. Here Luo came to the archives' rescue yet again. Having just returned from Japan, he was shocked to come across some documents from the imperial archive in the antique market. Immediately realizing what had happened, he used his own funds and borrowed more to purchase whatever was left. These papers

exchanged hands a few more times until the Academia Sinica and later the First Historical Archives of the PRC acquired them, turning an archive that had almost wound up in the pulp mills into one of the most crucial and indispensable resources for the study of Chinese history.

Two morals can be drawn from the Grand Secretariat archives' strange odyssey. The first, already touched on in chapter 1, was Luo's foresight and unexpected affinity with Fu Sinian's positivist ideals. The second can be found at the end of Lu Xun's essay. Apparently, even in the hands of the state—or one could argue, *precisely when* in the hands of the state—cultural heritage is not as safe as we like to think. Bearing witness to the fragile materiality of history and to Luo's quixotic efforts, Lu Xun concluded, "In China, it is really difficult to preserve any public property. If those in power are ignorant, they destroy it; if they are experts, they steal all of it. And this is in fact true not just for books or ancient artifacts."<sup>9</sup> That last qualification is the most significant: here he was invoking a broad and systemic failure to understand, preserve, and utilize the physical remains of the past to create a truthful cultural memory, a failure all the more glaring considering China's long-standing and much-lauded state-sanctioned historiographical tradition. More than any abstract elaborations on the *idea* of history, Lu Xun's firsthand witnessing of the physical decay of historical memory must have made him wonder how much more knowledge of the past had been lost than preserved. Further, within what *did* get passed down, how much could actually be trusted?

This last point leads us directly to *Siku quanshu*, the other imperial remnant that Lu Xun dealt with during his time at the ministry. *Siku quanshu* is a perfect example of the perils that eventually beset all collections.<sup>10</sup> Created under the order of the mighty Qianlong Emperor, this tremendous collection of almost eighty thousand volumes, the largest of its kind in ancient China, took over a decade to compile, and is among the most elaborate and ambitious pre-modern efforts to preserve learning. Altogether, seven copies of *Siku quanshu* were made and housed in custom-built libraries in various locations across the country, making the collection seem eternal and indestructible. And yet in a matter of barely two centuries, due to social upheaval and war, only three complete copies of the collection remained. In 1914, the ministry ordered one of them to be transferred from the Qing emperors' summer residence in Chengde to the Peking Library, where Lu Xun was responsible for tidying up and cataloguing the huge compendium. The fate of *Siku quanshu*, like that of the Grand Secretariat documents, shows us how collections are prone to "un-collect" themselves. Indeed, dispersion is the rule, not the exception.

The process of compiling *Siku quanshu* tells us even more about the irony of collecting. Reigning at a relatively prosperous time, the self-congratulatory

Qianlong saw himself as a supremely capable ruler in both the military and cultural arenas. He desired to gather around himself all the important books from his empire and intended *Siku quanshu* to be the ultimate, complete, and perfect collection. The idea of completeness, however, carried with it the price of violence and destruction: It did not simply include *everything*, but revised and deleted anything that did not conform to its standard of perfection. In this sense, Qianlong's project demonstrates the striking realism behind Jorge Luis Borges's fantastical fiction "The Library of Babel." The library, an allegory of the universe, "contained all books," and "there was no personal problem, no world problem, whose eloquent solution did not exist—somewhere in some hexagon." Yet in a quest to resolve "the fundamental mysteries of mankind," Borges writes, "[Some] thought the first thing to do was eliminate all worthless books. They would invade the hexagons, show credentials that were not always false, leaf disgustedly through a volume, and condemn entire walls of books. It is to their hygienic, ascetic rage that we lay the senseless loss of millions of volumes."<sup>11</sup> This elimination was precisely what the *Siku quanshu* editors did under the emperor's order: alongside the more than three thousand titles that were included, almost as many were banned.<sup>12</sup> And in the ones that were preserved, changes were applied to ensure they conformed to the Qing regime's official ideology. In short, Qianlong's seemingly generous project of cultural preservation was also one of unabashed brainwashing and ruthless cultural destruction.

This brings us to a deep scar in Chinese history. The ruling ethnic group of the Qing dynasty was the Jurchen-Manchu people, and their sixteenth-century conquest of China was marked by extreme brutality. Having established this rule, successive Qing emperors became keen to justify the invasion by portraying themselves as the legitimate successor to a unified China. They also sought to erase memories of the atrocities their ancestors had committed, an impulse that led to the notorious *wenziyu*, or literary inquisitions. During the reigns of Emperor Yongzheng (1723–35) and Emperor Qianlong (1736–96) in particular, severe punishments were dealt out to those who expressed any trace of longing for the defeated Han-ruled Ming regime.<sup>13</sup> This climate helps explain *Siku quanshu*'s aggressively interventionist editorial approach, as detailed in the "Terms for Handling Violative Books" (*Chaban wei'ai shuji tiaokuan*).<sup>14</sup> Regarding Qianlong's attempt to use *Siku quanshu* to erase the Han people's cultural memory, Frederick Mote said the following: "A genuinely good idea, innocently developed by his [Qianlong's] Chinese scholar-officials once he had proposed it, came to be seen by him as the perfect vehicle for simultaneously accomplishing sinister as well as altruistic objectives."<sup>15</sup>

In the essay “Idle Talks after Illness” (*Binghou zatan zhiyu*), a free-flowing and slightly digressive contemplation on cruelty and forgetfulness throughout Chinese history, Lu Xun noted the fine print of *Siku quanshu*’s editorial process. He quoted the scholar Yu Zhengxie as saying that ethnic Han rulers seemed no less cruel to their subjects than foreign conquerors had been, and in particular praised his own Manchu rulers for correcting long-standing historical wrongs. In Lu Xun’s opinion, Yu, an ethnic Han person living in mid-Qing dynasty, had been brainwashed:

He [Yu] was born in the fortieth year of the Qianlong reign (1775); by the time he reached adulthood and [then] advanced years, the literary inquisitions’ blood stain had disappeared, the Manchu people’s brutality had eased up, and the obscurantist policy had long accomplished its goal. What remained was only benevolent and charitable acts. I imagine that he didn’t have access to those banned books. We need only consider the Yongzheng and Qianlong reigns: [under these emperors,] the conspiracies against Chinese people’s writings were absolutely abhorrent. Not to mention policies like “complete destruction,” “random destruction,” and “partial erasure,” etc., the most sinister method was to alter the contents of ancient works. The compilation of *Siku quanshu* during the Qianlong reign has been praised by many as an epochal achievement, but they [the editors] not only messed up the formats of ancient books, but changed the contents of ancient authors; they not only stored it in the palace, but sent it to the most learned regions for all scholars to read, so that no one would ever know that among our Chinese writers, there were once some quite upright people.<sup>16</sup>

Lu Xun was referring to the carefully chosen locations for housing *Siku quanshu*’s copies. It is understandable that copies would be made for sites the emperors frequented: two in the capital Beijing, one in their summer residence in Chengde, and one in the old Manchu capital Fengtian (modern-day Shenyang). But three more costly copies were specially produced for Zhenjiang, Yangzhou, and Hangzhou in the wealthy and cultured southern provinces, where Lu Xun’s hometown Shaoxing was also located. Historically, people in this area put up some of the stiffest resistance to the Manchu invasion and as a result suffered an especially brutal onslaught. The regime could not have made its sinister intention clearer than by deliberately making the censored records of history readily accessible to students in this area.

Lu Xun also noted how *Siku quanshu*’s censorship was expanded to cover even the periods prior to the Qing reign. The twelfth-century war between the Jurchen people’s Jin dynasty (金, 1115–1234) and the ethnic Han people’s Song served as a historical precedent for the Manchu invasion and further complicated the already controversial meanings of “China.” Since at least the

time of the Spring and Autumn period (770–476 BCE), a sharp division had been drawn between *Yi*, a term for the cultural-ethnic other, and *Xia* (also called *Huaxia* and *Zhongguo*), which referred to the Han people's central domain and has since become a common name of the Chinese nation. A debate that has persisted throughout Chinese history turns on whether "China" should be defined ethnically or culturally. Successive invaders of the central domain, including the Jin and the Qing, clung to the cultural definition to justify their positions as legitimate Chinese regimes, whereas the Han dynasties, including the Song and the Ming, emphasized their ethnic purity.<sup>17</sup> Going through the *Siku quanshu* editions of works by Song authors, Lu Xun observed that editors often sanitized mentions of *Yi* and even *Zhongguo*, alongside records of the Jin conquerors' cruel acts. Readers had been unaware of these changes until earlier and uncensored Song and Yuan editions became available again through facsimile reproductions. This led Lu Xun to conclude that *Siku quanshu* was in fact a barbaric document, "the Manchu assassination of Chinese writings."<sup>18</sup>

His firsthand knowledge of this large-scale compendium also informed his position in the controversy surrounding the Republican government's plan to publish the *Siku quanshu*. With extensive censorship applied, the sanitized versions often differed significantly from the originals. These sanitized versions received imperially endorsed status as the "precious version" (*zhenben*), while the originals were stored away with less-vaunted stature as "proper versions" (*shanben*). In 1933, the Ministry of Education planned to publish selected titles of the *Siku quanshu*, but administrators preferred the "precious versions" over the "proper versions" for the former's imperial prestige. Lu Xun's short essay, "The Precious Versions from *Siku quanshu*" (*Siku quanshu zhenben*),<sup>19</sup> chided the government's shallowness, snobbishness, and ignorance, lamenting that popularizing the sanitized versions would only perpetuate the obfuscation of historical truth.

*Siku quanshu* also laid bare the peculiar characteristics of collecting that defied common assumptions and drew attention to the collection's curious affinity with its supposed opposite, the antique market. To define what makes up a perfect collection, it is necessary to also define what does not and to invoke categories of exclusion, such as what is offensive, improper, inferior, incomplete, or duplicated. As inclusion went hand in hand with exclusion, the compiling of the *Siku quanshu* almost immediately initiated a process of dispersion. Failing to gain inclusion in the prestigious category housed inside the imperial libraries, the rejected books ended up in the space of recycling—in this case the antique market—where a type of collector antithetical to Qianlong would roam and a different type of collecting

would take place. In other words, a perfect collection gave birth to its opposite: the *anticollection*.

This dynamism between opposites explains the fact that Liulichang's eighteenth-century rise to prominence coincided with the onset of the *Siku* project. One of Qianlong's goals was to gather old and rare books from across his territory. Taking note of his interest, book dealers in other provinces (especially the cultural centers Jiangsu and Zhejiang) set up business in the Liulichang area, which was located near the living quarters of the *Siku* editors, aiming to offer up their merchandise and increase sales. By the same token, the editors needed tremendous amounts of reference materials to support their work, and their daily routine included frequenting the book market. As Benjamin Elman observes, Liulichang created a cultural atmosphere "that stressed the value of rare works and ancient artifacts, promoted the exchange of books, and stimulated scholarship during the eighteenth century."<sup>20</sup> This space continued to thrive long after the compilation project. And as we already know, in the twentieth century, Liulichang again benefited from the fall of the Qing, which led to the dispersion of both royal and private collections into the marketplace.<sup>21</sup>

A chain of causal connections now makes itself visible: Qianlong's vanity gave birth, as it were, to the twins of *Siku quanshu* as the *collection* and Liulichang as a space for the *anticollection*; both eventually played important roles in the formation of twentieth-century cultural institutions. As the *anticollection*, Liulichang would become fertile ground for collectors as different as Luo Zhenyu and Lu Xun. Indeed, Liulichang was the space where the *genius loci* of the collector dwelled—a geographical nexus that connected Qianlong and Lu Xun. In contrast to the egotistical Qianlong, though, Lu Xun was a modest and self-deprecating collector. He also happened to be far more critical, clear-headed, and conscientious.

Like the Grand Secretariat documents, *Siku quanshu* provided additional evidence for Lu Xun's argument that the more the state attempted to solve things, the more damage it wound up doing. He bluntly summed it up thus: "Once the Qing people compiled *Siku quanshu*, ancient books were lost."<sup>22</sup> That being said, Lu Xun would certainly agree that Qianlong should not be the sole bearer of the blame. From the time writing was invented all the way to the present, Chinese rulers have seldom ceased to abuse the written record in their attempts to revise and erase the memory of an entire nation. And the stronger that written culture is, the more effective the abuse becomes. Here we find ourselves revisiting a key theme of this book: the problematic nature of China's much vaunted written culture. While the country did keep an impressive and enduring written record of its past, how much of that record

is actually free of censorship, manipulation, and outright deception? As we shall see below, this was precisely the question that came to haunt Lu Xun later in life. His collecting activities, I argue, were attempts to find a *terra firma* upon which historical certainty could be grounded. And he was not very successful in these efforts.

### The Indeterminacy of Textual Scholarship

Among the numerous objects Lu Xun acquired during his wanderings through Liulichang, one category stood out: old book editions. He had an especially keen interest in texts that were partially lost or mutilated; they became the source materials for various editorial projects that made up his main output before he became an influential writer. These projects could be considered a continuation of the Qing intellectual tradition of *kaozheng* or evidential scholarship. Through a rigorous philological approach to the ancient classics, Qing scholars distanced themselves from their Song and especially Ming predecessors, who were known for their liberal and at times fanciful interpretations. Lu Xun's editorial projects involved two activities at which the Qing tradition excelled: the compilation and reconstruction of lost texts by collating quotations and fragments found scattered in other books and the restoration of extant yet incomplete and/or unreliable texts through careful comparisons and selections of various versions. In both cases, Lu Xun labored painstakingly to restore the *urtexts*, or what remained of them, and in so doing sought to rectify the distortions that had occurred during the texts' circulation and transmission.

During his first visit to Liulichang, Lu Xun purchased Fu Yunlong's *Zhuanxilu congshu*, a collection of Chinese texts that had been lost in China but later recovered in Japan.<sup>23</sup> This marked the beginning of his extensive collecting activities during a fourteen-year sojourn in the capital. As he roamed the shops in Liulichang and scavenged fragmentary texts, Lu Xun must have resembled the Baudelairean flaneurs and ragpickers who inhabited the streets and arcades of nineteenth-century Paris. Although the texts that interested him were miscellaneous, most were loosely connected to a common theme: They were either written by or about people related to his hometown Kuaiji during the period from the late Eastern Han (25–220) to Jin (晉, 265–420) dynasties. Lu Xun compiled these texts into his *Miscellaneous Collection of Old Books from the Kuaiji Prefecture* (*Kuaiji jun gushu zaji*). In the preface, he explained that this book “gathers the *yiwén* of biographies and geographic records, and puts them into a collection to preserve the approximate contents of ancient books.”<sup>24</sup>

Commenting on one of the enclosed titles, Yu Yu's "Biographies of Historic Figures from Kuaiji" (*Kuaiji dianlu*), Lu Xun noted: "*Kuaiji dianlu* was already absent in *History of the Song's* 'Art and Literature' section, but it was still often quoted by Song authors in their works. So I suspect that some copies still existed in private collections but were eventually all lost. Now I have searched for the *yiwēn*, and can still get seventy-two biographies. So I arrange them roughly according to chronology into two volumes. Some I suspect to belong to other books, and are set apart at the end for reference."<sup>25</sup> *Yiwēn*, a term that repeatedly comes up in these writings, can be translated literally as "escaped texts." *Yi* is the pronunciation shared by the characters 逸, 佚, and 軼; they cover a spectrum of meanings that including "the escaped," "the scattered," "the overflowed," or "the extra." Often sought after by collectors, this category corresponds to the *anticollection*: scraps and fragments of history that have been excluded, eliminated, or forgotten. The reasons such texts "escaped" range from small-scale and unintentional editorial errors to deliberate and systematic censorship, and from natural to human-made disasters.

Lu Xun's collation of the *History of the Later Han (Hou Hanshu)*,<sup>26</sup> written by his fellow townsman Xie Cheng, offers a useful example of his efforts to preserve *yiwēn*. Among the eight histories of the later Han dynasty, Xie's was the earliest. Written around the third century and totaling a hundred and thirty volumes, this book has long been lost, though numerous fragments still exist as quotations in other texts. In the preface to his reconstructed edition, Lu Xun described his working principle: "The editor must include all textual variants to ensure that they are available [for future use]. The texts quoted in reference books are often abbreviated or enriched; errors that occurred during the process of copying made the text illegible. As a result, later readers complained about the careless quality and often made corrections. Therefore, based on what I have seen and heard, I select the key passages and arrange them here, for the purpose of convenient access."<sup>27</sup> In a note attached to the text, Lu Xun listed a total of ten such editing sessions with exact dates; in each, he used a different version of the text for comparison.<sup>28</sup>

*Yiwēn* also calls our attention to the catalogue as a textual format that guides the process of collecting. *Yiwēn* may have "escaped" history, but they are sometimes known to have existed thanks to their inclusion as entries in book catalogues. These entries, in turn, become the only remaining traces of the books' existence. A catalogue occupies both ends of a collector's career. Early on, it propels the novice to navigate the market and search for previously unknown objects, spurring them to fill in catalogue gaps. At the end of the collector's career, conversely, the catalogue becomes the epitome of a lifetime's achievement, an index of myriad desires now

completely or partially fulfilled. In more intriguing situations, a catalogue entry supersedes the text itself, as we saw earlier in the controversy over different versions of the *Siku quanshu*. In a coherent and well-regulated but authoritarian cataloging system, the *urtext* and the sanitized version became mutually exclusive and had to compete for inclusion under a single title; multiplicity could not be tolerated. No wonder that *yiwén* often bear the scars of loss and violence.

Lu Xun's quest to track down these escaped texts amounted to an urgent effort to retrieve and safeguard forgotten or erased dimensions of historical memory, to restore the organic hybridity of textual culture, to fight against oblivion, and to expose political power's age-old crusade against freedom of thought. An audacious undertaking, his work laid bare the discrepancy between name and content in a referencing system whose smooth functioning formed the basis of grandiose historical narratives. For a revolutionary like Lu Xun, there was no better way to challenge a repressive ideology than by starting with its textual foundation.

Besides *yiwén*, another problem often plagues the preservation of ancient texts: multiplicity. Many texts have survived to the present in multiple versions with numerous variants. Once an editor completes the daunting task of gathering all these extant versions, they then need to critically compare and decide, on a case by case basis, which variant is most likely to be authentic. Omitted parts must be reinserted, forged additions must be undone, and wrong characters must be corrected. Since the *urtext* is permanently lost, there is no definitive standard against which the editor can judge a given work. Accordingly, the recreation of lost books requires more than patching texts together; the editor must also assume the role of an exegete, judiciously applying their own agency to make interpretive decisions and solve textual jigsaw puzzles. Even so, in the end this laborious effort still yields no more than an approximation of the original.

Editing the works of Ji Kang (223–263), a project that lasted nearly two decades, was precisely this kind of textual challenge for Lu Xun. Ji Kang was an eminent figure of the Wei-Jin period whose family also hailed from Kuaiji, which must have been one of the reasons Lu Xun was drawn to him. Shortly after arriving in Beijing, Lu Xun started to seek out Ji Kang's writings. On September 23, 1913, his diary records a fruitless search for the latter's collected works in Liulichang.<sup>29</sup> A few days later, on October 1, he was able to borrow the rare Ming manuscript copy by Wu Kuan from the Capital Library.<sup>30</sup> This moment marked the beginning of a long and arduous engagement: between 1913 and 1931, he produced several versions of Ji Kang's works plus numerous miscellaneous commentaries.<sup>31</sup>

Ji Kang was a celebrated philosopher, essayist, poet, music theorist, composer, and zither player. A member of the so-called Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove (*Zhulin qixian*), he was already a legend in his lifetime. Tall, handsome, elegant, and highly cultivated in both music and metaphysical thinking, he was widely admired. Yet he was also known to be eccentric and blunt. Ji openly despised Confucianism, which he maintained had been weaponized by the corrupt ruling class for political persecution. His views made him a thorn in the side of the powerful regent Sima Zhao, who found an excuse to have Ji executed at the age of forty.<sup>32</sup>

Ji Kang's writings survived him and have endured to the present day, but in the long process of transmission, a considerable portion of the corpus was lost. Lu Xun did exhaustive preparatory work in an attempt to remedy this situation, including drafting a list of all mentions of Ji Kang's writings in book catalogues throughout history.<sup>33</sup> He noted that the number of volumes shrank as time went by, and what remained suffered from all kinds of editorial, copying, and printing errors. This far-from-ideal state of preservation helped spur Lu Xun's endeavor to set the record straight. Thanks to his access to the Capital Library and Liulichang, he consulted all the major extant editions he could find and reconstructed a genealogy among them. In doing so, he was often able to determine which variants were errors made by later editor-copiers, and which ones were in the earlier versions and thus stood closer to the original. He laid out his findings in "An Investigation of *Ji Kang Ji*" (*Ji Kang ji kao*).<sup>34</sup> Altogether, Lu Xun produced four versions of the *Collected Works of Ji Kang*—in 1913, 1922, 1924, and 1931. He also searched extensively through anthologies, historical accounts, and other texts to gather eleven fragments not included in the complete collection: these he presented in "An Investigation of the *Yiwen* of *Ji Kang Ji*" (*Ji Kang ji yiwen kao*).<sup>35</sup>

For the *Collected Works of Ji Kang*, Lu Xun compared each sentence for textual variations down to the smallest detail, applying his own judgment to select and assemble reliable parts, recreating a critical edition as close to the original as possible. As he described it, "what is missing in one edition can be supplemented by another; combining the strengths of the two, one is able to create a better edition."<sup>36</sup> Since the true form of the *urtext* was nowhere to be found, Lu Xun's reconstruction was inevitably an approximation at best. Where solid evidence was wanting, he had to make a hermeneutic judgment call. And he could not always be absolutely certain about his decisions. Indeed, throughout the years, his repeated efforts yielded variations that sometimes contradicted each other. Lu Xun must have been frustrated to realize that his painstaking attempt to produce a definitive version sometimes ended up undoing itself.

Among his many edits of Ji Kang's writings, I have chosen one sentence to illustrate my point. Although it concerns an ostensibly minor textual variant, this sentence might be related to a crucial intellectual debate in early Chinese philosophical history; it also illustrates a dynamic network of power relations among the author, the copiers, and the editors. The sentence in question comes from "Treatise on Releasing the Fixation on Selfhood" (*Shisilun*), an abstract and dense philosophical essay. Its thesis is summed up in the first paragraph:

The so-called perfect persons are the ones whose hearts are not bound by [the worldly standard of] right and wrong, and yet their actions still do not go against the Way. Why so? For those whose temperaments are tranquil and whose minds are empty, their hearts do not reside in boastful, worldly standards; for those whose bodies are bright and whose hearts are unrestrained, their emotions are not chained by their desires. With no worldly standards in the heart, one is able to transcend the Religion of Names and follow nature; with emotions unchained by desires, one is able to comprehend the high and the low and discern the nature of things. When the nature of things is discerned, the Great Way will not be transgressed; when the word is transcended and the heart is given free rein, [the worldly standard of] right and wrong will not be a concern.<sup>37</sup>

My translation of Lu Xun's edited sentence is imperfect, partly because this short passage is filled with complex philosophical ideas, each of which contains multiple layers of meanings and does not have a direct equivalent in English. For example, *mingjiao*, roughly translated as "religion of names" or "teaching of names," lay at the center of a philosophical debate in the Wei-Jin period between Confucianism and the neo-Taoist "mystic learning" school known as *xuanxue*. According to the neo-Taoists, the Confucian emphasis on the correctness of naming or the overarching authority of *wen* (language) needed to be transcended, so that the natural Way could run its course unimpeded.<sup>38</sup> Other words in the same paragraph—including *xin* 心, *wu* 無, and *yu* 欲—are also subject to multiple interpretations and subtle changes over time, showing how densely Ji Kang has filled his essay with philosophical terms. Almost every character matters, and a mistake in a single one could result in the corruption of a sentence's or even an entire paragraph's meaning.

Now when it comes to the sentence in question, which appears a few paragraphs later, exactly such a problem arises. In Dai Mingyang's edition of *Ji Kang ji*, the sentence proceeds as follows:

於是乎同之所措者，乃非所措也；俗之所私者，乃非所私也。<sup>39</sup>

This statement, if it makes sense at all, is at best opaque and ambiguous. Assuming all the characters are accurate, it can be roughly translated as “Therefore, what the community cares about, is in fact not what should be cared about; what social convention considers necessary to be kept private, is in fact not what should be kept private.” Several historical editions contain multiple textual discrepancies here, and the statement’s apparently convoluted meaning led editors to come up with different alternatives. The discrepancies are focused on two characters, which—as luck would have it—comprise the key terms of the sentence: *tong* and *su*. In the above translation, *tong* is rendered as “the community” but can also mean “sameness” or “commonality;” and *su* is rendered as “social convention” but can also mean “custom” or “vernacular.” Designating the first character as X, and the second as Y, the sentence reads, “Therefore, what X cares about, is in fact not what should be cared about; what Y considers necessary to be kept private, is actually not what should be kept private.”<sup>40</sup> The structure of the two clauses indicates a parallel relationship between X and Y: typically, they would be of either opposite or similar meanings.

As mentioned above, Lu Xun made four manuscript edits of this essay as part of *Ji Kang ji*, in 1913, 1922, 1924, and 1931, respectively. The 1913 and 1924 versions were based on the same source edition, while the 1922 version used several other sources. The final 1931 version was mostly a fair copy of the 1924 version, but with reference to new sources and including further changes and additions. Among them, the 1924 and 1931 versions are the most complete and hence considered the most valuable.<sup>41</sup>

For the sentence in question, all the sources Lu Xun consulted used the character *tong* 同 (sameness, commonality, community) for X, and used either *su* 俗 (custom) or *yu* 欲 (desire, intention) for Y.<sup>42</sup> The opacity of the sentence and the visual similarities between *su* and *yu* must have pushed him to come up with an alternative conjecture not based on any sources. In the 1913 version, he suggested *qing* 情 rather than *tong* for X and added a note referencing the philosophical text *Xunzi* to speculate that it might also be the similar-looking character *yong* 用 (use, function, etc.). He reverted to *tong* in the 1922 version but again suggested *qing* in 1924 and 1931. For Y, he twice chose the character *su*, then reverted to *yu* for the last two versions. Lu Xun was apparently struggling back and forth here, changing his mind more than once. X and Y are mutually determinative: if Y was “desire/intention,” then X should be “emotion;” if Y meant “custom,” then X should refer to “community/commonality.” We can summarize the possibilities as two potential pairs:

X=emotion; Y=desire/intention,

or

X=commonality/society; Y=custom,

Putting them back into the sentence, we have the following:

Therefore, what [one's] emotion is concerned about, is in fact not what it should be concerned about; what the desire considers necessary to be kept private, is actually not what should be kept private.

於是乎情之所措者，乃非所措也；欲之所私者，乃非所私也。

or

Therefore, what the community is concerned about, is in fact not what should be concerned about; what is customarily considered necessary to be kept private, is actually not what should be kept private.

於是乎同之所措者，乃非所措也；俗之所私者，乃非所私也。

Rather than an insignificant textual discrepancy, Lu Xun's editorial indecisiveness pointed to a key concern of the essay—the relationship between selfhood, emotions, desires, intentions, and social customs. More broadly, this concern relates to the thorny issues of ontology, subjectivity, and objectivity in ancient philosophical debates. Here Lu Xun was likely wrestling with the meaning of the term *qing*, a complex concept crucial to early Chinese thought, which, incidentally, also occupied a prominent role in the opening paragraph of *Shisilun* and appeared throughout the text over two dozen times. Commonly translated as “emotion” in modern use, *qing* can also mean the exact opposite, namely “fact” or “circumstance,” as attested by such modern terms as *shiqing* or *qingkuang*. The dual meanings of *qing* suggest a lack of strict division between the objective and subjective sides of a fact; when a fact is being constructed in the thinking mind, it inevitably has a subjective dimension as well. The closest equivalent to this idea is probably the opening statement in Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*: “Die Welt ist die Gesamtheit der Tatsachen, nicht der Dinge” (The world is the totality of facts, not of things), with “Tatsachen” (facts) being a compound of the human “Tat” (deed, action) and the objective “Sache” (object, matter).<sup>43</sup> The fact that the introduction of Buddhism into China may have changed *qing*'s meaning<sup>44</sup>—Lu Xun was an avid reader of Buddhist scripture—merits separate attention. The term's relevance to modern Chinese culture also forms the basis of recent studies of lyricism.<sup>45</sup> Therefore, Ji Kang's essay may or may not contribute to our understanding of this important philosophical term's

meaning in the third century, and more generally to comparative philosophical dialogues. And yet all depends on this obscure and seemingly minor textual discrepancy. To solve this problem requires careful philological and hermeneutic considerations, but barring a well-preserved early edition, it was unlikely that Lu Xun—or really anyone—would ever come up with a definitive answer.

While scholars can certainly debate which of the four versions is more comprehensive or complete, it would be unfair to say that the last version, or in fact any version, was definitive enough to override the others. Lu Xun's endeavor to bring forth a reliable version of this sentence serves as just one small case in point, reminding us of the two goals that bookend a collector-editor's task: on the one hand, the editor wants to go back to the original, the very beginning, a goal that calls for nothing less than the reestablishment of the *urtext*; on the other, they also need to determine the definitive, final version currently available, or the moment when the envelope containing the "last will" is sealed, so to speak, thus signaling the permanent closure of a process. In the case of Ji Kang's texts, the multiplicity of their copies and the inherent indeterminacy of much of their contents meant that perfection in editing remained impossible: the editorial task would be by definition inconclusive. This ambiguity is inherent, I would argue, to the broader editor-collector process well beyond Ji Kang's works. As long as the editor-collector continues to live, think, and work, any editing is always temporary and subject to potential revision. In Lu Xun's case, it seems fair to say that had he lived longer, his editing could and most likely would have gone on indefinitely.

Lu Xun's death in 1936 brought final closure to his work. Shortly afterward, his 1931 version became widely regarded as definitive thanks to its inclusion in the popular *Complete Works of Lu Xun* of 1938.<sup>46</sup> To make things more confusing, however, the 1924 version was printed by another publisher in subsequent years and problematically labeled the "corrected edition" (*jiaozheng ben*).<sup>47</sup> An apt description of this situation might borrow the phrase "the version of the last hand" (*Ausgabe letzter Hand*), coined by Goethe to describe his desperate attempt to conclude a seemingly endless editorial process of his own works.<sup>48</sup> By creating this phrase, Goethe reminded us that even the most distinguished creative genius often suffered from artistic indecisiveness—we need only to think of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, W. H. Auden, Henry James, and the composer Anton Bruckner, to name just a few examples. Although Lu Xun was not the author of these texts, his struggle here placed him in the same dilemma: since the *urtext* was nonexistent, he was given extra authorial power and thus entered into a negotiation not only with the long line of previous editors and commentators but also, or especially, with Ji Kang himself.

The most interesting aspect of Goethe's phrase is the presence of the hand: Despite its figurative use, it literally conjoins the text with the mortal body of the author. In Lu Xun's case, just as it was with Goethe, editorial closure came about not from any intrinsic textual logic—the realization that one version was *rhetorically* or *aesthetically better* than the other—but rather from an external event, namely the death of the author/editor. Each new version produced by Lu Xun may have been intended to override the previous one, just as a new will overrides the earlier one, and modifications to the text can be as varied and ongoing as those made to a will. But unlike the last will, which carries ultimate legal authority, from the perspective of the text itself the last editorial version does not automatically supersede earlier ones. “The version of the last hand” is therefore merely a contingent makeshift; it is final because it *happens* to be the last one. Similarly, after several rounds of editing, neither Lu Xun nor we can be certain about which version, if any, is the right one.

My readers will likely wonder why they need to know about this obscure and highly technical editorial detail in a not-so-famous essay by Ji Kang. The answer is that this is one of many instances of textual indeterminacy behind a vast number of the ancient classics available today. Worse still, it is difficult to determine whether such a small detail is inconsequential or otherwise in our understanding of the author's overall thesis. If even the writings of such a canonical and widely read author are so unreliable, how much else can we trust? With firsthand knowledge of the unreliable condition of ancient texts, Lu Xun must have come to the uncomfortable realization that so-called historical truth, insofar as it appears in the writings of the ancients, was elusive and fickle. What had been taken as righteous, sacred, and immutable might not have much legitimacy after all; it might not even rest on a foundation of historical facts. As one of his most famous characters, the anonymous protagonist in “Diary of a Madman,” once asked, “Is it right because it has always been like that?”<sup>49</sup>

### Lu Xun Transcribes Steles

As he collected and edited old texts, Lu Xun simultaneously indulged in another antiquarian obsession: he described himself as doing not much else other than simply “transcribing ancient steles” (*chao gubei*). Two contexts prove helpful for understanding his state of mind here, one involving a long-standing Chinese antiquarian practice and the other the immediate political climate of the 1910s.

As I have mentioned elsewhere in this book, Chinese antiquarianism was almost synonymous with *jinshixue*, the study of metals and stones, owing

to its overarching focus on the written word. In their exhaustive search for reliable records, scholars were not satisfied with books alone but expanded their study to include inscriptions on stones and bronze vessels. Accordingly, the study of ancient material culture became primarily concerned with these inscriptional elements.

In the culture of collecting, one might be accustomed to thinking that objects are always pursued to serve certain purposes. As one of the two pillars of *jinshixue*, steles have long been prized for their historical research value and for their calligraphic beauty. The stone's durability makes it an indispensable medium for preserving memories of the past. The unique writing styles generated by the carving knife's powerful engagement with the hard surface earned many calligraphers' admirations, inspiring them to simulate the angular quality with brushes. As a result, Qing evidential scholarship emphasized extensive collecting and study of inscriptions, especially on stones, and the knowledge gained in this process prompted calligraphic theorists to reflect on the stylistic importance of stele inscriptions. While I will take up these subjects in more detail in the next chapter, at the moment I want to focus our attention on something else: a certain elusive element in steles—unrelated to any apparent historical, aesthetic, or practical use—that had been a constant motivator for generations of eager collectors.

An example of this fascination can be found in the preeminent Song-dynasty antiquarian collector Ouyang Xiu, whose monumental *Collected Records of the Past* (*Jigulu*) laid the groundwork for inscription studies. Ronald Egan notes a peculiarity of this work: Ouyang repeatedly sounds “positively defensive about the utility of his project.”<sup>50</sup> Here I quote an example that Egan singles out. In the preface, Ouyang described an encounter with a barely legible ancient stele that recorded the life and career of an insignificant bureaucrat.

To the right is a nameless stele from the Han. The inscription has been mostly worn away, so that even the name of the person it concerns is no longer visible. What can be seen are the following phrases: “he placed first in the prefectural examination and proceeded to the governing commandery”; “during the mourning period [for his parents] he expressed great grief and was overcome by his distress”; “he was appointed to the staff of the metropolitan commandant and given the title of secretarial censor”; “he displayed the majestic bearing of steadfast resoluteness and showed the martial valor of a roaring tiger”; and “at age sixty-three, on the *geng-shen* day of the intercalary month in the fourth year of the Guanghe period [181 CE], he fell ill and died.” There are quite a few additional isolated characters that are still fully formed, but they cannot be read together to make sense.<sup>51</sup>

Egan rightly observes the absence of utility in such an inscription. Admittedly, nothing important could be gleaned from such a disjointed and obscure record that lacked so much context. Ouyang himself conceded as much, pointing out the literati's somewhat unexplainable attachment to stele inscriptions: "The things that scholars who are fond of the past collect and preserve do not necessarily serve any use in the world today. It is just that when they come across such fragments that are buried or strewn about the countryside, they view them with special affection and pity. Such is the obsession of fondness for the past!"<sup>52</sup>

I would argue, however, that precisely in this functional void we find the persisting charm and attraction of fragmentary stele inscriptions. Their spell is twofold: on one level, the missing characters ignite imagination and are paradoxically more efficient than a pristine inscription in transporting the reader to the past. This imaginative quality is connected to a second level in which the act of *reading* becomes conflated with that of *looking*: the blurry surface turns the text, together with the blemishes on the stele, into a piece of visual art created by the combined forces of human, nature, and time. When trying hard to discern, identify, decipher, and imagine the often unreadable contents of the inscriptions, the observer's eyes are being trained to look more attentively. In the process, *wen* as an effective semiotic symbol is transformed into a raw configuration of marks; information is distorted, bracketed, and altered by the visual "noise" of timeworn blemishes. The reader-viewer is thus reminded that *wen* (the textual) remains, as we saw in chapter 1's discussion of the oracle bones, closely linked to its counterpart, *wu* (the material). To put it differently, the steles' concrete thingness, impenetrability, illegibility, and endurance are key elements that made up the stele's overall effect as a gestaltic work of art. When rubbings were made from such inscriptions, the dramatic contrast between black and white only heightened these characteristics. In this way, steles and rubbings represent the most important task of the monument: to fight oblivion by mitigating the effects of time. Across the centuries, collectors of steles and rubbings found themselves being transported back in time or, at least, *outside* of their own time.<sup>53</sup>

The second background context to Lu Xun's antiquarian obsession is the political atmosphere of the 1910s, which illustrates how scholarship often serves as a refraction of its immediate social background. The Qing intellectual tradition, for example, was characterized by a shift from the subjective and abstract speculations of the preceding Ming era to a more objective, evidence-based *kaozheng*. A common explanation for this shift states that the newly established Qing regime, not yet assured of its legitimacy, imposed severe ideological pressure on scholars, a move that effectively narrowed the

available space for free thinking. In the influential words of Liang Qichao, “whenever rulers like to interfere with people’s thoughts, scholars’ energy has to be channeled into annotating the classics.”<sup>54</sup>

Lu Xun found himself in an oppressive atmosphere not unlike that of the early Qing dynasty. Beneath his calm and routine life as a government bureaucrat, he harbored deep-seated frustrations. Clues to his mental state can be found in the preface to his short-story collection *Nahan* (*Outcry*, alternatively translated “Call to Arms”), which documents the major phases of his intellectual development from childhood up to 1922, four years before he left Beijing. It starts with an account of the trauma he endured because of his father’s illness and death, which taught him that Chinese medical doctors were “either unwitting or deliberate charlatans.”<sup>55</sup> During the same period, he also learned that Japan’s impressive modernization “had originated, to a great extent, with the introduction of Western medical science.”<sup>56</sup> He decided to study Western medicine in Japan, but shortly after making this decision he experienced the shocking “slideshow incident,” a now-legendary moment of awakening in modern Chinese literary history. At the end of a lecture, some slides of images from recent news were shown to the class. One of them depicted a Chinese man being bound and about to be executed by the Japanese army; he was apparently a spy for the Russians during the 1904–5 Russo-Japanese War. What shocked Lu Xun was not the execution itself, but the many Chinese onlookers at the scene: “They were all strong fellows but appeared completely apathetic” and “had come to enjoy the spectacle.”<sup>57</sup>

This scene deeply wounded Lu Xun, and he left his medical study before the term was over. “After this film I felt that medical science was not so important after all,” he wrote. “The people of a weak and backward country, however strong and healthy they may be, can only serve to be made examples of, or to witness such futile spectacles; and it doesn’t really matter how many of them die of illness. The most important thing, therefore, was to change their spirit, and since at that time I felt that literature was the best means to this end, I determined to promote a literary movement.”<sup>58</sup> His youthful idealism about literature’s power to enlighten the masses did not lead to much success. Lu Xun’s first literary project was actually a failure: the journal *New Life* (*Xinsheng*) he founded with friends soon folded due to a lack of funding, leaving him feeling disappointed, lonely, and purposeless. Contemporary cultural and political debates also wore him out: “And this feeling of loneliness grew day by day, coiling about my soul like a huge poisonous snake. . . . However, my loneliness had to be dispelled, for it was causing me agony. So I used various means to dull my senses, both by conforming to the spirit of the time and turning to the past.”<sup>59</sup>

One of those “various means to dull my senses” was collecting and transcribing rubbings of ancient inscriptions. “For some years,” he recalled, “I stayed in this room [in the Shaoxing Hostel in Beijing], transcribing ancient inscriptions. I had few visitors, there were no political problems or issues in those inscriptions, and my only desire was that my life should slip quietly away like this.”<sup>60</sup> One visitor in those summer nights was Jin Xinyi, whose real name was Qian Xuantong. Lu Xun recorded a brief conversation between the two men:

“What’s the use of copying these?” he demanded inquisitively one night, after looking through the inscriptions I had copied.

“No use at all.”

“Then why copy them?”

“For no particular reason.”

“I think you might write something. . . .”<sup>61</sup>

The rest is history: Lu Xun agreed to the request and wrote “Diary of a Madman,” today credited as the beginning of modern vernacular Chinese fiction.

Lu Xun’s seemingly casual and numb-sounding answer, “For no particular reason” (*mei shenme yisi*), was possibly a pun; it could also mean “It’s no fun.” Such blunt indifference is rather baffling, given how obsessively he devoted himself to this work. Despite the almost self-mocking tone, he obviously derived pleasure from this pastime that helped free him from embroilment in “political problems or issues.”

Lu Xun’s younger brother Zhou Zuoren, who observed and sometimes participated in these activities, supplied an explanation for his eccentric pastime. At that time, the president Yuan Shikai was plotting to restore monarchy and install himself as emperor. Fearing opposition, he placed government officials in Beijing under close surveillance. As a result, many indulged themselves in decadent but harmless activities such as gambling and visiting prostitutes to show their political apathy. Lu Xun was either not interested in or not able to afford such activities, so he would, as Zhou put it, pretend to “play with antiques” (*wanwan gudong*). Since ancient steles were bulky and expensive, he resorted to collecting and transcribing rubbings (see fig. 2.1): “A Hand-dynasty stele could take him half a month to transcribe. This was a rather cost-effective activity. Unlike manuscripts, these steles were large in scale, and had many characters. What’s more, Han steles had lots of blemishes, so when a character on the rubbing was rather obscure, one had to position oneself

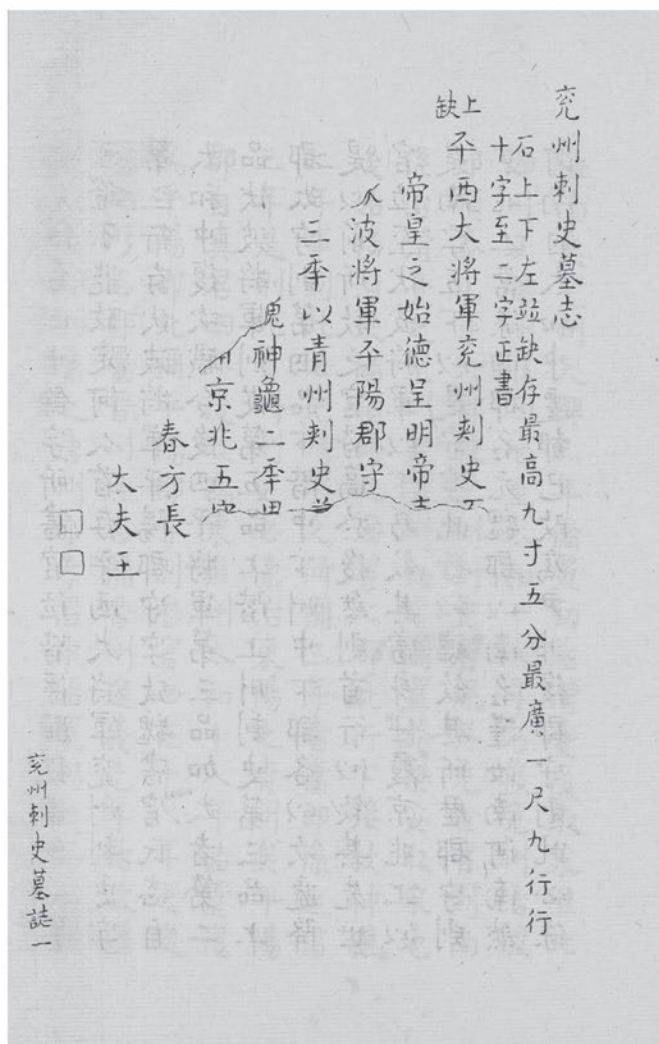


FIGURE 2.1. Facsimile of Lu Xun's transcription of a Northern Wei-dynasty epitaph. In Lu Xun, *Lu Xun jijiao shike shougao* 鲁迅辑校石刻手稿, case 3, volume 1 (Shanghai shuhua chubanshe, 1986), 271.

from afar, near, left, and right to recognize roughly what it was. As a result, there was no better way of killing time, though this did require lots of care.”<sup>62</sup>

Zhou Zuoren's account suggests that interest in antiques and political ambition were at odds with each other; hence a person indulging in impractical antiquarian hobbies would not be considered a political threat. Here Zhou was subscribing to the concept of *wanwu sangzhi*, or “taking wanton pleasure in things deprives one of a striving will.” According to this concept,

trivial pastimes are not just distracting but have a corrupting effect on a person's character, preventing him or her from pursuing endeavors that require strong-willed perseverance and commitment.

The term *wanwan gudong* or “playing with antiques” also serves as a reminder that the concept of playing is embedded in the Chinese word for “collectible antique” or *guwan*, a compound of “antique” and “plaything,” as if one cannot collect antiques without a sense of playfulness, triviality, and purposelessness. As such, a hobby takes the form of an excessive focus on an impractical and inessential matter, so long as it stands in opposition to a value system that places great importance on usefulness and worldly achievements. Hobbies were a form of escapism often adopted by historical figures to avoid attention and conceal their ambitions.<sup>63</sup> And with their penchant for single-minded repetition and duplication, the collector stands out as a typical escapist, making them excessive and indulgent in the eyes of practical-minded people—strange indeed, but safe and politically irrelevant. Therefore, just as his bland understatement suggests, Lu Xun's collecting activities had their intended effect of painting him as a harmless eccentric who refused to politicize either the past or the present.

However, it is necessary to return to a basic question: when Lu Xun copied those obscure and mostly not very important rubbings, what was he really doing? He was surely not channeling his own thinking or engaging in calligraphical exercise as a form of aesthetic expression. Nor was he treating this work as a practical means of communication. It is true that his efforts provided some source materials for his editorial projects, but if his own words are to be trusted, this hobby was merely a byproduct of his apathetic and disillusioned life—as Zhou Zuoren said, his brother was just killing time. But I would argue for a deeper layer of meaning. For Lu Xun, manual transcribing was not an entirely neutral action, but conveyed certain critical messages, and it did so during a period generally perceived as Lu Xun's “silent phase.”<sup>64</sup>

While there are different ways to own an object, probably the most intimate and exclusive one is to manually recreate it so that it becomes an extension of the collector's own self. This appeared to be the case with Lu Xun: Instead of purchasing a stele, he opted to forge a deeper identification with the text through the labor of his own hand. Handwriting is an interaction between the mind and the hand, as the mind thinks through language, which materializes as letters or characters on paper. Nevertheless, Lu Xun's professed indifference suggests a disruption of this process. Here it is helpful to reference Martin Heidegger, who probed the relationship between language and the hand as essentially a cultural construct. For Heidegger, the hand is what distinguishes humans from animals because “only a being who

can speak, that is, think, can have hands and can be handy in achieving works of handicraft,” and “only when man speaks does he think—not the other way around, as metaphysics still believes.”<sup>65</sup> In other words, the hand is no longer merely a body part but essentially a social-cultural product, subordinate to and defined by its relationship to thinking and speech. Here the hierarchy is apparent: speech occupies the top position. According to Heidegger, only human beings have the hand because it allows speech to manifest itself. To put it another way: this part of the body deserves to be called a hand only insofar as it is capable of writing as dictated by thought-speech.

If we accept Heidegger’s analysis, then with the hand taking center stage while thought-speech remained conspicuously absent, Lu Xun’s transcription of steles defied the law of meaningful communication. In his tactile engagement with the materiality of writing as a pastime to “anesthetize” himself, thinking and hence speech were vacated from the script and shunted into an irrelevant position. The mindless act of transcribing characters allowed Lu Xun to free the hand from the logocentric hierarchy and, more importantly, to *circumvent* the effective functioning of the script as a communicative tool.

Here another question immediately follows. Why did he *want* to circumvent the effective functioning of the script? A clue is hidden in that enigmatic conversation between Lu Xun and Qian Xuanton about transcribing steles. It should be noted that Qian was not just a random acquaintance stopping by for a casual chat. He was a leading figure in the New Culture Movement; he and Lu Xun both studied under the *Shuowen* authority and revolutionary thinker Zhang Taiyan in Japan. An accomplished philologist in his own right, with a specialization in historical phonology, Qian was a radical doubter of antiquity; he even stylized himself with the courtesy name *Yigu* (doubting antiquity). Most importantly, he was a fierce advocate for the total abolition of the Chinese script, blaming it for all the superstition, backwardness, deception, and ignorance that had long plagued Chinese people. He argued that “to abolish Confucian teachings, it is necessary to first abolish the Chinese script; to rid common people of infantile, barbaric, and stubborn thoughts, it is especially necessary to first abolish the Chinese script.”<sup>66</sup> Lu Xun echoed this sentiment, similarly linking the nation’s survival to the elimination of its writing system. The brief exchange between these two men thus resonates with an issue central to the present study’s larger argument: the ambivalent role of *wen* as both an enduring element of cultural continuity and a presumably deficient medium that perverts historical truth. Moreover, their exchange also provides a footnote to the debate about script reform that ran through much of the twentieth century.

While many vocal critics, including Lu Xun himself, offered practical as well as impractical proposals regarding script reform,<sup>67</sup> it has not been sufficiently understood that Lu Xun's own position on this issue likely had its inception in *chao gubei*, or the transcription of ancient steles in the early phase of his career. By turning Chinese characters into a non-signifying void, he staged a performative act to dismantle the meaning-making function of a writing system that he vehemently condemned as "a sharp weapon for stultifying the masses."<sup>68</sup> Even after he ended his quiet antiquarian life and threw himself into the turbulent New Culture Movement, those blurry and uncanny inscriptions continued to haunt his fictional characters. If we bear Lu Xun's *chao gubei* activity in mind, we begin to notice imagery in some of his most familiar masterpieces that has a deeper layer of meaning.

An example can be found in the story "Kong Yiji," published in 1919, about a pathetic scholar who never manages to gain success in the imperial examination. The tale satirizes a traditional educational system that, instead of producing full-grown citizens, dehumanized them. For Lu Xun, China's imperial examination was one of the culprits of the country's backwardness because it selected government officials according to how well they mastered empty Confucian teachings that had little practical use. Thus the scholar Kong Yiji, well-versed in the classics, remained a useless residue of the old society. A conversation between Kong Yiji and the narrator, a boy working at a tavern, pokes fun at the former's superfluous knowledge of how to write a character in four different ways:

Once he [Kong Yiji] asked me:

"Have you had any schooling?"

When I nodded, he said, "Well then, I'll test you. How do you write the character *hui* as in *huixiang* [aniseed] peas?"

I thought, "I'm not going to be tested by a beggar!" So I turned away and ignored him. After waiting for some time, he said very earnestly:

"You can't write it? I'll show you how. Mind you remember! You ought to remember such characters, because later when you have a shop of your own, you'll need them to make up your accounts."

It seemed to me I was still very far from owning a shop; besides, our employer never entered *huixiang* peas in the account book. Amused yet exasperated, I answered listlessly: "Who wants you as a teacher? Isn't it the character *hui* with the grass radical?"

Kong Yiji was delighted, and tapped two long fingernails on the counter. "Right, right!" he said, nodding. "Only there are four different ways of writing *hui*. Do you know them?"

My patience exhausted, I scowled and made off. Kong Yiji had dipped his finger in wine in order to trace the characters on the counter; but when he saw how indifferent I was, he sighed and looked most disappointed.<sup>69</sup>

Kong Yiji was talking about the so-called *yitizi* or variant characters, often as a result of complex developments in the history of writing. The skill of writing the same character in its multiple forms, which Kong Yiji was keen to show off, now appears amusingly meaningless. Besides offering Lu Xun's trademark satire of traditional culture, this episode also foregrounds the uncanny archaism of *wen*. In an effective system of signification, the manifestation of meaning is predicated on a symbol's self-effacement, which deflects our attention away from its own existence. However, when a character such as *hui*, apart from denoting a kind of herb, also has four—or possibly more—variations or allographs in writing, it ceases to be an effective, meaningful symbol. This is the opposite of what Andrea Bachner calls the "pictographic myth," in which the "pictorial quality [is] supposedly mimetic of reality," that led Ernest Fenollosa to envision the Chinese script as "a poetic language that bridges the gap between words and things."<sup>70</sup> In this case, *hui* is neither the word it is supposed to be, nor the spice it is supposed to refer to: it is nothing more and less than *itself*. Kong Yiji's superfluous skill of writing Chinese characters seems to symbolize the residues of traditional culture: although they survived the old political system, they were now without a function or purpose. The revolution, promising to usher in a new era, indeed succeeded in overthrowing monarchy, but as Lu Xun realized, its promise did not thoroughly materialize in the cultural sphere, and old ways of thinking still placed people in shackles.<sup>71</sup>

A more powerful example of the lasting effect Lu Xun's stele work exercised on his literary creations can be found in "Diary of a Madman" (*Kuangren riji*), which directs our attention to the unreliability of the Chinese script as a medium for recording history. This short story, which earned Lu Xun instant fame, assumes the form of a series of diaries written by a presumably insane man who lives in constant fear of persecution and is especially afraid of falling victim to cannibalism. He keeps thinking that his fellow villagers, even his own brother, are plotting to eat him up.

Since its publication, "Diary of a Madman" has been widely interpreted as an allegory of the inhuman cruelty and hypocrisy of traditional Confucian society. This reading is based on the assumption that cannibalism is a metaphor; the opposite scenario, in which the protagonist is perceiving credible threats of

cannibalism, would mean that this is a literal horror story about human-eating villagers. One detail in particular provides clear evidence of its allegorical nature: “Everything requires careful consideration if one is to understand it. In ancient times, as I recollect, people often ate human beings, but to be sure I am rather hazy about it. I tried to look this up, but my history has no chronology, and scrawled all over each page are the words ‘Virtue and Morality.’ Since I could not sleep anyway, I read intently for half the night, until I began to see words between the lines, the whole book being filled with the two words—‘Eat people!’”<sup>72</sup>

The visual metamorphosis of “Virtue and Morality” (*renyi daode*), a coded reference to Confucian teachings, into “Eat people,” exposes the allegorical structure underlying the story: It is not the villagers, but rather Confucianism, that is cannibalistic. Thanks to “Diary of a Madman,” this impression has become so deeply ingrained in popular perception that the term “Confucian teachings” is now customarily accompanied by the adjective “cannibalistic” (*chiren de lijiao*). As Satoru Hashimoto notes, this episode exposes the arbitrariness both in “the existing order of meaning and value” and in “signification.”<sup>73</sup> Most relevant for the current discussion, however, is the fact that this equation is achieved through the act of (mis)reading, or rather, through intently and laboriously *looking at* rather than reading the written words, which suddenly lose all their legibility. This moment in the story reminds us of Zhou Zuoren’s description of Lu Xun’s transcription of ancient steles: “Han-dynasty steles had lots of blemishes, so when a character on the rubbing was rather obscure, one had to position oneself from afar, near, left and right to recognize roughly what it was.”<sup>74</sup> The striking resemblance between the madman staring at these pages and Lu Xun obsessively attempting to decipher obscure inscriptions cannot be overstated. In both cases, repeated looking defamiliarizes the characters into eerie and outlandish patterns, beneath which traces of suppressed truth finally start to creep up (see fig. 2.2).

Script illegibility also relates to the story’s main theme: madness. Among other reasons, the man is thought to be mad because he is not able to *read* properly, insofar as rationality is defined by the ability to think, which is, in turn, determined by the proper functioning of the linguistic faculty. To be able to read “properly” means to treat the script as a fully functional semiotic system; the reader’s attention needs to pass through the characters’ visual constructions so as to arrive at the meaning they point to. But the obscurity of the scrawled characters on the madman’s history book, just like those mottled rubbings Lu Xun transcribed, blocks the smooth transition across these planes. As the reader laboriously gazes at the obscure signs on blemished surfaces, these signs cease to be efficient references to meaning and instead assume an opacity that traps the reader’s sight on their surface. In this way, a



FIGURE 2.2. Rubbing of a Northern Zhou-dynasty brick inscription from Lu Xun's collection. In Zhu Tianshu 朱天曙 et al., eds., *Zhongguo shufa quanji* 中國書法全集 (Rongbaozhai chubanshe, 2024), 15:176.

stable and coherent system of reference between signs and meanings starts to dissolve, and the characters are reduced to physical patterns. In other words, they dissolve into their material self.

It is unlikely that Lu Xun's hands-on experience as a collector and transcriber of ancient steles was not at the back of his mind when he created this harrowing allegory of the deceitful and oppressive nature of historical

records. History is often if not always mediated through writing—indeed, historians used to be called “scribes.” If traditional morality is a form of cannibalism, as the madman discovers, he arrives at this conclusion through none other than the act of looking, which stops at the surface of written history with all its blemishes and imperfections. It is fair to say, then, that Lu Xun’s contribution to the New Culture Movement’s demolition of established historical narratives had its origin in his immersion in ancient inscriptions.

A third example from Lu Xun’s literary works shows that he went a step further in dissolving the script as a functional system of symbols. This time, he did so through vocal-aural means. The example is the apocalyptic “Epitaph” (*Mujiwen*) from his prose poem collection *Wild Grass* (*Yecao*). In his later years, Lu Xun grew increasingly preoccupied with macabre and ghostly themes, but the seed for this interest might have been planted earlier, when he made hundreds of manuscript copies of epitaphs. Among his works in textual scholarship, those related to epitaphs from the Six Dynasties (222–589) include the unfinished *Catalogue of Six Dynasties Epitaphs* (*Liuchao muzhi mulu*) and miscellaneous studies such as “An investigation of □ Gong’s Epitaph” (□Gong muzhi kao), “An investigation of Xu Fazhi’s Epitaph” (*Xu Fazhi muzhi kao*), and “Postscript to Lü Chao’s Epitaph” (*Lü Chao muzhiming ba*).<sup>75</sup> Owing to the fragmentary and blemished state of the stones and their rubbings, as well as an absence of context, most of these epitaphs were barely intelligible, and Lu Xun’s brief editorial commentaries contained no more than extremely cautious guesswork about the missing characters.

Before we proceed, a quick clarification of terminologies might be helpful. Although often translated as “epitaph,” *muzhi* should be more properly rendered as “tomb record.” Like most of its kind during the Six Dynasties, a *muzhi* was a brief biography of the deceased, with a terse verse called *ming* attached to the end. Unlike *ming*, a *muzhi* was written for documentary rather than poetic purposes. The two were customarily grouped together as *muzhiming*, a text inscribed on a stone tablet buried in front of the tomb—and not to be confused with the epitaph carved on a headstone. A Chinese *muzhiming* typically did not have the creative rhetorical twists often found in Western epitaphs.

As I have quoted above, Heidegger argued that “only when man speaks does he think—not the other way around.”<sup>76</sup> According to this logic, for there to be thought, there must be speech; and for there to be speech, there must be first of all a body and a voice. Since too many voices had been suppressed by the deceitfully generalizing script that falsified written history, in this example, Lu Xun aimed to restore the intimate, corporeal origin of writing, namely the human voice. Within the cold and abstract textual symbols, the pulsating vocal cord is waiting to be heard.

In a sense, writing was created to mitigate the ephemerality of the voice. As Sigmund Freud said, "Writing was in its origin the voice of an absent person."<sup>77</sup> Quoting Jacques Lacan's reversed interpretation of the classical proverb "*Verba volant, scripta manent*" ("spoken words fly away, written ones remain"), Mladen Dolar argues that "it is only the voice which remains there, on the spot where . . . it is born and where it dies at the same moment . . . while the letters fly around and, by flying, form the whirlwind of history."<sup>78</sup> Writing inherently contains a lapse in time, a deferral that marks the absence of the speaker. As Jesper Svenbro puts it, "What is written is present, the writer is absent. . . . At the moment of reading, the reader finds himself before a written word that is present in the absence of the writer. Just as he foresees his own absence, the writer foresees the presence of his writing before the reader."<sup>79</sup>

No absence is more permanent and irreversible than death, which is why the most classic genre in representing the lost voice is the epitaph. And what makes an autobiographical epitaph even more peculiar is the fact that the speaker, who gives the speech while still alive, expects himself to be dead and buried under the tombstone by the time the words are read. Alternatively, the words are written by the living, who impersonate the dead and imagine them to be alive. Either way, the epitaph is effectively a speech from across the threshold. As Svenbro notes,

the writer, who is present only at the action of producing the written statement and soon disappears for good, has foreseen the vocalization of his writing. Absent as he is, he depends on the voice that the reader will lend him. By writing, he deferred the production of his speech in sound. . . . The most [writing] can do is provoke a reading, prompt its own rendering in sound, get the reader's voice going—the voice that . . . is part of the text. For the text to achieve complete fulfillment, the reader must lend his voice to the writing (or, in the last analysis, to the writer).<sup>80</sup>

By borrowing the reader's voice, the epitaph makes itself the dictator of speech, whereas the reader is relegated into a voice and nothing else, a vocal instrument of the dead. The epitaph is therefore a speech act that reaches beyond the flat surface of the stele, exercising a real power that halts passersby, reminds them, and even reprimands them, using their very own voices.

The solicitation of the human voice and the bidirectional act of reading allows this genre to acquire a special poetic dimension. A series of essays on epitaphs by William Wordsworth and a pair of paintings by Nicolas Poussin under the same title, "*Et in Arcadia Ego*," are notable cases in point that reflect on the epitaph's unique rhetorical possibilities. Emphasizing the importance of the epitaph's *gestalt*, Wordsworth remarked,

We might ruminate upon the beauty which the monuments, thus placed, must have borrowed from the surrounding images of nature—from the trees, the wild flowers, from a stream running perhaps within sight or hearing, from the beaten road stretching its weary length hard by. Many tender similitudes must these objects have presented to the mind of the traveller leaning upon one of the tombs, or reposing in the coolness of its shade, whether he had halted from weariness or in compliance with the invitation, “Pause, Traveller!” so often found upon the monuments. And to its epitaph also must have been supplied strong appeals to visible appearances or immediate impressions, lively and affecting analogies of life as a journey. . . . These, and similar suggestions, must have given, formerly, to the language of the senseless stone a voice enforced and endeared by the benignity of that Nature with which it was in unison.<sup>81</sup>

All these aspects of the tranquil and idyllic environment serve the same purpose, namely to give voice to the epitaph inscribed on the tombstone. In this way, the text is not idly lying by the roadside, passively waiting to be read: It transforms itself into a speech act that halts the passersby and commands their attention.

Poussin’s paintings, on the other hand, visualize two interpretations of the Latin motto *Et in Arcadia Ego* to present two expressive possibilities of epitaphs. The dramatic and deliberately unbalanced baroque painting of 1627 interprets the epitaph as a horrifying utterance by Death itself, who halts passersby and reminds them that “even in Arcady I, Death, hold sway.”<sup>82</sup> The more iconic 1637–38 painting with a tranquil and classical style, now on display in the Louvre, depicts the epitaph as consoling words spoken by the deceased, buried under the tombstone: “I, too, lived in Arcady where you now live; I, too, enjoyed the pleasures which you now enjoy.”<sup>83</sup>

In their own way, each of these cases demonstrates the epitaph’s tendency to transcend the purely textual dimension to become an embodied voice that is nevertheless a borrowed one. This is why the epitaph is associated with the rhetorical device “prosopopoeia,” in which one person speaks using the identity of another. These theoretical analyses of the epitaphic genre provide a necessary framework for the proper appreciation of Lu Xun’s “Epitaph” that, I argue, completely transcends the biographical and documentary framework of traditional Chinese *muzhiming*:

I dreamed of myself facing a tombstone, reading its inscriptions. That tombstone seemed made of sandstone, with lots of blemishes and mosses growing on it. Only a few words remained—

... Catching a cold during fervent singing;

Seeing abyss in the sky.

Seeing nothingness in all eyes;

Redeemed in hopelessness.

... There is a wandering spirit, which transforms itself into a long snake; there are poisonous teeth in its mouth. It doesn't use them to bite others, but bites itself, until it dies.

... Go away! ...

I turned to the back, and saw the lonely grave; there wasn't any grass or tree on it; it was crumbling. Right away I saw the corpse through the big crack; its chest and stomach all broken, without heart or liver. But its face showed neither sadness nor joy, only smoke-like haziness.

In suspicion and horror, before I could turn back, I already spotted the fragmented words on the back of the tombstone—

... Picking one's own heart to eat, hoping to know one's own taste. So intense is the pain, how can one's own taste be known?

... With the pain reducing, eating it slowly. But the heart is already old, how can one's own taste be known?

... Answer me. Otherwise, go away! ...

As I was about to leave, the corpse already sat up in the grave, and with its lips unmoved, uttered this—

"When I become dust, you will see me smile!"

I rushed away, and didn't dare to look back, fearing it would follow.

June 17, 1925<sup>84</sup>

This prose poem is full of allusions. For example, "all eyes" (*yiqieyan*) is a phrase taken from Buddhist scriptures, while "seeing nothingness in all eyes" contains such complex references to Buddhist philosophy that it merits a separate study. Self-cannibalism is also a familiar theme, while the image of the snake reminds us of a line from the already quoted preface to *Outcry*: "this feeling of loneliness grew day by day, coiling about my soul like a huge poisonous snake."<sup>85</sup> One might also make a connection with the serpentine goddess Nüwa, about whom Lu Xun wrote "Repairing Heaven" (*Butian*).<sup>86</sup> And all these allusions are one layer removed from us, as they are contained within the spotty inscriptions on both sides of the tombstone, which are now being read by the frightened "I."

It is crucial to recognize the ingenious visual and aural devices employed in the poem. When examining its visual effect, we are again back to Lu Xun's old hobby of transcribing steles. While one could certainly take the ellipses as indicating pauses or words left unsaid, it is more likely that they replace the missing parts on the moss-covered and blemished surface of the stone, something that becomes immediately clear if we compare the inscription within the poem to Lu Xun's manuscript copies of ancient steles (see fig. 2.3). In this sense, the ellipses are a visual rather than a rhetorical device.

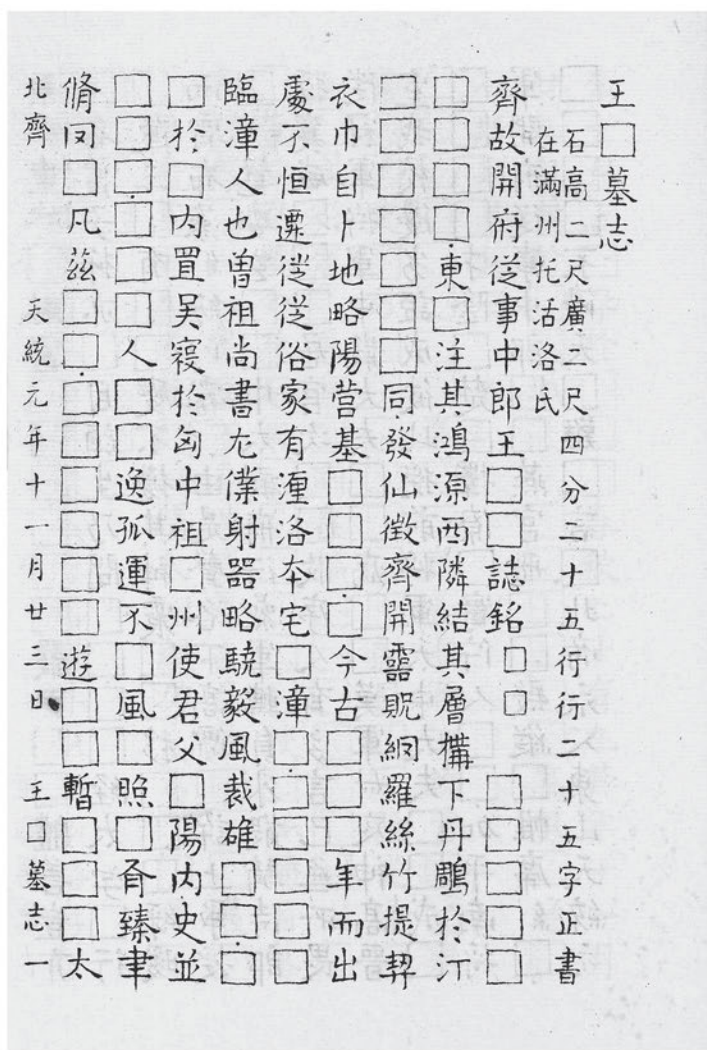


FIGURE 2.3. Facsimile of Lu Xun's transcription of a Northern Qi-dynasty epitaph. In Lu Xun, *Lu Xun jijiao shike shougao* 鲁迅辑校石刻手稿, case 3, volume 3 (Shanghai shuhua chubanshe, 1986), 531.

One can interpret “Epitaph” as a scene of hallucination, as Nicholas Kaldis convincingly does. He notices that “the mouth and lips of the corpse do not move as it speaks,”<sup>87</sup> thus drawing our attention to the conflation between the dream self and the corpse. But contrary to his interpretation that “its voice is actually in the mind of the dream self,”<sup>88</sup> I contend that the voice has been pronounced—and by none other than the dream self, who has been tricked by the dead’s use of the epitaph as a rhetorical trap. In the inscriptions on both sides, what initially seems like a neutral reporting of words abruptly turns into a shocking imperative. In the front text, the order “Go away!” surprises the “I”—and possibly us—by overturning the power dynamic between the active reader and the passive text. In the text inscribed on the back, an ostensibly rhetorical question—“But the heart is already old, how can one’s own taste be known?”—turns out to be a real question, and the text sternly demands an answer from anyone who dares read it. Here, we see how the horrified reader, by unwittingly lending their voice to the epitaph, is deprived of control over the situation and becomes the subject of interrogation by the dead. And the most alarming effect of this piece lies in our realization that, by reading the dream self’s reading of the epitaph, we suddenly find ourselves exposed to the same threat.

I would also argue that this transfer of vocal authority dramatically dislodges what Adriana Cavarero calls “the theater of consciousness,” in which “the natural relationality of the vocal . . . is preemptively neutralized in favor of a silent and internal voice that produces a self-referential type of relation, an ego-logical relation between the self and itself.”<sup>89</sup> With the help of the epitaph’s ability to facilitate conversation between the living and the dead and between the absent and the present, Lu Xun twists an ordinary act of reading into an evocation of the dead’s voice. Previously imprisoned on the cold stone surface where characters from an oppressive script system were inscribed, this voice is now no longer neutral, nonphysical, and subaltern. Once read, it becomes so powerful and present that it bursts forth to take control of the living reader. With this macabre scene, Lu Xun translates the abstract script back to a voice that once belonged to a body. Here the script is no longer a vehicle for falsified historical records, but a medium for the vocalization of something primordial and intensely personal that escapes the tyrannical power of the written word.

### Shi Zhecun, Too, Transcribes Steles

As it turns out, the hobby of collecting stele inscriptions can serve as a common ground for people who otherwise do not get along ideologically. Through his antiquarian interest, Lu Xun found an unlikely kindred spirit.

As a sequel and a counterpoint to the above episode, the concluding section of this chapter turns to his erstwhile literary foe Shi Zhecun, a leading modernist writer of the 1930s metropolitan Shanghai. Leo Ou-fan Lee sums up Shi's literary achievements as follows: "As a creative writer he was a pioneer and a trailblazer who dared to break into the new inner terrain of the human psyche and cast a daring glance into the forces of the irrational. He may well have been the first modern Chinese writer to have consciously used Freudian theory in order to bring out an undercurrent of sexual obsession in his fictional landscape, a landscape both realistic and surrealistic."<sup>90</sup>

Besides producing masterful experimental fictions, Shi maintained a prominent presence on the Shanghai literary scene through his activities as a publisher and editor, especially of the influential journal *Les Contemporains*. As a junior writer, Shi eagerly facilitated the publication of several of Lu Xun's most influential essays, including "On the Third Type of People" (*Lun disanzhongren*) and "Remembrance for the Sake of Forgetting" (*Weile wangque de jinian*). The former was Lu Xun's contribution to the debate about the politics of literature in the 1930s. "The third type of people" (*disanzhongren*) referred to writers who wanted to preserve the apolitical purity and neutrality of literature and claimed to side with neither the left nor the right. In scathing remarks, Lu Xun argued that these writers could not transcend their own social class, and their worry about the left's unwillingness to forgive was an overreaction.<sup>91</sup> The "third type" category, often used disparagingly, would eventually be applied to Shi and to Shen Congwen. "Remembrance for the Sake of Forgetting," which became one of Lu Xun's most widely read pieces due to its later inclusion in high school textbooks, commemorated five leftist writers executed by the Nationalist government in 1931.<sup>92</sup> Considering the sensitive political climate, Shi took considerable personal risk to publish this piece. The two essays give us a glimpse into just how ideologically polarized literary debates had become in the 1930s, and how dangerous a situation writers often found themselves in.

Despite Shi's respect for Lu Xun and the two men's initially cordial relationship, he unintentionally triggered a quarrel with the senior writer in 1933. It started innocuously enough, with an invitation from the newspaper *Da Wanbao* to Shi to draw up a reading list for young people. Shi recommended several mainstream classics, including the Taoist text *Zhuangzi* and the *Selections of Refined Literature* (*Wenxuan*), one of the earliest and most essential anthologies of classical literature. These had always been basic books in Chinese culture that were not considered particularly controversial in the 1930s. Yet Lu Xun, writing under the pen name Feng Zhiyu, published a scathing critique of these choices. Without naming Shi directly, Lu Xun berated certain "new youths" who, despite being educated in the new society,

still fashioned themselves after the ancients and recommended that others read such relics as *Zhuangzi* and the *Selections of Refined Literature*.<sup>93</sup>

This thinly veiled attack immediately drew a public response from Shi, who was apparently shocked and angered by this mockery from such a prominent figure. At this stage in his life, Lu Xun was growing increasingly combative and relentless, too ready to engage in polemical debates with anyone he perceived to have crossed him, whether ideologically or personally. The quarrel quickly became personal and at points trivial; it dragged on for several rounds.<sup>94</sup> For our purposes, the main takeaway from this quarrel is the flammable tension between tradition and modernity, as well as Lu Xun's fierce and intolerant attitude toward traditional culture.

This episode had an especially negative impact on Shi, who was the less established of the two writers. He not only earned Lu Xun's loathing but faced setbacks in both his literary career and personal life. Several left-leaning writers piled their criticisms onto Shi, who began to feel that the tide had turned against him. Overwhelmed by the hostility and harboring much grievance, he believed there was less and less space available for his liberal and apolitical tastes. As a result, he gradually pulled away from literary activities.<sup>95</sup> In 1937, when the Second Sino-Japanese War broke out, he turned to teaching literature at various universities across the country.

Fast-forward to 1957. By this time, Lu Xun, who died in 1936, had been canonized by the Communist Party as the greatest writer of modern China and enjoyed unrivaled posthumous prestige. Shi, on the other hand, was just a modest professor of literature. Having gone through the Thought Reform Campaign (see chapter 4), Shi had decided to abandon his career as a creative writer altogether and focused on academic research.<sup>96</sup> But despite his life-long efforts to escape politics, politics followed him wherever he traveled. The year 1957 saw the initiation of the Anti-Rightist Campaign, during which, like Chen Mengjia, Shi Zhecun was labeled a "rightist" for his outspoken but well-meaning criticisms. Being the great Lu Xun's literary enemy naturally made his case more serious in the eyes of his critics. Numerous articles were published to denounce him. Removed from his teaching position at East China Normal University, he was sent to a Shanghai suburb to perform manual labor and endured much hardship.<sup>97</sup>

Amid these trials, Shi chose to take up precisely the kind of hobby that had preoccupied Lu Xun in his early years. This almost poetic coincidence did not escape Shi's notice:

Lu Xun's early life was, I'm afraid, rather desolate and lonely. After work, he would hide in his "tiger tail" to copy ancient inscriptions. Only the May

Fourth Movement motivated him to walk out of the “tiger tail” and participate in literary revolution. After 1958, for almost two decades, my life was also desolate and lonely. So I followed Lu Xun and hid in my own “tiger tail,” the North Mountain Studio, to copy ancient inscriptions. *This is an irony, as Lu Xun went from ancient inscriptions to revolution, whereas I went from revolution to ancient inscriptions.*<sup>98</sup>

This shift of interest—from revolution to inscription, as Shi puts it, or more broadly, to go under political duress from literary experimentation with Western modernity to Chinese antiquity—is a pattern that we witness again and again within the present study. Equally noteworthy for our discussion is the fact that a fair number of the objects in Shi’s collection were previously owned by Luo Zhenyu, Wang Yirong, and the brothers Lu Xun (Zhou Shuren) and Zhou Zuoren, as well as their circles of friends (see fig. 2.4).<sup>99</sup>

In another recollection, Shi noted the following:

During the War against Japanese Aggression, I escaped to southern Yunnan, and by chance acquired the *Meng Xiaoju*, the large and small *Cuan* [*baozhi*], and the *Xiangguang* steles. In 1941, I traveled to Hong Kong, where I acquired two *Yuanyou dangji* [steles] from western Guangdong. The next year, I moved to western Fujian, where I acquired Cai Mo’s *Wan’anqiao ji* [stele]. Since then, my interest in antiquity was stimulated, and I started to collect inscribed texts. Due to limited resources and the difficulty of movement, I did not own a lot. Whenever I read Mr. Ouyang [Xiu]’s preface to *Jigulu*, I could not help feeling emotionally stirred. After Liberation [the founding of the PRC], large amounts of old [and prestigious] families’ collections of ancient artifacts were dispersed into the marketplace; rare rubbings of stone and metal inscriptions, which were previously hard to come by, were now available, and even with meagre means I was able to acquire some. In a few years, I collected more than four thousand [rubbings of] stele inscriptions, epitaphs, and carved figures from the Han, Wei, the Southern and Northern dynasties, Sui, and Tang dynasties. In my leisurely days, I put my heart in them.<sup>100</sup>

Here Shi touched on several key aspects of twentieth-century Chinese antiquarian collecting that are worth holding up as I bring this chapter to its conclusion. First, war forced him to travel, bringing him into contact with a much wider array of important ancient steles. Geography was a crucial dimension in the study of steles and inscriptions, which often contain important information about the expansion and management of empires. We will see the significance of geographical displacement again in chapter 4, where I will examine Shen Congwen’s sojourn in Yunnan. Second, Shi, like so many of his contemporaries, emulated the Song antiquarian Ouyang Xiu

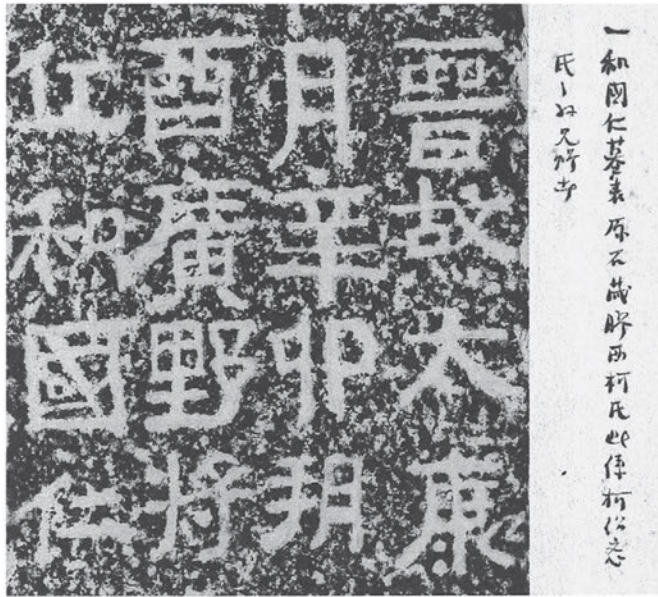


FIGURE 2.4. Rubbing of He Guoren's 和國仁 epitaph (detail) from Shi Zhecun's collection, with a hand-written note by its former owner Zhou Zuoren (Lu Xun's younger brother) detailing the stone's provenance. In Shen Jianzhong 沈建中, ed., *Beishanlou jinshi yiji* 北山樓金石遺跡 (East China Normal University Press, 2021), 43.

as a model. Third, the flourishing of antiquarian collecting was facilitated by the general shakeup and reshuffling of power and wealth underway during this period. And last, as was the case for other collectors in this book, ancient artifacts proved to be a kind of spiritual consolation and refuge for Shi during a time of crisis and loss.

Lu Xun and Shi Zhecun's intellectual differences aside, their choices convey a strikingly consistent message: Literature, when bound too tightly to politics, would quickly reach a dead end. Collecting objects of antiquity therefore served as a welcome alternative that provided a neutral and liberating outlet for these writers' explorations of the human condition. In addition, cataloguing and editing offered a system whose rule of organization was fluid; it permitted wider-ranging associations and interplay between objects and thus served as a form of resistance against, or at least a temporary suspension of, the violent and hegemonic sway of ideology. In other words, a constellation of objects created a virtual structure that substituted for the tyranny of storytelling.

What's more, instead of being complete and finite, such a collection can be open-ended, perpetually unfinished, and hence—at least in theory—infinite,

as is shown by Lu Xun's continual engagement with textual editing and Shi's tireless search for new rubbings. Shortly after Freud managed to escape Nazi persecution, fleeing with his beloved collection of antique objects, he made a poignant remark to the same effect: "A collection to which there are no new additions is really dead."<sup>101</sup> Conversely, we could also say that a living collection is by definition able to grow organically and continuously, thus retaining the capacity to stand up to the totalizing impulses that Lu Xun so profoundly detested. This open-ended aspect of collecting, aided by the unlimited potential of the antique market as the "anticollection," allows for a materialist reconfiguration of history that is constantly revising, challenging, and even negating itself.

This same fluidity and inconclusiveness pave the way for the collector to become a revolutionary who disrupts self-enclosed and supposedly perfected narratives. Antiquarian collectors seem almost by definition to be conservatives in their fascination with the past. Yet in almost every instance, the fragments they collect and study cannot be pieced back into some original whole, as if a rupture had never occurred. This reality places the *yi* (escape) concept at the very center of collecting: when these fringe or "escaped" elements accumulate into an anticollection that awaits new forms of arrangement, antiquarian collecting is no longer conservatory and conservative, but fundamentally creative and disruptive. After witnessing the irreversible dispersion of collections and the mutilation of texts, it was only natural that Lu Xun became a prominent voice of revolution who dismantled the oppressive totality of historical narratives as a form of mythmaking. But when revolution itself is turned into another cycle of mythmaking, as is unfortunately always the case, a collector like Shi also stands ready to sound the dissonant note by escaping back into objects as an alternative space to preserve his intellectual freedom and integrity.

## Brushing

What happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. . . . [T]he past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past.

T. S. ELIOT<sup>1</sup>

History seems to progress along a straight line. But every now and then, something from the past leaps out into the present and disrupts the linear scheme. In the ever-flowing stream of time, such moments give us pause and prompt us to look at the past—and the present—in a different light.

On January 19, 1965, a tomb slab was unearthed in a suburb of Nanjing. Each side of the slab was inscribed with an epitaph (see figs. 3.1–3.2). Together they commemorated a couple: husband Wang Xingzhi (309–40) and wife Song Hezhi (313–48). This discovery, while not especially remarkable in and of itself, soon attracted attention when the husband's family connection was recognized: Wang Xingzhi was a distant cousin and one-time colleague of Wang Xizhi (303–61), whose *Lantingxu* was widely considered the supreme masterpiece in Chinese calligraphy. Both men belonged to a prominent clan in the Eastern Jin dynasty. With clear dating on the tomb slab, the calligraphy of the epitaphs was without any doubt contemporaneous with Wang Xizhi, thus providing an authentic and valuable stylistic point of reference for *Lantingxu*. As it happened, since the seventh century this masterpiece had only existed in copies, and its authenticity had come under increasingly intense scrutiny since the eighteenth century. The epitaphs' unearthing provided fresh ammunition for its detractors. What had first seemed like a relatively ordinary artifact from sixteen centuries ago triggered a heated debate

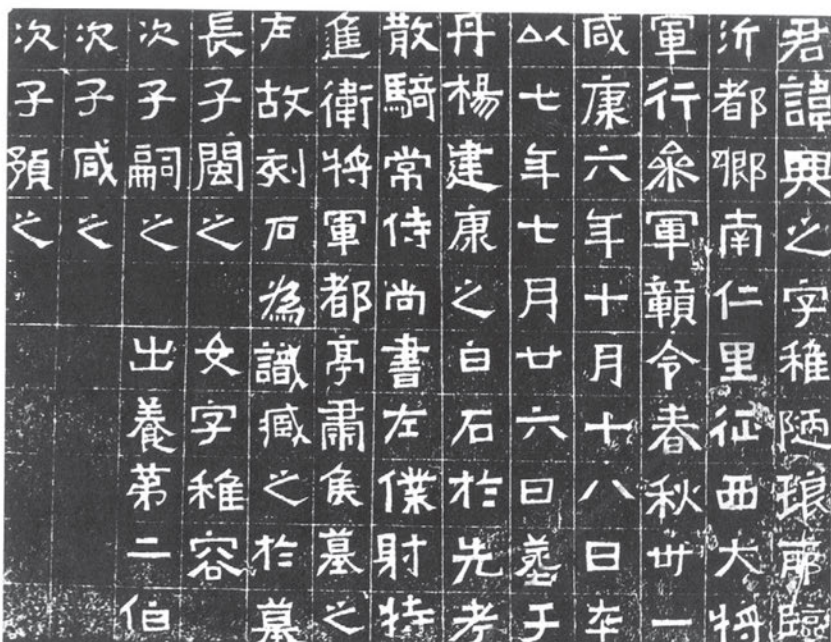


FIGURE 3.1. Rubbing of Wang Xingzhi's 王興之 epitaph, in Liu Zhengcheng 劉正成 and Hua Rende 華人德, eds., *Zhongguo shufa quanji* 中國書法全集, vol. 13, *Sanguo liangjin nanbeichao bian* 三國兩晉南北朝編, *Sanguo liangjin nanbeichao muzhi juan* 三國兩晉南北朝墓志卷 (Rongbaozhai chubanshe, 2010), 26.

that soon involved almost all of the leading calligraphic experts of the time and even some high-profile politicians.

The instigator of the debate was Guo Moruo, who also makes important appearances elsewhere in this book. After seeing rubbings of the epitaphs, he wrote a lengthy and wide-ranging article, "On the Authenticity of *Lantingxu* Based on the Unearthing of Wang's and Xie's Epitaphs" (You Wang Xie muzhi de chutu lundao *Lantingxu* de zhenwei).<sup>2</sup> Here he made the explosive argument that these two epitaphs proved the presumably contemporaneous *Lantingxu* to be in fact a later fabrication by other hands, and he confidently announced that the long-running case about this masterpiece's authorship could now be closed. Although Guo claimed that the artistic value of *Lantingxu* would not diminish in the slightest if its creator was proven to be someone other than Wang Xizhi, his argument, if true, would force a complete reconsideration of Chinese calligraphic history, both in terms of its factual narrative and its aesthetic evaluations. On a technical and stylistic level, *Lantingxu* was the highest model against which most artists had conceived their own styles. On a biographical level, the calligraphic myth of *Lantingxu* was inseparably linked

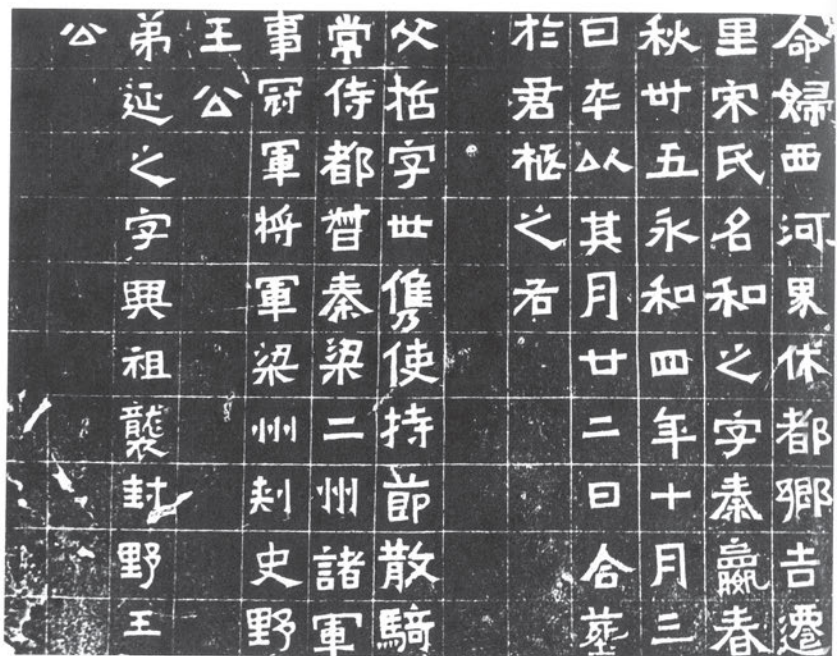


FIGURE 3.2. Rubbing of Song Hezhi's 宋和之 epitaph, in Liu Zhengcheng 劉正成 and Hua Rendie 華人德, eds., *Zhongguo shufa quanji* 中國書法全集, vol. 13, *Sanguo liangjin nanbeichao bian* 三國兩晉南北朝編, *Sanguo liangjin nanbeichao muzhi juan* 三國兩晉南北朝墓志卷 (Rongbaozhai chubanshe, 2010), 27.

to the personality myth of Wang Xizhi. It would be impossible to imagine *Lantingxu* as the same artifact without the historical figure and his activities at a specific moment serving as the basis of its creation.

Guo's argument had even more wide-reaching ramifications beyond the realm of calligraphy. The appearance of the epitaphs came at a particularly ominous moment: in 1965, the country was barely recovering from a series of upheavals caused by aggressive government policies, including the 1957 Anti-Rightist Campaign, the 1958 Great Leap Forward, and the resulting economic failure and great famine. Since 1961, the high-profile breakdown of the alliance between China and the Soviet Union, ostensibly due to their irreconcilable differences over Joseph Stalin's legacy, had caused much trouble both domestically and internationally. On the one hand, these events intensified the power struggle among political elites. On the other, thanks to the Anti-Rightist Campaign's crackdown on free expression, any discussions, even purely technical or artistic ones, became highly susceptible to politicization with serious consequences. Furthermore, these events were unfolding just one year before the onset of the Cultural Revolution which, it is worth

remembering, was nominally triggered by another debate over a historical issue. Thanks to the Party's top leader Mao Zedong's penchant for using history to manipulate the present, the past had become a political and cultural minefield that contemporaries did well to steer clear of.

By revisiting this debate from six decades ago, the present chapter is treading on overfamiliar grounds. The events leading up to the launch of the Cultural Revolution have been repeatedly examined by historians under a microscope, and *Lantingxu* is arguably the most discussed topic in calligraphic history. Even the debate itself has been the subject of extensive analysis, and from an art-historical point of view, not much of Guo's argument holds up. Nevertheless, something crucial remains to be said. The debate epitomizes two interconnected problems in the conception of Chinese history that are themselves closely related to the overall themes of this book.

First, the quest for the authentic *Lantingxu* and its true creator was motivated by the ideological need to validate historical materialism (*lishi weiwu zhuyi*), which reflects a common tendency to treat excavated artifacts as "evidence" that can "prove" one's preferred political theories about societal development. Problematically, theorists with strong ideological convictions seldom fail to fit the former into the latter, resulting in the ironic situation that the same "evidence" can be used to support opposing views. In the case of the *Lantingxu* debate, we see calligraphy being used to "prove" Marxist historical materialism. Touted as a scientific truth and mandated by the government to guide all fields of research, this theory explains the development of societies in stage-oriented terms based on a sociopolitical reading of material production. And yet as the history of *Lantingxu* shows, artifacts and theoretical discourses inhabit two separate realms; while artifacts do allow us to describe the past with greater specificity, they also demonstrate a strenuous resistance to grand narrativization. Some (such as the collectors) were more respectful of such resistance, whereas others (such as the storytellers) were less so. Only by examining historical materialism's impact on the study of material culture, collectorship, and antiquarianism is it possible to understand the divergent choices Chen Mengjia, Guo Moruo, Shen Congwen, and Shi Zhecun made after 1949, as one of these men eagerly adopted historical materialism in his research while the others all quietly resisted it.

Second, on a deeper level, behind the quest for the authentic *Lantingxu* was the problematic obsession with the *origin*. In order to make sense of the present and one's place in it, it is necessary to establish an origin as a solid starting point of a narrative that flows uninterrupted to the here and now. The origin is the source of authenticity and, ultimately, of authority (the etymological proximity between "authenticity" and "authority" is worth noting).<sup>3</sup>

As a result, the mythologization of power starts with the retroactive establishment of the origin, which is nonetheless anything but an objective reconstruction. As a matter of fact, the origin, insofar as it appears to us, is both mediated and fluid: each time we look back to it, our gaze travels through—and is inevitably colored by—layers of historical consciousness, starting with the present layer we inhabit. Therefore, instead of pursuing the impossible task of circumventing these layers, we should adopt the hermeneutic approach outlined by Gadamer to recognize them as constitutive of the invention (rather than reconstruction) of the origin, which forms the first step in demythologizing power.

By launching the *Lantingxu* debate to destroy its authorial myth, Guo was merely transferring the origin of this calligraphic masterpiece from one person to another. In so doing, he nonetheless reinforced the origin as a static entity grounded in a specific moment rather than a fluid projection across time; he then used this point to “prove” the validity of historical materialism. However, he inadvertently chose an example that eloquently refuted his theory: *Lantingxu* was transmitted to posterity in copies only, and rather than passive imitations each copy was an inherently hermeneutic dialogue between the original and the copying subject. In other words, *Lantingxu* exists exclusively as a palimpsest of mediations in physical incarnations. At issue here are subtle aspects of manual reproduction that shaped its reception history, which will be investigated in detail below.

### 353: A Late Spring Party

*Lantingxu* is short for *Lantingji xu*, “Preface to the Poems Collected from the Orchid Pavilion.” According to historical record (which we know cannot be trusted entirely), on March 3 of the lunar calendar, 353, Wang Xizhi hosted a Spring Purification Ceremony (*xiuxi*) at Lanting, or the Orchid Pavilion in Kuaiji, Zhejiang Province.<sup>4</sup> The ceremony included a “winding stream party” (*qushui liushang*), in which participants were expected to compose a poem while waiting for cups of wine to float to them from upstream. More than forty eminent personalities were present for this event, and twenty-six of them composed a total of thirty-six poems that formed the *Lantingji* or the *Orchid Pavilion Collection*.

At the end of the gathering, Wang wrote a preface to commemorate the event, reproduced in full below:

In the ninth year of the Eternal Harmony era in the beginning of the last month of spring when the calendar was in *kuichou*, we met at the Orchid

Pavilion in Shanyin, Kuaiji, to celebrate the Bathing Festival.<sup>5</sup> All the worthy men assembled; the young and the senior gathered together. Here were lofty mountains and towering hills, thick groves and tall bamboo. And there was a clear, rapid stream reflecting everything around that had been diverted to play the game of floating wine-cups along a winding course. We sat down in order of precedence. Though we had none of the magnificent sounds of strings and flutes, a cup of wine and then a poem were enough to stir our innermost feelings.

This was a day when the sky was bright and the air was pure. A gentle breeze warmed us. Upwards we gazed to contemplate the immensity of the universe; downwards we peered to scrutinize the abundance of living things. In this way, we let our eyes roam and our emotions become aroused, so that we enjoyed to the fullest these sights and sounds. This was happiness indeed!

Men associate with each other but for the brief span of their lives. Some are content to control their innermost feelings as they converse inside a room. Some are prompted to give rein to their ambitions and lead wild, unfettered lives. There is all the difference between controlled and abandoned natures, just as the quiescent and the frenzied are unlike. Yet, both take pleasure from whatever they encounter, possessing it but for a while. Happy and content, they remain unaware that old age is fast approaching. And, when they tire of something, they let their feelings change along with events as they experience a deep melancholy. What they had taken pleasure in has now passed away in an instant, so how could their hearts not give rise to longing? Furthermore, a long or short life depends on the transformation of all things: everything must come to an end. An ancient said, "Death and life are the greatest of matters, indeed!"<sup>6</sup> Isn't this reason enough to be sad? Whenever I read of the causes of melancholy felt by men of the past, it is like joining together two halves of a tally. I always feel sad when I read them, yet I cannot quite understand why. But I know that it is meaningless to say life and death are the same; and to equate the longevity of Pengzu with that of Shangzi is simply wrong.<sup>7</sup> Future readers will look back upon today just as we look back at the past. How sad it all is!

Therefore, I have recorded my contemporaries and transcribed what they have written. Over distant generations and changing events, what gives rise to melancholy will be the same. Future readers will also feel moved by these writings.<sup>8</sup>

Wang's closing prediction proved to be accurate: successive generations of readers have been enthralled by the melancholic beauty so spontaneously articulated in this preface. What stands out most, however, is not the literary value of the preface or the quality of the poems in the collection, fine as these

might be, but rather Wang's transcendental calligraphic technique, which immortalized the writing (see fig. 3.3). Accordingly, it has been and continues to be overanalyzed by countless admirers and a small number of detractors. But other important elements were also indispensable for the making of *Lantingxu*: the preface's temporal dimension and unrepeatability, its inseparability from Wang's personality and thoughts, and the intriguing fact that the original work was already presumed lost by the seventh century, with subsequent commentators basing their judgments solely on reproductions of a work that was—by definition—not reproducible.

As is usually the case with paper-based Chinese calligraphy, the preface was written with ink on delicate and absorbent paper,<sup>9</sup> which meant that its surface was an extremely sensitive recipient and reflector of even the subtlest movements of the hand, and the calligrapher could not completely control how the ink spread out. It also meant that no covering up was possible, and any revision would be plainly visible. Even the most skillful calligrapher must accept a considerable degree of contingency when using this type of paper, and the resulting work could be more accurately described as the *trace* of an action rather than as a well-planned product.

Would calligraphers prefer a sturdier fabric and a less liquid pigment that allowed corrections, coverups, and precision, like that offered by oil painting? The answer is a definitive *no*: the essence of paper-based calligraphy resides in its unrepeatability. Calligraphy is an actual event that happens only once. Although the final product is static, it is really the live process that matters. Calligraphy, like music, is thus an art of time: temporality resides at the core of its aesthetic structure.

This temporal dimension has a few important implications for our understanding of *Lantingxu*. Like a musical performance, the temporal dimension

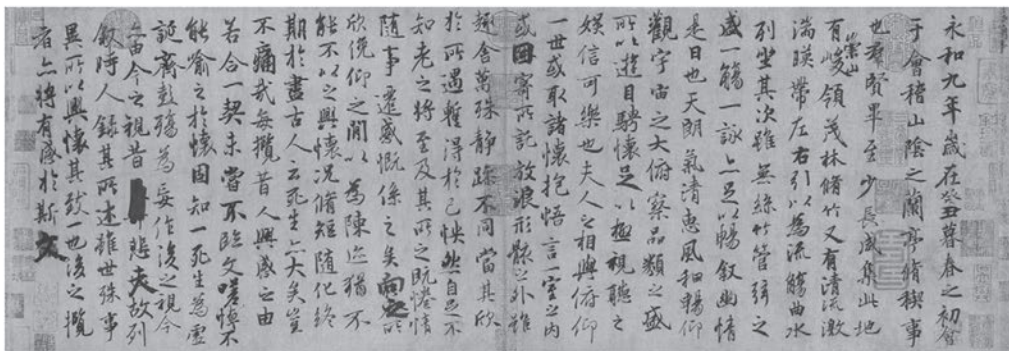


FIGURE 3.3. Wang Xizhi 王羲之, *Lantingxu*, tracing copy attributed to Feng Chengsu 馮承素. Collection of the Palace Museum, Beijing.

determined both the fixed order and the fluctuating *tempi* of its creative process. In terms of order, the piece *occurred* in real time, starting from the top left and continuing one way, down to the last character at the bottom right. Each character—in fact each stroke—sensitively responded to the previous one and prefigured the next. In the meantime, the *tempi* affected the force being applied as well as the varying degrees of cursiveness. It is also reasonable to assume that the changing mood of the writer was responsible for the ebb and flow of *tempi*, which in turn led to subtle variations in the effects of each stroke.

Wang's first paragraph (lines one to seven), which vividly but matter-of-factly describes the occasion, was written in a neat, consistent, and leisurely running script (*xingshu*, also called semi-cursive script). This is especially true for the first two vertical lines, where the degree of cursiveness is the lowest, with each stroke clearly delineated. In musical terms, this paragraph is like a prelude in *andante tempo*.

In lines eight to eleven, Wang turned away from scenic description and adopted a visionary perspective, as if the spirit was gradually released from its physical shackles to roam the universe. Accordingly, the calligraphic style now has an increased feeling of movement and dance. The brushwork becomes bolder and starts to show more swaying movements; individual strokes are slightly more bent and stretched to create internal structural tension. The characters are no longer confined to an invisible grid. Now the music enters the *allegro vivace* phase.

At this point, the writer's senses were fully aroused by the lush natural scenery, which led him to muse on metaphysical matters such as the brevity of life, the gravity of death, and the relativity of perspectives between different generations. Paraphrasing sayings from the Taoist classic *Zhuangzi*, he immersed himself in a deep meditation and entered a state of intoxicating abandon, giving free rein to a rhapsodic mood. In response, all the cursive calligraphic traits from the previous paragraph were amplified, with the general style reaching the most freewheeling phase and the "performance" reaching its climax: the sizes of characters became greatly varied; the strokes looked more like continuously running lines; some characters were written as if they were visualizations of dance movements (especially the "不" at the end of line eighteen); and different components within the same character were occasionally stretched to the breaking point but pulled back together by a robust inner elasticity. In stark contrast to the orderly manner with which he began his preface, in this section Wang made at least seven obvious mistakes, which he either wrote over or crossed out. All these traits indicate a fast-running brush guided by an unfettered spirit. The tempo now accelerated to

presto, corresponding to the most emotional content—his lament on the transience of life. This piece was then cut short by a swift and somewhat abrupt turn to a succinct coda.

I offer this description to show that *Lantingxu* unfolded in time and had temporality as a fundamental element built into its structure. It was apparently not premeditated, but rather the trace of a singular occurrence graced by unexpected spontaneity, thanks to the combined stimulation of pleasant late spring weather (which was often experienced as a melancholy-inducing season, as can be seen in well-known poems by Du Fu, Li Shangyin, and Li Yu, to name just a very few), a picturesque landscape, and a decent amount of alcohol. This singularity constituted a core and indispensable component of the preface's presumed authenticity. Wang's calligraphic technique alone was not enough to account for the stunning effect. Something else was at work here that lay beyond his control. Thus any attempt at reproducing this piece is, strictly speaking, impossible, because doing so would require the reenactment of this fleeting process, including its many contingencies. This peculiarity was realized early on by *Lantingxu*'s first admirer—Wang himself. So pleased was he with his creation that, after recovering from intoxication, he was said to have written a few dozen copies in a futile attempt to repeat the miracle. None came close to the original.<sup>10</sup>

After *Lantingxu*'s creation, the preface's documented provenance had a curious gap. Although earlier sources preserved its textual contents, the first extant historical records documenting *Lantingxu* as the original, physical piece of calligraphy did not appear until the eighth century. In the meantime, the image of Wang as the "sage of calligraphy" continued to grow. A telling discrepancy in historical texts shows that there was a tendency to conflate Wang's character with his art. *A New Account of Tales of the World* (*Shishuo xinyu*, hereafter *Shishuo*), a collection of anecdotes and sketches of historical figures compiled about a century after Wang's lifetime, tells us that Wang's contemporaries described him as "now drifting like a floating cloud; now rearing up robustly like a startled dragon."<sup>11</sup> We can reasonably assume that this florid and heavily metaphorical description applied both to his outward appearance and posture and to his internal, spiritual qualities. In either case, the sketch passed a flattering judgment on his character, leading early readers to imagine a stylish, refined, nimble, and incisive gentleman whose appearance corresponded to his superior temperament.

By the seventh century, however, the referent of this description had become ambiguous. The *History of Jin* (*Jinshu*) recorded that "critics, when commenting on the momentum of [Wang's] brushwork, considered it to be drifting like a floating cloud, and rearing up robustly like a startled dragon."<sup>12</sup>

It is important to note here that the *History of Jin* was itself compiled from various sources, including *Shishuo*—and the latter, though not fictional, was generally not considered reliable history. The *History of Jin* also received criticism for its careless and unselective use of primary sources. Whether the *History of Jin* misquoted *Shishuo* or consulted a different source, its conflation of Wang's calligraphy with his personality left its mark, becoming a widely accepted interpretation in later discussions. Indeed, "the handwriting resembles the personality" (*zi ru qiren*) was a common belief that commentators across the centuries could not resist subscribing to in their calligraphic criticisms. Yuan Ang, for instance, opened his *Comments on Calligraphies Ancient and Modern* (*Gujin shuping*) with a series of comparisons between famous calligraphers' styles and their characters. The first example he used was Wang Xizhi: "Wang's calligraphy was like members of the Xie Family: even those non-upright ones had a refreshing elegance."<sup>13</sup> The adjective "upright" (*duanzheng*) is applicable to both a person's conduct and to a handwriting's structural vigor.<sup>14</sup>

Here it would be useful for us to zoom out to a broader historical view, which better allows us to understand the idolization of Wang, the mythologizing of *Lantingxu*, and the aestheticization of calligraphy in general. Contrary to the rosy picture painted in Wang's description of the springtime gathering, the reality of his time was turbulent and perilous. Wang spent his adulthood in the Eastern Jin (317–420), a dynasty in exile after invading forces toppled its predecessor, the Western Jin (266–316). The Eastern Jin was undermined by incompetent administration, widespread corruption, intense factional infighting, and aggressive foreign threats. Having fled from the war-torn land, a significant number of prominent gentry clans, including the Wangs, became powerful players in the new regime and engaged in frequent intrigues against one another. Paradoxically, this chaotic background allowed for a certain kind of freedom that encouraged diverse forms of self-fashioning, resulting in a flourishing literary and artistic culture. In Lu Xun's words, this was "an era of literary self-consciousness and . . . of 'art for art's sake.'"<sup>15</sup> *Shishuo* was full of vivid mini-portraits of notable personalities whose behaviors, values, and tastes could appear whimsical, eccentric, unfettered, performative, and provocative. Wang Xizhi was one such person, here described in a light-hearted anecdote:

While Chi Jian was in Jingkou, he dispatched a retainer with a letter to Chancellor Wang Tao, requesting a son-in-law from among Wang's nephews for his daughter. The chancellor said to Chi's messenger, "Go to the eastern apartment and follow your own wishes in making a choice."

After the retainer had returned, he reported to Chi, “The sons of the Wang family are all of them admirable, each in his own way. When they heard that someone had come to spy out a son-in-law, they all conducted themselves with circumspection. There was just one son, who was lying sprawled out on the eastern bed with his belly exposed, as though he hadn’t heard about it.”

Chi said, “He’s just the one I want.” When he went to visit him, it turned out to be Wang Xizhi. So he gave his daughter to him in marriage.<sup>16</sup>

This appreciation of Wang’s supposedly unrestrained and genuine temperament was consistent with the broader valorization of artistic qualities underway during this period. As Wai-ye Li puts it, *Shishuo* “plunges us into a finely observed and deftly articulated world of variations on human sensations, perceptions, and actions.” The dominant concern driving this world was “the compass of beauty—the discernment, judgment, and delineation of physical, moral, verbal, intellectual, and spiritual beauty and the connections (or apparent lack thereof) among these categories.”<sup>17</sup> During the Jin period, elites developed a passion for comparing and classifying people in much the same way they compared and classified poetry and calligraphy. Wang Xizhi’s youngest son Wang Xianzhi (344–86), for example, a venerated calligraphy master in his own right, frequently had to face comparison with his imposing father. Hence the following conversation:

Xie An asked Wang Xianzhi, “How would you rate your own calligraphy in comparison with that of your father?”

Xianzhi replied, “Of course mine isn’t the same as his.”

Xie An said, “According to the discussions of outsiders that isn’t at all the case.”

Wang replied, “How could outsiders know?”<sup>18</sup>

Such comparisons were not a simple matter of whose art was better but involved finely articulated standards of discernment and judgment (to borrow Li’s words) that assessed the person and the work holistically. Such refinement in taste entailed a high degree of aesthetic awareness, which effectively transformed a practical medium for communication into an idealized artistic embodiment of personal cultivation.

By the same token, a calligrapher’s religious beliefs were also understood to color their calligraphic style. Like his family members across several generations, Wang Xizhi followed the “Way of the Celestial Master” (*Tianshi dao*), a major sect of the Taoist religion. He also avidly pursued the intake of so-called immortality pills, a medical practice integral to Taoism.<sup>19</sup> Chen

Yinke's pioneering research in the 1930s, outlined in "On the Relationship between the Way of the Celestial Master and Coastal Geography" (*Tianshidao yu binhai diyu zhi guanxi*), explained the spread of Taoism from a geographical perspective and pointed to how close-knit family ties perpetuated religious beliefs in a manner akin to calligraphy's transmission within a family. In fact, several prominent clans of Taoist followers were also known for producing great calligraphers.<sup>20</sup> The proximity of Taoism and calligraphy suggested that the latter probably contained a semireligious quality; it is no surprise that Taoism's preference for untrammelled freedom and spontaneity influenced the cultivation of calligraphic styles. This association seemed to be the case for Wang, who was believed to demonstrate a thoroughly Taoist disposition: "Having retired from office, Xizhi together with gentries of the eastern provinces toured mountains and rivers extensively and entertained themselves by fishing. With the Taoist priest Xu Mai, he also cultivated the intake of immortality pills, going for thousands of miles to look for medicines. He traveled through all the eastern and central provinces, visited famous mountains and floated on the deep blue sea. He used to exclaim: I will eventually die of bliss."<sup>21</sup>

Calligraphy theorist Sun Guoting (646–691), building on such descriptions, attributed the superiority of Wang's late style to the fact that "[at the later stage in his life] his mental state was unimpeded and his mood balanced; it was neither radical nor fierce, therefore his style was naturally profound."<sup>22</sup> Such interpretations meant that the myth of Wang Xizhi as a calligrapher had become inseparable from the myth of Wang Xizhi as a person. If, more than any other art, calligraphy is expected to candidly reveal the inner disposition of the writer, then it is difficult to imagine that a petty, dull, and constrained person or a rigid, uptight Confucian dogmatist would be able to create a spontaneous calligraphic style.

Despite Wang's legendary status and the effusive descriptions of his style—or precisely *because* the general impression of his style was derived indirectly from such descriptions, rather than through firsthand observation—the actual appearance of his handwriting grew more rather than less obscure over time. The disappearance of his original works was not helped by calligraphy's ephemeral nature, including the calligraphic paper's fragile physical qualities. It was also exacerbated by the high demand for Wang's art, which led to the proliferation of copies and, even worse, forgeries, thus forever complicating the appreciation and study of his work. Wang's admirers included several powerful rulers, and their appetites for his art spurred the production of such forgeries, further blurring the already elusive image of the originals.<sup>23</sup>

The steadily growing idolization of Wang set the stage for *Lantingxu's* "reappearance" almost three centuries after its creation. Under the patronage

of Emperor Taizong of the Tang dynasty (598–649), perhaps Wang’s most fervent admirer, the canonization of Wang’s style reached its peak. As Lothar Ledderose puts it, “It is largely the result of the personal engagement of this emperor that the Wang tradition was finally established as the classic one.”<sup>24</sup> Taizong played a decisive and not-so-commendable role in the transmission of *Lantingxu*. According to He Yanzhi’s “A Record of the Beginning and End of *Lanting*” (*Lanting shimo ji*), which provided the first detailed account of *Lantingxu*’s provenance (too detailed, we might say, to be entirely credible), Wang himself greatly cherished the piece and kept it within the family, so that very few people were able to see it. Seven generations later it reached the hands of his descendant Zhiyong, a Buddhist monk and yet another accomplished calligrapher. After Zhiyong’s passing, his disciple Biancai religiously guarded the treasure on his late master’s behalf and kept its existence a secret. At the same time, Emperor Taizong was obsessively searching for all extant Wang calligraphies, having already amassed an impressive collection. He was eager to acquire *Lantingxu* as the crown jewel. Hearing that it was most likely in Biancai’s possession, Taizong sent a cunning official, Xiao Yi, to trick it out of Biancai’s hand (see fig. 3.4). With his wish fulfilled and the prized artifact in hand, Taizong ordered his legion of skillful calligraphers to make multiple copies and distributed them widely. Before his death, he instructed that the original *Lantingxu* be buried along with him.<sup>25</sup>

The reliability of He’s narrative notwithstanding, we do know that after Taizong’s death, no one was ever said to have seen the original again. In other



FIGURE 3.4. Unidentified artist, “Xiao Yi Obtaining the *Lanting* Manuscript from the Monk Biancai” 蕭翼賺蘭亭圖, detail, in the style of Zhao Mengfu 趙孟頫; Ming (1368–1644) or Qing (1644–1911) dynasty copy. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, CCo 1.0 @ www.metmuseum.org.

words, no sooner had *Lantingxu* “reappeared” than it vanished again, this time for good. Later generations’ knowledge of the masterpiece would have to be based exclusively on reproductions. Taizong’s patronage also marked the starting point of a process in which *Lantingxu* served as the highest object of exaltation. Simon Leys was not exaggerating when he wrote, “Practically all the major calligraphers of later centuries defined themselves in relation to this particular work.”<sup>26</sup>

### 1965: The *Lantingxu* Debate

Some sixteen hundred years after that fine late spring day, when Guo Moruo announced that *Lantingxu* was nothing more than a fabrication by a skillful fraudster,<sup>27</sup> he was declaring war not just on a physical piece of writing, but also on an illustrious and complex artistic tradition constructed on a personality myth—a set of cultural imaginings about a historical period and the totality of subsequent interpretations, not to mention the countless calligraphic works inspired by the original piece. This “powerful and cohesive cultural tradition,” as Robert Harrist calls it,<sup>28</sup> revolved around the *assumption* that the piece had in fact existed, and that Wang Xizhi had in fact written it at a particular time on a particular occasion. Regardless of the authenticity of its factual basis, the solidity of the tradition itself is undeniable.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the immediate catalyst for Guo’s argument was the excavation of Wang Xingzhi’s and Song Hezhi’s epitaphs. Guo presented his argument forcefully and confidently. He attacked the issue from several angles, each supported with ample evidence, and he did so with considerable theoretical finesse, even though his analysis was not always rigorous and his conclusions were not incontrovertible. The debate his article triggered involved three separate yet related dimensions. First, it revisited fundamental questions that had long troubled the understanding of calligraphic history. Second, political and ideological struggles in 1960s China served as an invisible driving force behind the debate. Third, Guo’s multidimensional approach engaged the complex problem of historical authenticity, particularly as it emerged in twentieth-century China. He effectively turned the *Lantingxu* debate into a theoretical laboratory in which a series of historiographical assumptions were subject to stringent testing. And linking all three of these dimensions together, I would add, is one overarching element: historical materialism.<sup>29</sup>

Guo began by revisiting long-standing issues that had clouded the study of *Lantingxu*. He conducted thorough research into Wang Xingzhi’s life and family connections, placing Wang back into the fourth-century social

network of the Eastern Jin. He then analyzed three other recently excavated epitaphs found within the historical Eastern Jin territory and crafted between 322 and 358. These were carved in the angular, stiff, and rigorous clerical script (*lishu*) commonly used in stele and brick inscriptions, a style typical of the northern territory and presumably brought to the south by political refugees.<sup>30</sup> Assessing the three epitaphs, Guo concluded that *lishu* must have been the common type of Wang Xizhi's time, and noted that it stood in stark contrast to *Lantingxu's* smooth and flexible *xingshu*, which was more typical of the Tang era (from the seventh century onward). In other words, Guo argued, *Lantingxu* was stylistically anachronistic for its supposed time.

Guo then cast doubt on the preface's textual content. Citing a note by the Qing scholar Li Wentian, he pointed out that according to *Shishuo*, a resemblance existed between *Lantingxu* and a piece by a different author, Shi Chong: "Whenever Wang Xizhi heard someone compare his own 'Preface to the Lanting Collection' to Shi Chong's 'Preface to the Golden Valley Poems' (*Jingu shi xu*), or again, whenever someone matched him against Shi Chong, he would look extremely pleased."<sup>31</sup> This anecdote suggests that we might not even be able to ascertain whether the textual *Lantingxu* was entirely original or an imitation, at least partially, of *Jingu shi xu*.

Liu Xiaobiao's annotation of this same entry in *Shishuo* included the presumed full text of *Lantingxu*, except that it was much shorter and came under a different title: *Linhexu*, meaning "Preface Written by the River." Its last paragraph, recording the number of people and poems composed, is not found anywhere in *Lantingxu*. For purposes of comparison, below is a translation of *Jingu shi xu* according to Liu:

In the ninth year of the Eternal Harmony era in the beginning of the last month of spring when the calendar was in *kuichou*, we met at the Orchid Pavilion in Shanyin, Kuaiji, to celebrate the Bathing Festival. All the worthy men assembled; the young and the senior gathered together. Here were lofty mountains and towering hills, thick groves and tall bamboo. And there was a clear, rapid stream reflecting everything around that had been diverted to play the game of floating wine-cups along a winding course. We sat down in order of precedence.

This was a day when the sky was bright and the air was pure. A gentle breeze warmed us. We let our eyes roam and our emotions become aroused. This was happiness indeed! Though we had none of the magnificent sounds of strings and flutes, a cup of wine and then a poem were enough to stir our innermost feelings.

Therefore, I have recorded my contemporaries and transcribed what they have written. Sun Tong and the rest, twenty-six persons in all, composed poems as they appear below. Xie Sheng and the rest, fifteen persons in all, who found themselves unable to compose anything, paid the forfeit by drinking three dippers full of wine.<sup>32</sup>

Apart from some slight rhetorical discrepancies, what caught Guo's attention here was a striking omission: the *Shishuo* version did not have the long and elaborate passage of philosophizing that shifted the tone from spring merriment to melancholic musing on the transience of life. This key passage constitutes the emotional and philosophical core of the text and inspires its calligraphic climax. It twice refers to *Zhuangzi*, one of the two central Taoist classics, and thus presumably bears the hallmarks of Wang's religious and philosophical orientation. Why did Liu Xiaobiao's annotation of *Shishuo*, a source closer to Wang's lifetime, omit this crucial passage?

Guo's explanation was straightforward: Wang did not write the original passage. Guo based this argument on two points. First, citing poems from the *Lanting* collection, he argued that the late spring drinking party was a thoroughly joyful occasion, so there was no reason for the preface to suddenly become so melancholic. Second, by reexamining Wang's biography and records about his temperament, thought, and religious belief, Guo concluded that Wang was an optimistic, positive and strenuous person; such pessimism was entirely out of character for him. Guo also challenged He's overly detailed and thus suspect narrative of *Lantingxu's* provenance, which was quite possibly the main initiator of the *Lantingxu* myth.<sup>33</sup>

Guo further noted that historical events had likely disrupted the transmission of Wang's authentic calligraphic works. By the sixth century, Emperor Wu of the Liang dynasty had amassed a large collection of Wang's works in his palace (as mentioned above, his discussion with Tao Hongjing showed that by this time, very few original Wang Xizhi works existed, and even these were interspersed with numerous copies and forgeries). In 555, when enemies surrounded the Liang capital, Emperor Wu's son Emperor Yuan decided to burn the massive collection of books and calligraphic works he and his father had gathered. This became an extraordinarily catastrophic event in Chinese history that was mentioned by Li Qingzhao in "Postscript." By the time Emperor Taizong started his own collection in the seventh century, an even smaller number, if any, of authentic Wang Xizhi pieces would still have existed. And responding to this royal passion, forgers became busy once again. From Guo's point of view, then, it seemed reasonable to assert

that *Lantingxu* was forged in the *xingshu* style popular during Taizong's reign to satisfy his appetite.

Now only two crucial questions remained for Guo to answer: Who faked it? And what did the authentic Wang Xizhi style look like? Regarding the first question, Guo contended that it was the monk Zhiyong, who was famous for diligently honing his skills by making hundreds of freehand copies of ancient masters' works, especially his ancestor Wang Xizhi's. Emperor Yang of the Sui dynasty praised Zhiyong for managing to "acquire the 'muscle' of Wang's style" (whereas another monk, Zhiguo, "acquired the 'bones'").<sup>34</sup> Contemporaries also noted the similarity between Zhiyong's and Wang's styles, to the point that sometimes the former's originals were mistaken as copies of the latter. In addition, Zhiyong's own style bore a striking resemblance to *Lantingxu*. Last but not least, Guo pointed out, the melancholic tone of the "fabricated" passage, with its emphasis on impermanence, befitted the worldview of a Buddhist monk.

To answer the second question, about the true Wang Xizhi style, Guo undertook a close reading of extensive literary descriptions in historical records. Descriptions prior to the "reappearance" of *Lantingxu* showed that Wang's style was generally perceived to be angular and robust. Emperor Wu praised it as follows: "The momentum of the characters is strong and vigorous, as if a fish is jumping across the Dragon Gate and a tiger is crouching on the Phoenix Tower."<sup>35</sup> Subscribing to the view that "the calligraphy resembles the personality," Guo reminded readers that Wang was known to have a strong and unbending character that fitted this description. In contrast, *Lantingxu* was smooth, fluid, and charming in style, seemingly quite remote from an unyielding or angular approach. Returning to his starting point, Guo argued that the true Wang Xizhi style should in fact resemble that of the recently excavated epitaphs. The latter were inscribed in *lishu*, precisely the kind of archaic and angular style that had made Wang Xizhi famous.

Given *Lantingxu*'s legendary status and Guo's own prestigious position in communist China, such a provocative argument was bound to attract attention. This turn of events leads me to the second key dimension of Guo's larger argument: the ways that politics and ideology in mid-twentieth-century China helped drive debates over historical issues. By the 1960s, Guo had firmly established himself as one of the most visible cultural personalities in the country. His scholarly expertise spanned history, archaeologist, philology, poetry, theater, translation, and beyond.<sup>36</sup> An ardent Marxist, he had embraced political activism since the Republican era and aligned himself closely with the Communist Party. After the founding of the PRC, he served as Vice Premier from 1949 to 1954, and president of the Chinese Academy of Sciences

beginning in 1949. Most notably, he developed an almost uniquely enduring friendship with Mao Zedong and was allowed to serve as his loyal propagandist throughout the latter's reign. This was rather unusual considering the fact that the first decades of the PRC were an ideologically volatile time, and Mao's ever-changing and unpredictable mind meant that prominent personalities, even as they went out their way to please him, still fell in and out of favor in rapid succession. Guo's extraordinarily skillful, opportunistic, and utterly shameless sycophancy likely explains the longevity of his favored status.<sup>37</sup>

Guo's article also contained two details that direct our attention to political intrigues. First, in the original version, he specifically acknowledged that it was "comrade Chen Boda" who alerted him to the note by Li Wentian as an early challenge to *Lantingxu's* authenticity. At the time, Chen Boda was Mao's secretary, close ally, a notorious ideological czar, and the number-four figure in the government's five-strong top leadership. However, by 1970, Chen had fallen out of Mao's favor and been denounced as a traitor; when Guo's article was republished in 1973, Chen's name had vanished completely. Second, Guo acknowledged that "comrade Kang Sheng gathered five historical references" to prove that the authentic Wang Xizhi style "retained the flavor of *lishu*" and "bore considerable distinction from *Lantingxu*."<sup>38</sup> Kang Sheng was another close ally of Mao's and a much-feared ultra-leftist. Together with Chen, he was responsible for helping launch the Cultural Revolution and ruthlessly persecuting many political rivals. Interestingly, all five references came from the well-known *Shishuo* and *History of Jin*; the erudite Guo certainly did not need Kang to tell him where to find them. Quoting Kang in such an unnecessarily visible manner conveyed a not-so-subtle message: Guo's opinion was sanctioned by those at the very top.

Published in May 1965, Guo's article immediately caused a stir in the scholarly world. Everyone had their own opinions, but few were willing to respond publicly, given Guo's influential status and the support he had garnered from two much-feared ideologues. By this time, most people understood that expressing opinions on the distant past could bring about present-day disaster. But Gao Ershi's article "A Refutation Concerning *Lantingxu's* Authenticity" (*Lantingxu de zhenwei boyi*; hereafter "Refutation") turned Guo's lone declaration into a debate.<sup>39</sup>

Gao responded directly to Guo's two main challenges: *Lantingxu's* textual authenticity and Wang Xizhi's original style. Regarding the former, he gave examples of anthologizers trimming essays and adding explanatory notes to demonstrate that the discrepancy between *Linhexu* and *Lantingxu* did not automatically prove the latter to be a forgery. For the style question, the situation was considerably more complex. For a Wang Xizhi calligraphy

to be authentic, did it always need to show traces of the more ancient *lishu*? Was the more modern *xingshu* used in *Lantingxu* chronologically impossible and therefore a clear sign of forgery? In essence, the debate here turned on whether *lishu* and *xingshu* could be used as reliable dating factors.<sup>40</sup>

Gao argued that several scenarios were equally possible. It is true that *lishu* was representative of the Eastern Han era (25–220) while *xingshu* started to be popular in the Tang era (618–907). Yet that difference did not mean the two styles did not coexist. Quite the contrary: *xingshu* as a universally accepted type replaced *lishu* only gradually, leaving a long period of overlap.<sup>41</sup> Then came the questions of context and writing materials. The more rigid and stately *lishu* was used in formal and solemn contexts such as tombstones and large plaques on monumental buildings. Since these inscriptions were carved onto hard surfaces, they inevitably looked more angular. Furthermore, tombstones were often carved by craftsmen without the calligraphic technique necessary to write in the highly sophisticated *xingshu* style.<sup>42</sup> Popular among upper class literati, *xingshu* was used in intimate and informal contexts, especially letters and casual notes exchanged among family and friends, so it appeared more abbreviated, smooth, and flexible. Further strengthening this stylistic feature was the fact that these letters were written with brush and ink on paper.

Gao's objection was eye-catching not only because he dared to voice blunt dissent against powerful ideologues, but also because his appeal involved Mao's intervention. Unlike Guo, Gao was an obscure figure with no national fame, and his article was initially rejected by multiple publishers.<sup>43</sup> He then sent it to his teacher Zhang Shizhao, a senior statesman who enjoyed Mao's respect. Zhang forwarded Gao's piece to Mao on July 16, saying that he considered it to be well-argued and supported by solid research. Zhang recommended the piece for publication for the sake of academic debate and the advancement of learning.

Mao replied to Zhang two days later. The brief letter dealt with two separate and ostensibly unrelated subjects, but an underlying connection tied them together: historical materialism, a key player in this debate, here starts to emerge in the conversation.

Mr. Zhang:

Your letters and [your book] *Liuwen zhiyao* have all been received and read. I want to go over them again. . . . The big issue here is historical materialism, mainly the issue of class struggle. But this cannot be required of senior scholars whose worldviews have been solidified, so there's no need to make

changes. In the future, historians will probably criticize you, so please be psychologically prepared and don't be afraid of criticism.

I have read Mr. Gao's criticism of Mr. Guo's article. His [Gao's] argument is that we won't find tombstones from underground written in *zhenshu*, *xingshu* or *caoshu*. I'm certain that *caoshu* indeed wouldn't be used on steles;<sup>44</sup> as to *zhenshu* and *xingshu*, we need to wait for more archaeological evidence. But it's natural to have debates. I will persuade Mr. Guo, Kang Sheng, and Boda to support publishing Gao's article. . . .

Mao Zedong  
July 18, 1965<sup>45</sup>

On the same day, Mao forwarded Zhang's letter and Gao's article together with his own brief note to Guo:

Mr. Guo:

Attached are Mr. Zhang Shizhao's letter and Mr. Gao Ershi's article for your deliberation. I'm also including my reply to Mr. Zhang for your reference. Having scholarly "lawsuits" is always a good thing. What do you think? . . .

Mao Zedong  
July 18, 1965<sup>46</sup>

With Mao's sanction, Gao's article finally appeared in full in the national newspaper *Guangming ribao* on July 23.<sup>47</sup> Kang immediately responded by recruiting prominent voices to support Guo. The overly eager servant Long Qian duly offered his service and wrote a fiercely worded response, but serious scholars such as Qigong, Xu Senyu, and Zhao Wanli, wary of possible political consequences, remained reluctant to get involved. Yet they were all pushed to publish perfunctory articles backing Guo's position.<sup>48</sup>

Four decades later, Qigong recounted how the debate was manipulated from behind the scenes. Qigong was a respected expert in calligraphy and especially the history of *Lantingxu* copies, but at the time of the debate, he already had the damning label of a "rightist" following the Anti-Rightist Campaign. Although he thought there was not enough evidence to dismiss *Lantingxu* as a forgery, Guo and others pressed him into showing his support. He ended up writing "The Superstition over *Lantingxu* Should Be Abolished," in which he found a way to praise Guo while implying to the discerning reader that he actually thought otherwise. Looking back, he considered the whole debate an example of "academic discussions getting entangled with politics, or rather the latter using the former as a pretext, to the point that

academic issues became politicized.” Citing the film *The Life of Wu Xun*<sup>49</sup> as a precursor, he wrote:

The top leadership again wanted to launch a massive political campaign and needed another excuse. Those who had experienced that period of history knew that in the end, they picked Wu Han’s *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office* for condemnation, which led to the Cultural Revolution. But before the final target was decided, several other topics were tested, one of which was the *Lantingxu* debate launched in 1965. Average readers would wonder: What relation did an insignificant *Lantingxu* have with political struggle? There was indeed no relation, but in the hands of those who controlled the Party’s ideological lines, it could be elevated to represent grave issues such as [the conflict between] the materialist conception of history (*weiwu shiguan*) and the idealist conception of history (*weixin shiguan*). . . . Kang Sheng and Chen Boda were in control of ideology, and they often drew in and made use of Mr. Guo.<sup>50</sup>

In subsequent years, more details have emerged showing how ideological agendas were at work in the debate, including Kang’s involvement from the very beginning. Together with Guo, he solicited extensive information from the Nanjing Committee of Cultural Heritage Management, which was responsible for excavating the Wang and Song epitaphs.<sup>51</sup> And, as noted, Kang’s “opinion” was prominently displayed in Guo’s article. Mao was not neutral, either: after Gao’s refutation was published, Mao asked Kang whether “Mr. Guo could win his *Lantingxu* lawsuit.” Having read one of Guo’s follow-up articles, Mao expressed his strong approval.<sup>52</sup>

As is well known, Mao and his allies soon found a more suitable excuse to advance his agenda. In November 1965, the historian Wu Han’s play *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office* drew severe condemnation from Yao Wenyuan, a member of the notorious “Gang of Four,”<sup>53</sup> an event that ignited the Cultural Revolution and ushered in a decade of widespread chaos and destruction. In 1973, with the Cultural Revolution still raging, the publishing house Wenwu chubanshe collected eighteen articles and published them as *Lanting Debate* (*Lanting lunbian*). The first volume, devoted to Guo’s camp, consisted of fifteen articles, including four by Guo and two by his wife Yu Liqun under the pen name Yu Shuo. The second volume, covering dissenting opinions, included only three pieces. This editorial approach foregrounded the imbalance of the two sides, and the editors did not conceal their bias:

The majority of these articles sided with comrade Guo Moruo and supported his use of historical materialism as a critical method to overturn emperors’ and powerful ministers’ opinions. . . . It should be pointed out that such

debates reflect the struggle between the materialist conception of history and the idealist conception of history. . . . The publication of this book . . . will provide inspirations about how to adhere to the scientific attitude of dialectic materialism (*bianzheng weiwu zhuyi*) and historical materialism in the appraisal of calligraphy and even the general approach to historical cultural heritage.<sup>54</sup>

In hindsight, readers can better appreciate the degree to which the *Lantingxu* debate, a legitimate artistic and intellectual discourse in itself, became entangled with politics. The debate took place at the cusp of a critical national event within which several trends of thought converged and clashed. Against this background, the debate brought to the fore a fierce competition aimed at seizing the exclusive right to define China's past—and to dictate its future.

### When Antiquarianism Meets Historical Materialism

As I made clear at the beginning of this chapter, although it addresses a long-standing controversy in Chinese calligraphy and palace intrigues in Mao's court, it is ultimately about neither. My focus is on their intersection. What technical aspects in calligraphic history, of all things, made this arena a lightning rod for fierce political struggle? Two factors hold the key to answering this question: antiquarianism and historical materialism. Given their common emphasis on materiality's primacy, these two domains shared a natural affinity. But while antiquarianism assumed an air of disengagement, historical materialism was the exact opposite. It repeatedly turned up in the *Lantingxu* debate, and its impact can also be seen in other case studies in this book. Readers will recall that in chapter 1, for example, Chen Mengjia was required to study ancient history "from the angle of slave society," a reference to a basic argument of historical materialism.

What, then, is historical materialism? By the time of the 1960s, the term had accumulated several layers of meanings in Chinese cultural politics. In this book's introduction, I briefly discussed the "materialist conception of history" formulated by Karl Marx in *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. He summed up the relationship between a society's material foundation and superstructure thus: "It is not the consciousness of men which determines their existence; it is on the contrary their social existence which determines their consciousness." Based on this relationship, Marx argued that society developed through several stages as a result of the continual progress in material production. He broadly outlined these stages as "Asiatic, the ancient, the feudal, and the modern bourgeois methods of production."<sup>55</sup>

Guo spearheaded the adaptation of Marx's theory to the analysis of Chinese antiquity through his groundbreaking yet controversial *Research on Ancient Chinese Society*.<sup>56</sup> As Arif Dirlik observes, "Guo cast his analysis of the origins of Chinese civilization within a scheme of periodization he derived from the list of social formations Marx had enumerated in the preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* as the four 'progressive epochs' in historical development."<sup>57</sup> Most importantly, Dirlik reminds us of the considerable political stakes Guo's view carried, which traveled well beyond the purely academic realm. In the eyes of ardent Marxists, those who disagreed with Guo's outlook could be considered ideological foes: "The assumption of universal validity for this scheme was integral to Guo's justification of his analysis of early Chinese history; conversely, objections to his discovery of slave society in early China raised questions by implication about the status of slavery in the Marxist periodization of history and threw doubts on the universality of the scheme of progress Marx had offered in the *Critique*."<sup>58</sup>

Equally noteworthy, especially in the context of this book, is the fact that Guo also derived his authority from his skillful use of archaeological material, particularly the Shang oracle bones and Zhou bronze inscriptions. With *Selected Inscriptions from the Ruins of Yin (Yinqi cuibian)*<sup>59</sup> and *A General Compilation of Oracle Bone Inscriptions (Buci tongzuan)*<sup>60</sup> to his credit, Guo achieved acclaim as one of the four authorities in oracle-bone studies, the others being Luo Zhenyu, Wang Guowei, and Dong Zuobin. Guo's analysis yielded the conclusion, itself a subject of much debate, that the Shang dynasty was a primitive society and the Zhou was a slave society, an argument that conveniently fitted Marx's theory.<sup>61</sup> Luo and Wang opposed Marxism as vehemently as Guo supported it. Yet, ironically, all three remained convinced that the oracle bones validated their respective beliefs.

In subsequent years, Stalin would develop Marx's periodization of human society into five relationships of production: primitive communal, slave, feudal, capitalist, and socialist. Emphasizing the primacy of materiality over spirituality, Stalin argued, "If in different periods of the history of society different social ideas, theories, views and political institutions are to be observed; if under the slave system we encounter certain social ideas, theories, views and political institutions, under feudalism others, and under capitalism others still, this is not to be explained by the 'nature,' the 'properties' of the ideas, theories, views and political institutions themselves but by the different conditions of the material life of society at different periods of social development."<sup>62</sup> The Chinese Communist Party presented this view, together with Marx's original theory, as scientific, universal, and

uncontestable. Party elites used it to justify the regime's core policy of class struggle (as indicated in Mao's letter to Zhang), to support materialism over idealism, and to promote the view that historical development could be clearly divided into stages.

In communist China, idealism (*weixin zhuyi*) was yet another heavily politicized category that was denounced as a deadly enemy of materialism (*weiwu zhuyi*), the cornerstone of the regime's official ideology. According to this ideology, the totality of intellectual history offered itself up to interpreters in black-and-white terms, with materialism serving as the progressive, scientific, and correct view, while idealism was synonymous with the subjective, the erroneous, and the politically reactionary. As the two terms became popularized in everyday use, they lost their complex philosophical connotations and simply came to mean objectivity versus subjectivity or, more often than not, objectivity versus willfulness. But the Chinese terms *weixin zhuyi* and *weiwu zhuyi* had their own intellectual genealogy. Wolfgang Lippert has shown that both were borrowed from Japanese translations of the German words "Idealismus" and "Materialismus." Interestingly, *yuishin-ron*, the Japanese term for "Idealismus," was inspired by the Chinese Buddhist term *Cheng weishi lun*, itself a seventh-century sinicization of a Sanskrit concept. And *yuibutsu-ron*, the Japanese term for "Materialismus," was coined as the antonym of *yuishin-ron*. Thus both the Japanese and Chinese terms bear the marks of Buddhism, especially the implication of *onliness* as conveyed by the Japanese *yui* and the Chinese *wei*.<sup>63</sup> With its emphasis on the exclusive correctness of object-based evidence, the translation of materialism into *weiwu zhuyi* tilted Marx's socioeconomic historical materialism toward a more metaphysical and epistemological interpretation.

Therefore, it makes sense that historical materialism would be the position Guo consistently advanced in the *Lantingxu* debate. He argued that each epoch had its own aesthetic preference and artistic style as defined by its material basis. Since these stages followed one another in fixed order, their arts and aesthetics did the same and could not possibly defy that order. Guo's core argument, which Ledderose summarizes as "unilinear stylistic evolution," bears out this way of thinking.<sup>64</sup> *Lishu* was a product of the Jin era and *xingshu* was that of the Tang; the timeline was fixed and uncontestable. Here we once again encounter the prevalent mentality of what Wu Hung calls "dynastic time," which "organizes historical information and channels the historical imagination through successive dynasties from the third millennium BCE to the twenty-first century CE."<sup>65</sup> In Guo's articulation, dynastic time merged with historical materialism. As he put it in private correspondence:

The *Lantingxu* debate is no longer merely about the authenticity of Wang Xizhi's writing and calligraphy, but more about a crucial principle in cultural history, namely [the correspondence of] epochal customs and artistic trends. History is ever-developing, culture and aesthetic views are accumulative and always changing. Of course, due to differences in social status, living conditions, and personal experiences, people from the same era would develop different styles. However, comparative research in history has made clear that, overall, an epoch always generates characteristics [shared by all its products]. Bronze artifacts of the Shang and the Zhou dynasties are like that; stone sculptures of the Han and the Tang, too, are like that; how could poetry, painting, and calligraphy be exceptions? . . . Only based on many detailed and in-depth analyses can we summarize the systematic evolution of our country's culture in different historical periods.<sup>66</sup>

When he made the above claims, Guo's thinking also showed traces of two intellectual aspects that were crucial for the *Lantingxu* debate: the rise of antiquarianism and especially stone epigraphy since the seventeenth century, as well as the long-standing tension between excavated artifacts (*chutu wenwu*) and transmitted documents (*chuanshi wenxian*) that was intensified in the twentieth century. In the first aspect, extensive collecting and study of stone inscriptions injected new ideas into historiography and changed the way people looked at calligraphy as an art form. Crafted with metal tools on hard surfaces rather than with brush on paper, these inscriptions represented a kind of beauty completely outside the revered tradition established by *Lantingxu*. Laying the theoretical groundwork for this fusion of antiquarianism and calligraphic aesthetic was Ruan Yuan, a prominent statesman and leading scholar of the Qing philological tradition.<sup>67</sup> While Ledderose points out that Ruan's idea prefigured Guo's and was in certain aspects identical to it,<sup>68</sup> I would like to stress some crucial differences between the two.

In a series of writings on the history of calligraphy, Ruan sought to rehabilitate the neglected tradition of stele inscriptions, as well as the "Northern School" these inscriptions exemplified. In two seminal essays, "On the Northern and Southern Schools of Calligraphy" (*Nanbei shupai lun*) and "On Northern Stele and Southern Paper" (*Beibei nantie lun*),<sup>69</sup> he laid out his core arguments, namely (1) although the early Tang saw the peak of Wang Xizhi's idolization, repeated copying had modified the true face of his art, and in that process, each copier had unwittingly allowed his personal touch to sneak into even the most faithful reproductions; (2) specifically, the early Tang's own penchant for the smoother, cursive Southern Style associated with paper- or silk-based, intimate and mostly epistolary ephemera obscured and corrupted Wang's *lishu* flavor, which was associated with the angular and rigorous

Northern Style typically used on grand steles; thereafter, the Southern Style became the norm for centuries, and it was Ruan's goal to rectify that; and (3) the original *Lantingxu* might be closer to the Southern Style, but intriguingly, some of the early and most important freehand copiers of *Lantingxu*, such as Ouyang Xun and Chu Suiliang, were in fact trained in the Northern Style, and brought its elements into their renderings of *Lantingxu*.<sup>70</sup>

Guo and Ruan agreed on one point: Wang Xizhi's signature style was anchored in *lishu* or at least retained ample *lishu* flavor. The key difference between them is that, while Guo thought that *Lantingxu*, if it were truly written by Wang Xizhi, should look like *lishu* and not *xingshu*, Ruan did not question that Wang wrote *Lantingxu*; instead, he argued that *Lantingxu* as we have come to know it no longer resembles the original due to modifications in the lengthy process of transmission and reception. Ruan stressed that his observations were firmly grounded in his antiquarian investigations, including his collecting and study of brick inscriptions: "For the past two decades, I have paid attention to steles in the south and the north, comparing them against orthodox history; [as a result,] the genealogies and schools [of calligraphy] became crystal clear."<sup>71</sup>

Ruan's theory was further elaborated in major works such as Bao Shichen's *Yizhou shuangji*,<sup>72</sup> Ye Changchi's *Yu shi*,<sup>73</sup> and Kang Youwei's *Guang Yizhou shuangji*.<sup>74</sup> Together these authors contributed to the formation of *Beixue*, or the study of steles as a subfield and stylistic category in calligraphy,<sup>75</sup> as opposed to the *Tiexue*, or the study of the model script. Behind these two categories is a key distinction involving excavated cultural artifacts and transmitted documents.<sup>76</sup> Steles were neglected and mostly stayed out of circulation, while model script masterpieces, particularly *Lantingxu*, were repeatedly copied, imitated, studied, and interpreted.

This distinction was thrown into even greater relief by the excavation of the oracle bones and other important archaeological projects,<sup>77</sup> and in this regard, as we have seen, Wang Guowei was especially influential for coining "the method of dual-layer evidence" in the 1920s. Wang observed that transmitted documents were a mixture of legends and facts, thus causing widespread distrust. Now, however, thanks to ongoing archaeological discoveries, these documents could be compared against and verified by excavated artifacts. More specifically, Wang argued that instead of indiscriminately discrediting transmitted documents, excavated artifacts often helped demonstrate the opposite; even less-than-reliable legends frequently contained a certain kind of historical truth.<sup>78</sup>

Although widely cited and frequently praised, Wang's method was only common sense and offered little that was new. If excavated and transmitted

evidence had not been widely compared before, that omission was not because previous scholars were ignorant (they surely were not). Wang's true insight lay in his recognition that these materials yielded two equally valid yet often irreconcilable versions of historical truth. The transmitted documents, even with distorted elaborations, still contained serious efforts by later generations to make sense of the past. The question was how to properly decipher these efforts.

When two types of evidence in the same case contradicted each other, the natural tendency was to side with excavated materials over transmitted documents, based on the former's presumed objectivity. This was the basic assumption of the influential Doubting Antiquity School (*Gushibian pai*), whose leader Gu Jiegang came up with the "view of layerwise accumulated, fabricated Chinese ancient history."<sup>79</sup> According to this framework, as time passes historical records tend to extend further back, and descriptions of the past become ever more detailed. Our knowledge of antiquity is formed by the continual accumulation of strata; more and more elaborations and interpretations are constantly being made, and stacked stratum upon stratum "above" the original event. If we are unable to retrieve the original truth of the past, we could at least settle on the earliest available stratum of interpretation that lies closest to the truth.<sup>80</sup> That was the core of Gu's conceptualization (at least at the early stage of his career) of the "Doubting Antiquity" method.

Gu, as we may recall from chapter 1, was an ardent admirer of Wang. But they parted ways over their attitudes toward those later strata. While Gu saw them mainly as distortions, Wang considered them worthy of serious attention in their own right, albeit requiring far more nuanced and sophisticated analytic skill and a lot of patience. We can reframe their difference here as the following question: Is it possible to bypass generations of perceptions and interpretations to directly reach the original, unmediated historical fact? And what do we make of those later perceptions and interpretations? Is it fair to dismiss them as subjective colorations and even distortions? If yes, how can we be sure that we ourselves are free of the same? More intriguingly, even if they *are* subjective colorations, they have themselves become an integral part of a broader history of interpretation—in this sense, do they also deserve serious reckoning?

These same questions are equally relevant to the reception history of both *Lantingxu's* presumed author and the work itself. Recent research has revealed apparent discrepancies between the historical Wang Xizhi and the one who appears in posthumous imaginations. Eugene Wang observes that Wang Xizhi's balanced temperament "bears the indelible mark of willful selections and layered reinterpretations and reconfigurations. Wang Xizhi has become

what we now believe him to be. . . .”<sup>81</sup> Reading his miscellaneous epistolary writings, Antje Richter notes that traditional perceptions of Wang’s tranquil calligraphic persona did not correspond to how he appeared in his private letters, where he “admits to being miserable and despairing” and “obviously does not deem it necessary to balance the unrestrained expression of these feelings with neat relativist maxims—be they Confucian, Buddhist or Daoist—that would keep up a façade of enlightened tranquility.”<sup>82</sup> In a compelling analysis of another Wang Xizhi masterpiece, *Xingrangtie*, Martin Kern demonstrates that the canonization of Wang’s individual pieces into a coherent aesthetic oeuvre was the result of a dynamic and dialectic interaction with the imperial state’s cultural ideology. He summarizes the situation as follows: “The artistic persona of Wang Xizhi is the product of his works, not their origin.”<sup>83</sup> The end result, he concludes, is that Wang Xizhi’s calligraphic oeuvre is “not an expression of the master calligrapher’s mind but a representation of the cultural history of imperial China.”<sup>84</sup>

These studies help us delineate the layers of filtering that have long shrouded the historical Wang Xizhi and his oeuvre. In a similar vein, Guo penned a follow-up essay reinforcing his argument in the 1965 debate, here arguing that the philosophical thinking articulated in *Lantingxu*, especially its objection to a quote from *Zhuangzi*, did not form a coherent picture with other records depicting the historical Wang’s Taoist leanings.<sup>85</sup> Although Guo’s analysis was not watertight, his methodological point remains salient: An undeniable gap existed between the original and what was transmitted and received through successive generations.<sup>86</sup>

Returning to the question about how to deal with these historical layers of interpretation in relation to the elusive original entity, we may turn to Hans-Georg Gadamer, who identified in *Truth and Method* two divergent responses: Friedrich Schleiermacher’s *reconstruction* and Hegel’s *integration*. The distinction between these two approaches can help us organize thinkers into two groups. The *reconstruction* approach, often identified with historicism, positivism, and empiricism, holds that each point in history is preserved intact and unchanged on the timeline, accessible to those who have conducted adequate objective research. They make it their goal to recover history “as it truly was,” to borrow Ranke’s famous phrase, cited by Nietzsche and Benjamin. Following Schleiermacher’s thinking, “historical knowledge opens the possibility of replacing what is lost and reconstructing tradition, inasmuch as it restores the original occasion and circumstances.”<sup>87</sup> Gadamer considered this view nonsensical. “In its continuance in an estranged state,” he argued, the reconstructed work “acquires only a derivative, cultural existence,” so that “putting them back in their historical context does not give us

a living relationship with them but rather a merely ideative representation (*Vorstellung*).<sup>88</sup>

The second approach, in contrast, maintains that the very act of knowing inserts the subject's perspective into the object that is being known. To study the past is always by default a hermeneutic task, for "everything that is no longer immediately situated in a world . . . is estranged from its original meaning." Everything thus "depends on the unlocking and mediating spirit that we, like the Greeks, name after Hermes: the messenger of the gods."<sup>89</sup> Such a perspective involves a "fusion of horizons" between the past and the present.<sup>90</sup> This was precisely Hegel's view: his *integration* approach acknowledged the unavoidable impact of the contemporary mind upon its object of study. According to him, "the essential nature of the historical spirit consists not in the restoration of the past but in *thoughtful mediation with contemporary life*."<sup>91</sup> The relationship between *reconstruction* and *integration* here mirrors the dynamic between excavated cultural artifacts and transmitted documents. To treat excavated cultural artifacts' objectivity as exclusive and to dismiss transmitted documents as unreliable is not just to deny the validity of the mediation process but also to pretend that we can be entirely free of our own perspectives or prejudices, which in truth constitute a fundamental condition for all thinking subjects.

Separately, two authors have offered ingenious and imaginative ways to illustrate the relationship between history and the historically conscious subject. T. S. Eliot suggested that "what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. . . . [T]he past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past."<sup>92</sup> In other words, later events change the way earlier occurrences are perceived, and these earlier occurrences—or the origins, so to speak—exist only in our perception and *as* our perception, no more and no less. The origin-in-itself, devoid of later generations' interpretations, is epistemologically unavailable. Fluid and ever-changing, the origin as such constantly accumulates meanings through its dynamic interaction with each moment when we try to access it.

Along the same line but in a more imaginative and provocative manner, Borges used the case of Franz Kafka to illustrate this point. In the short essay "Kafka and His Precursors," Borges argues that "Kafka's idiosyncrasy is present in each of these [earlier authors'] writings, to a greater or lesser degree, but if Kafka had not written, we would not perceive it; that is to say, it would not exist." In this way, Borges daringly concludes, "Each writer *creates* his

precursors. His work modifies our conception of the past, as it will modify the future.<sup>93</sup> He quotes a short essay by the Tang dynasty author Han Yu as an example of a Kafka precursor. The essay concerns the mythological animal *Qilin* or, in the translation to which Borges refers, the unicorn: everyone is convinced of its existence, but no one knows its exact appearance. So “we could be in the presence of a unicorn and not know with certainty that it is one,” and the “failure to recognize the sacred animal and its shameful or casual death at the hands of the people are traditional themes in Chinese literature.”<sup>94</sup> Han Yu was referring to an important incident in the spring of 481 BCE when an unusual animal was sighted, and only Confucius was able to identify it as *Qilin*.<sup>95</sup> Borges used this example to show that in some cases, “the affinity [between Kafka and his precursor] is not in the form but in the tone.”<sup>96</sup> Coincidentally, and for our own purposes, the *Qilin* also serves as a perfect metaphor for the unknowability of origin-in-itself—and *Lantingxu* in particular. As Brett Levinson observes, “if we do not know what a *Qilin* looks like, each identification and depiction of one, each interpretation (as an actor interprets a script) of one, alters that likeness, so that one never encounters, for certain, a unicorn.”<sup>97</sup> Similarly, each attempt at identifying, describing, and interpreting a historical entity as indefinite as *Lantingxu*—or as Wang Xizhi—inevitably alters their “likeness.” This view of the past falls squarely into the idealist category, which holds that insofar as reality is always processed through the mind, it is also determined by the latter’s structure.

Here we arrive at the point where *Lantingxu* contributes a truly unique insight into the hackneyed debate between materialism and idealism. Borges’s and Eliot’s idealist arguments that the present changes the past were based on two assumptions: first, the past is embodied in works of art that are finished and whose physical appearance or constitution remains mostly unchanged; and second, it is our *perception* of these works that is constantly subject to change. For an idealist, perceptual change is no less real than physical change—or rather, it is the only real change perceivable to us.

With *Lantingxu*, however, we find ourselves dealing with a quite different scenario, on several levels. First, no one had seen this calligraphic masterpiece since the seventh century, so there was no concrete and objective basis to start with. Ruan noted the curious fact that each *Lantingxu* copy resembled a common model but the copies were not identical to one another.<sup>98</sup> Here he echoed Borges’s observation that “if I am not mistaken, the heterogeneous [earlier] pieces I have listed resemble Kafka; if I am not mistaken, not all of them resemble each other.”<sup>99</sup> Unlike Kafka’s texts, though, with *Lantingxu* the observer or reader had to piece together a no-longer-extant original via mutually dissimilar copies. Second, *Lantingxu* as a work of art presumably

emerged out of a specific historical moment that was facilitated by a series of contingencies—including the medium's delicate quality, the calligrapher's personality, and his real-time reactions to a particular lived experience. These elements all played a role in *Lantingxu's* creation, helping shape an artistic piece that, like a musical or theatrical performance, had its existence rooted in time. This historical boundedness in turn helped determine a third aspect of *Lantingxu*—the relative strength between two main methods of reproducing a calligraphy piece: freehand copying (*lin*, “to look down at”) and tracing copying (*mo*, “to trace by hand”).

This third element warrants additional explanation. With freehand copying, the copier carefully observes the original and reproduces it freehand. Tracing copying, on the contrary, outlines the original's shape and fills it in with ink.<sup>100</sup> In other words, the practitioner of tracing copying was almost *drawing* the shape of the character as if it were an image rather than *writing* it.<sup>101</sup> As a result, a tracing copy in theory excels in conveying the original's physical similitude, whereas a freehand copy retains the temporal dimension that lies at the core of calligraphy as a *process*. One could argue, then, that a freehand copy is more faithful to the original: it is a real-time reenactment of the process itself, in accordance with the original tempi and rhythms that guided the running brush. A tracing copy, much as it might resemble the original, remains one step removed from it due to the absence of the temporal dimension. “The work of art,” Gadamer notes, “cannot simply be isolated from the ‘contingency’ of the chance conditions in which it appears. . . . It itself belongs to the world to which it represents itself. A drama really exists only when it is played, and ultimately music must resound.”<sup>102</sup> We may as well say that *Lantingxu* truly exists in every instance when it is being copied out in real time.

Ruan's criticism of *Lantingxu's* copies should be understood in this light. Among the earliest and most authoritative copies that have been passed down, he took to task those attributed to Ouyang Xun and Chu Suiliang: “Ouyang Xun and Chu Suiliang were already in their middle age when they made freehand copies of this piece under the emperor's order, and [by that point] their calligraphic style had already fully formed. Ouyang's calligraphy, being rectangular, upright, and vigorous as it was, really belonged to the Northern School. . . . Chu's freehand copy of *Lantingxu* modified Wang's style, hence could not be considered identical [to the original].”<sup>103</sup>

Ruan's observation on the subtle stylistic discrepancies of these copies is extremely insightful. But instead of seeing them as corruptions, I propose to consider them as inevitable byproducts in a hermeneutic process. Discrepancies are by definition unavoidable during a freehand reenactment:

As long as a process unfolds in real time, it cannot be repeated in the exact same way. Even with the highest calligraphic skills, and even after repeated practice, no one can guarantee that their individual manner will not ever so subtly, at certain minute turn of the wrist, overtake the original's. In the above observation, Ruan showed his fundamental understanding of *Lantingxu* as a process by focusing solely on two prominent freehand copies while ignoring all tracing copies, including the universally admired Shenlong version attributed to Feng Chengsu (see fig. 3.3).<sup>104</sup> To understand freehand copying, we must see it as a *hermeneutic* act in which the horizons of the original calligrapher and the copier fuse in real time. In this process, the subject changes the object and vice versa, hence the unavoidable discrepancies.

What was special about the freehand copying of *Lantingxu* was that this hermeneutic act did not happen in the mind, as it might for a reader reading a Kafka text. Rather, it took place within the concrete making of physical pieces. In this way, we can say that *Lantingxu*'s freehand copies transcended the materialist-idealist dichotomy by realizing idealism's view of historical knowledge through purely material means. Instead of "corrupting" the true face of the past, each freehand copy was the copier's attempt to re-experience *Lantingxu* as an original event; each added a stratum over the original; and each changed the past as much as it was also shaped by it. *Lantingxu* as we know it, then, has never been in its original, objective state. It is, at heart, the accumulation of layers of hermeneutic acts, all the way to the present and beyond.

With the core of the *Lantingxu* debate resting on the discrepancy between excavated artifacts and transmitted documents, the discussion can thus be seen as a sequel to an age-old historiographical discourse. This sequel was complicated by the intervention, through Guo, of historical materialism, whose elevation to the status of universal truth in communist China cast a heavily politicized light on the debate. Applying two fundamental tenets of historical materialism, at least insofar as it was interpreted in China, namely the stage-oriented interpretation of historical development and the primacy of materiality, Guo hoped to prove that the irreversible development of calligraphic styles, in which *lishu* proceeded *xingshu* and in which Wang Xizhi must be confined to his assigned moment, mirrored the stage-oriented and progressive development of society at large. However, as the above analysis has shown, *Lantingxu* defied both of these claims. Subjective perceptions were not separated from, but literally *embodied* in, the materiality of freehand copying; and calligraphic history, like human history, did not follow a mechanical and positivist sequence but was made up of dynamic encounters between the past and every instance of the present.

Therefore, the *Lantingxu* debate stood at the intersection of aesthetic, historical, philosophical, and political discourses, with just as much at stake as this central positioning implies. As it happens, Walter Benjamin grappled with these exact same issues as he probed the implications of historical materialism and early twentieth-century European left-wing politics in relation to the collecting of antiquity. His approach sheds valuable light on a question I raised earlier: What made a fragile piece of fourth-century calligraphy, of all things, a potential lightning rod for brutal political struggles in the twentieth century? Benjamin repeatedly criticized Rankean historicism's view of historical time as linear, homogeneous, continuous, positivist, and progressive—but “empty.”<sup>105</sup> Although it was called “historicism” in Benjamin's vocabulary, this view actually aligned with the historical materialism advocated by Mao and Guo. Like his Chinese counterparts, Benjamin was also preoccupied with the question of class struggle as a crucial driving force for social development. But unlike them, he did not subscribe to a stage-oriented understanding of historical time, according to which society inevitably progresses toward a classless endgame, regardless of the presence or absence of any revolutionary efforts. For Benjamin, this outlook amounted to a lazy materialist determinism: “Once the classless society had been defined as an infinite task, the empty and homogeneous time was transformed into an anteroom, so to speak, in which one could wait for the emergence of the revolutionary situation with more or less equanimity.”<sup>106</sup>

Instead, Benjamin reappropriated “historical materialism” for his own use. Michael Steinberg offers a much-needed clarification of Benjamin's version of historical materialism, which

sounds like, but is not, Marx. . . . For Marx, the coming revolution will indeed break the continuum of the past, and that past is a linear and essentially a monolithic process of successive modes of production and their attending modes of social relations and dominations . . . [whereas] for Benjamin, the view of history as a continuum is fundamentally dangerous because it reinforces the ideology of mechanistic progress, which is dangerous no matter into whose hands it falls. With this distinction, Benjamin's concept of historical materialism—politically compatible as it is with Marx—moves away from Marxian paradigms as it moves closer to a concept of material history.<sup>107</sup>

Contrary to the Marxian paradigms, the kind of historical time Benjamin articulated is “filled full by now-time [*Jetztzeit*],”<sup>108</sup> during which *his* historical materialist “recognizes the sign of a messianic arrest of happening, or (to put it differently) a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past.”<sup>109</sup> To rephrase this idea in secular language, “now-time” is the moment when the

horizons of the present and the past fuse. In this sense, the historical materialist assumes the form of a hermeneutician, an antiquarian collector, or a copier who, instead of slavishly tracing and “drawing” the physical resemblance of the original *Lantingxu*, allows the hand to freely reenact a calligraphic event that took place on a fine but fleeting spring day in 353.

As a rupturing force, the Benjaminian “now-time” serves to dissolve the hegemony of the rigid and mechanical ideology of progress that we encounter in the *Lantingxu* debate. In the meantime, Ruan’s theorization of the Northern Calligraphic Style, in a way akin to Gadamer’s hermeneutics, liberates us from the obsessive quest for the elusive origin which, instead of providing historical clarity and solidity, has become a source of mythologization. Once we revise Ruan’s view that the Northern Style “corrupted” the original *Lantingxu* and instead see it as a precondition for hermeneutic transmission, the participation of the present’s perspective in the construction of historical knowledge is fully legitimized. The view that for someone “who wishes to relive an era” the best cause of action is to “blot out everything he knows about the later course of history”<sup>110</sup> is neither productive nor tenable. As Gadamer reminded us, we risk self-alienation if we let historical study “regard the method of modern historical science as its own true nature.” And “if we disregard ourselves in this way, we have no historical horizon.”<sup>111</sup> We have already witnessed how, at the height of the Cultural Revolution, this scenario was acted out, as ideological dogmatism became a tyrant under the name of science.

Yet the view of history as linear and teleological was not exclusive to Maoist China. It has been widely adopted around the world since at least the nineteenth century. Duara traces the prototype of the idea back to Hegel’s *Philosophy of History*, which prefigured Marxism and came to dominate modern Chinese historiography in connection with its construction of the Chinese nation-state. And “while this History has quite possibly played a part in the attainment of certain modernist goals, it has also involved totalization and closure in order to destroy or domesticate the Other.”<sup>112</sup> Whereas Duara proposes to “bifurcate” history so that “the past is not only transmitted forward in a linear fashion,” but “its meanings are also dispersed in space and time,”<sup>113</sup> the approaches offered by Benjamin and Gadamer point to a different but equally effective response.

There is a final Kafkaesque twist to the *Lantingxu* case. According to Benjamin’s political theology, the problem with the Messiah is not that it never arrives, but that when it does arrive, which can happen at any moment, people will most likely fail to recognize it: “It is an irretrievable image of the past which threatens to disappear in any present that *does not recognize* itself

as intended in that image.”<sup>114</sup> The same can be said about the mythical *Qilin* and, by extension, *Lantingxu*. Since no one has seen the real *Qilin*, if and when it does appear, it most likely will not be recognized by the common eye. The same can be posited of the original *Lantingxu*: it might *not* be the masterpiece people expect it to be based on their preexisting conceptualizations. In a provocative manner, Ruan suggested exactly that: The original *Lantingxu* “might not be as moving as the *Dingwu* copy [fig. 3.5]—except no one ever dares to say this.”<sup>115</sup> Similarly, if the historical person of Wang Xizhi were to suddenly come back to life, he might not strike us as the ideal Confucianist/Taoist gentleman that people have for centuries imagined him to be. Those who wish to preserve the afterlife of Wang as the history of interpretation has rendered it, along with his elusive masterpiece as it persists in our collective



FIGURE 3.5. *Song ta Dingwu Lanting* 宋拓定武蘭亭 (Dingwu copy of *Lantingxu* in a Song-dynasty rubbing), first eight lines on two pages. Collection of the Palace Museum, Beijing.

imaginations, would probably do well to hope that the original *Lantingxu* is never recovered.

Today, the *Lantingxu* debate appears to have been won by believers, even though both sides still have their merits (and shortcomings). On the one hand, archaeological findings have demonstrated that Guo's first claim—that *xingshu* could not have appeared in Wang Xizhi's time—is patently false. In fact, not just *xingshu*, but a wide variety of scripts, coexisted in a vibrant calligraphic environment.<sup>116</sup> On the other hand, from a purely scientific point of view, and barring highly unlikely archaeological discoveries, scholars will not reach a definitive conclusion about *Lantingxu*'s authorship. It is possible that *Lantingxu* might have been forged by a Tang calligrapher after all and then disguised as Wang Xizhi's work; or it might simply have been transformed or deformed during repeated copying. As Richter accurately summarizes, "Generally speaking, there can hardly be any absolute proof of authenticity of any transmitted text, other than its retrieval in a controlled archaeological excavation."<sup>117</sup> Guo went too far when he claimed that *Lantingxu* absolutely was *not* written by Wang Xizhi, whereas many of his detractors were unfalsifiable, saying that the evidence was not adequate to justify this claim, or quite simply that artifacts do not exist for the purpose of supplying evidence for our grand narratives.

Guo should be recognized for his fresh critical thinking and for the plethora of modern perspectives he introduced into an ancient debate; yet in the end, in the eyes of the debate's architects, the goal was less about proving *Lantingxu*'s authorship than about promoting a certain philosophy of history that served the political agenda of the Communist Party. In hindsight, Mao's ideologues in fact deserve credit for their choice. In singling out *Lantingxu*, they selected a perfect example to demonstrate the general law of historical development—except that the conclusion it yielded was not what they had wished for.

## Weaving

According to the *Book of Diverse Crafts*, “cyan and red interspersed is called wen.” . . . The “interspersion of patterns” is the original meaning of wen. . . . The Yellow Emperor’s scribe Cangjie saw traces of animals’ footprints and realized that patterns could be used for differentiation.

DUAN YUCAI, “WEN” ENTRY, ANNOTATED *SHUOWEN JIEZI*<sup>1</sup>

In 1953, the Chinese National History Museum mounted an *Against Squandering* exhibition atop the Forbidden City’s magnificent Meridian Gate. The exhibition was organized for participants of the “National Conference on Museum Work” and intended as a warning against wasting public funds on acquisitions deemed to have little or no value. Visitors were greeted by a gentle and modest middle-aged man; he would guide them through the display cases and patiently explain the exhibited objects with impressive expertise. This man was none other than the person who had “squandered” public funds to purchase these objects. His bosses put up this spectacle to humiliate their own employee as much as to “educate” museum workers across the country.<sup>2</sup>

As it happened, the disgraced exhibition guide was also one of the most accomplished writers of modern China. Shen Congwen was renowned for his novellas and novels, including *Border Town*, *Long River*, *Xiaoxiao*, and *The Love of the Shaman God*, as well as numerous short stories and essays. His writings wove a colorful tapestry of folkloric traditions steeped in vibrant and diverse ethnic customs, which stood in stark contrast to burgeoning urban centers where the ethnic Han people formed the majority. A representative of the so-called Nativist or Native Soil writers, Shen had carved out for himself a path divergent from his more cosmopolitan peers.<sup>3</sup>

But visitors to the exhibition were unlikely to associate these literary achievements with the man standing before them. This bizarre episode raises

many questions. Why did Shen, among the foremost novelists of his time, change course and take up a low-level museum job? What kind of “worthless” objects did he collect to warrant such insult? And why did he ignore the intended mockery and seemed genuinely eager to carry out his task? To find answers, we need a longer timeframe to examine the periods before and after the 1949 communist takeover, a momentous event that created a deep rupture in Shen’s career, cleaving it into two seemingly unrelated halves: one devoted to literature, and the other to artifacts.

In tackling the above questions, this chapter zooms in on the most neglected and misunderstood aspects of Shen’s life—his collecting and study of ancient material culture. As a major writer in the modern canon, Shen’s literary output has been the subject of extensive scholarly scrutiny. In comparison, attention to Shen as a material historian remains relatively scant, owing both to his self-effacing attitude and to the perceived triviality of the artifacts he studied. Above all, Shen’s legacy in the arena of material culture seems so out of sync with his literary career that it presents unique challenges for a synthetic evaluation of his cumulative legacy.<sup>4</sup> Jeffrey Kinkley’s magisterial biography evaluates Shen from a literary point of view, with only brief references to the later work to which Shen unswervingly devoted forty years of his life—by all accounts a full career in itself.<sup>5</sup> Shen’s one-time student Wang Zengqi lamented, “Our country thus gained a connoisseur by losing a novelist. But from a cultural-historical perspective, wasn’t that a great loss? And yet, whose loss?”<sup>6</sup> Xiaojue Wang offers a more informed and balanced view, arguing that “the aesthetic and historical visions he constructed in his art scholarship, which continued and further developed his previous artistic imaginations and propositions, have for too long been ignored. Is this consignment of Shen Congwen the art historian to oblivion not another great loss for the Chinese intellectual world?”<sup>7</sup>

To undo this historic injustice, this chapter puts forward three theses. First, the tragic collapse of Shen’s literary career, a result of external political forces, laid bare the expressive limits of literature in the face of an intolerant ideology. In response, Shen turned to artifacts as his preferred alternative, once again foregrounding the tension between *wen* (the textual) and *wu* (the material), a recurring theme in this book. Yet underlying this tension was also a striking cohesion: as I will show, the two ostensibly disjointed phases were in fact spiritually commensurate with each other and formed an organic whole. His fictional works have been described as “lyrical,” in contrast to the “epic” and “revolutionary” works prevalent at the time.<sup>8</sup> When examined in the proper theoretical framework, his interpretation of quotidian artifacts reveals exactly the same lyrical quality.

Second, Shen's egalitarian taste in material culture, unorthodox during his time, made him a Chinese pioneer for recognizing the aesthetic and political value of decorative arts. By placing Shen in the context of a more recent moment of modernity—the Cold War—Xiaoju Wang sees in his interest in miscellaneous artifacts an “aesthetic of the fragment and fragmentation,” which challenged “the monumentality and totality of the socialist revolutionary ideology that has taken hold in mainland China since the 1949 divide.”<sup>9</sup> Pushing the context further back in history, I argue that Shen saw in these artifacts the embodiment of a preindustrial mode of labor and its corresponding socio-economic relations, as well as a world of subtle yet profound affects unfamiliar to the modern urban audience. In this way, Shen unwittingly facilitated a dialogue between local Chinese traditions and the international Arts and Crafts movement. Since the latter was partly inspired by nineteenth-century European left-wing politics, especially Marxism, which was the official doctrine in communist China, Shen's neglected and widely misunderstood research into material culture turns out to be of crucial importance for Chinese and international cultural politics.

Last but not least, this chapter argues that, by giving long overdue attention to the material cultures and histories of the “minority” ethnic groups and by mapping them onto China's vast and geographically complex territory, Shen not only transcended the scope of traditional antiquarian practices but initiated a renegotiation and interrogation of “Chineseness” built on the Han-dominant and Confucian *wen* tradition.<sup>10</sup> He stands out from other antiquarian collectors in this book for his radical departure from script-centrism toward a new type of collecting—a miscellaneous category of uninscribed, ordinary, and functional artifacts. In doing so, however, he was simply reaffirming *wen*'s neglected material dimension.

### The Death of a Writer

Typical biographies of Shen Congwen the writer would effectively come to a full stop in 1949, the year that saw the founding of the People's Republic of China. My story, in contrast, begins with this same moment. By the late 1940s the Communist Party was set to defeat the government led by the Nationalist Party in the Chinese Civil War. When the People's Liberation Army approached Beijing in late 1948, the retreating Nationalist government drew up a list of prominent scholars, scientists, and writers and offered to evacuate them to the south. Shen's name was on the list, but just like Chen Mengjia, he decided to stay. His attitude, though, remained ambivalent. Within a few days, he had written two letters with contradictory messages. On November

28, he wrote to his brother with cautious optimism, suggesting that he could just get on with his literary career as before, even sketching out an ambitious plan to write eight to ten more novels.<sup>11</sup> But on December 7, he struck a more somber tone. Addressing the author Ji Liu, he remarked: "In a broader perspective, China is no doubt entering a new era. For those who write, if they want to be meaningful and useful, then the traditional writing method and attitude really need to be seriously reassessed. All the old practices have to be resolutely abandoned, and one has to learn from the beginning."<sup>12</sup>

On the surface, it might seem counterintuitive that Shen would find it difficult to fit his literary aesthetics in the new regime's ideological requirements. After all, he was best known for sympathetic depictions of ordinary people's life in a rural setting, which ostensibly aligned with the Communist Party's preference. But deep down, he grasped quite precisely what was at stake, and perceived a fundamental incompatibility between the new regime and his creative freedom as a writer: "Now approaching middle age, [my] sentiments are congealed, and maybe because I am temperamentally an introvert, and I am lacking in social skills, and while for the past two to three decades the way I write all starts with 'thinking,' now it has to start with 'believing,' [and] it would be very difficult to change course. Very soon, even if I am not forced to give up writing, I will eventually have to do so anyway. This is the inevitable destiny of some people of my generation." There can hardly be a more succinct way to describe the conflict than between "thinking" and "believing." For the new regime, ideological compliance must be an absolute prerequisite; everything else followed from it.

It is worth noting that, unlike many authors of the time, Shen had always kept his distance from politics. Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, he repeatedly stressed the importance of literature's complete separation from politics.<sup>13</sup> Though often critical of the Nationalist government, he was not an avowed supporter of the rival Communist Party, either. But as we have already seen in the case of Shi Zhecun, being a well-known author in twentieth-century China meant that it was hard to be completely insulated from the political sphere. Shen's philosophy directly contradicted the Communist Party's cultural policy, laid out by Mao Zedong in no uncertain terms at the 1942 "Yan'an Forum on Literature and Arts," in which he announced that "In today's world, all cultures or literatures and arts belong to a certain class, and belong to a certain political agenda. Art for art's sake, trans-class art, or art that is parallel to or independent from politics, in fact do not exist."<sup>14</sup> As a result, "for any class in any class society, the political principle is always primary, the artistic principle secondary."<sup>15</sup> Shen did not appear to subscribe to this view. In David Wang's words, he indulged in "an aloof, even transcendental state of mind, a

far cry from the current revolutionary mode of thinking.”<sup>16</sup> In an ideologically polarized climate, tolerance for ambiguity was scant; his reservation toward left-wing politics and his neutral position earned him an unpopular reputation among the leftist camp. Along with his friend Shi Zhecun, Shen was placed in the so-called Third Type of People category, namely those who did not belong to the right or to the left and were considered friends of neither.<sup>17</sup>

Soon after Shen decided to stay on the mainland, the tide turned against him. The prominent scholar and powerful pro-communist activist Guo Moruo, whose words carried considerable weight, published the fiercely worded “A Rebuke to Reactionary Literature and Art,” accusing Shen of writing “pornographic” novels that “soften people’s will to fight.”<sup>18</sup> Even worse, he described Shen as “having always been deliberately acting as a reactionary” and said that while China was fighting for its survival against Japan, Shen was busy “singing the tune that [literature] has nothing to do with war against Japanese invasion.” Similarly, during the civil war, “he again cried against ‘writers participating in politics.’”<sup>19</sup> According to Guo’s logic, even the avoidance of politics qualified one as an enemy.

Guo’s scathing attack was a call to arms. In January 1949, students at Peking University where Shen taught mounted posters with large characters (a form of public accusation) against him, and he received letters attempting blackmail. His home life was not much better: Pressure was mounting from his wife Zhang Zhaohe, who wanted to be more “progressive” and thought that her husband was “dragging her legs,” that is, burdening her as she tried to move forward.<sup>20</sup>

Overwhelmed by these crises, Shen suffered a nervous breakdown. His friends the architect couple Liang Sicheng and Lin Huiyin and the logician Jin Yuelin, all professors at Tsinghua University, took him into their homes, hoping to calm his nerves. Their kindness did not prevent Shen from attempting suicide on March 28, but he was saved by family and friends who had been watching him closely. Believing that he suffered from persecutory delusion, they sent him to a psychiatric hospital. After his release in April, Shen lost his teaching position. In August, he was assigned to work at the National Museum of History, but he was soon sent to a so-called political school to receive a year-long “reeducation.”

Upon completing “reeducation,” he was allowed to resume his writing career, but Shen chose to return to the museum instead.<sup>21</sup> Although he did make a few tentative attempts to write fiction again, they eventually came to nothing.<sup>22</sup> In 1953, his publisher on the mainland destroyed all inventory and printing plates of his works. That same year, the Nationalist government in Taiwan banned his works.<sup>23</sup> Suddenly he was a literary outcast on both sides,

a rare distinction indeed. The birth of the People's Republic thus also marked the death of Shen Congwen as a writer.

Shen's career shift mystified friends, colleagues, readers, and literary scholars. Many wondered why such a prolific author had stopped writing. They considered it a great loss and blamed the problem partly on his mental illness. This line of thinking, I would argue, constitutes yet another of the many injustices done to him. While his mental state was no doubt strained, to what extent it could be considered a clinical condition, as his family claimed, is debatable.<sup>24</sup> In this regard, Xiaojue Wang aptly calls our attention to the discourse of insanity not as a pathological condition but rather as a cultural and political metaphor. By connecting Shen's mental breakdown to the protagonist of Lu Xun's "The Diary of a Madman," she questions the fundamental idea of normalcy, which requires the act of othering to justify itself.<sup>25</sup> Shen himself clearly stated the following: "Everything I say, nobody understands. Not even one friend is willing to make sense of it or has the courage to understand [the fact that] I am not mad."<sup>26</sup> At a time when many were either optimistic or indifferent to the imminent changes, Shen's reaction was regarded as overwrought, neurotic, and a nuisance. In hindsight, he deserves to be recognized as possessing a visionary foresight that eluded many. His personal struggle in 1949 was only a prelude to a common pattern: Once in power, the new regime initiated sweeping changes, including the Thought Reform (or Ideological Remolding) Campaign, mainly directed at intellectuals. In 1951, Premier Zhou Enlai reminded an audience of professors and students that "a truly neutral position is basically nonexistent" and demanded they understand that "as long as you're determined to remake yourself, no matter how much you were immersed in the old society, you can succeed. . . . To reform old thinking, it is necessary to constantly analyze your own thoughts; this is how you gradually make progress."<sup>27</sup>

To do justice to Shen and to gain a thorough understanding of this transitional moment in his life, we need to take his own words seriously. Thankfully, he left extensive records of his thought process. Numerous diary entries and letters to relatives and friends right up to the point of his suicide attempt reveal a sensitive and troubled mind torn between a desperate yearning to be understood and a profound sense of resignation. These writings also demonstrate an extraordinary sense of clarity, and it would be a grave mistake to let the notion of Shen's "mental breakdown" lead us to dismiss what he said during this period.

At the core of these materials were three texts in manuscript form. "A Person's Confession" (*Yigeren de zibai*, dated February 1949) and "On Southwestern Lacquerware and Others: An Autobiographical Chapter—Variations on a

Fantasy” (*Guanyu xinan qiqi ji qita: yizhang zizhuan—yidian huanxiang de fazhan*, dated March 6, 1949; hereafter “On Southwestern Lacquerware”) both belong to an ambitious but unfinished autobiographical project. “Some Records: For a Few Friends” (*Yidian jilu: gei jige shuren*, dated February 1949; hereafter “Some Records”) is likely a stand-alone piece. These idiosyncratic texts are part autobiographical, part confessional, and part epistolary. They include spontaneous streams of memories, reflections, self-analysis, musings on artistic, philosophical, and literary matters, and disparate historical details referencing archaeology, folklore, and ethnic histories. The manuscript of “Some Records” is itself a harrowing testimony to the political violence Shen endured. It was confiscated during the Cultural Revolution when Shen’s home was repeatedly raided for “antirevolutionary” evidence. When it was returned to the family, the manuscript bore unsightly red underlining, marking possible evidence of thought crime.<sup>28</sup> These documents not only help us identify the continuity in Shen’s thinking as he transitioned from author to collector but open a window onto a critical moment in Chinese history. But they have yet to receive the recognition and thorough analysis they deserve.

“A Person’s Confession” opens with the following statement:

After much dithering and wavering, extreme agitation and excessive depression, the strife to survive and suicidal despair . . . three weeks of back and forth, from delirium to clarity, I experienced the true meaning of a “life.” [By] repeatedly reexamining all that has passed and looking to the future, I attempt to write down the following to serve as “a sample reference for pathology and abnormal psychology.” In the future, if [this document is] placed side by side with all my works, maybe it is possible for the original state of the “human” to emerge.<sup>29</sup>

Shen intended this piece to be a testament and valedictory statement on his literary career, but he also hoped it would serve as a protest, a self-vindication and a manifesto of his philosophy of life. Written in an earnest and beseeching tone, the piece is deceptive. A casual reading gives the impression that Shen fully accepted and supported the new regime’s requirements and that he placed the blame squarely on himself for having failed to adapt to them. But beneath such humility, he held a defiant position. He rejected the whole “Thought Reform” idea,<sup>30</sup> a pillar of the Communist Party’s policy for a new China. He particularly took issue with the regime’s demand that men and women renounce their “individual self” and dissolve into an epic, universal political process.<sup>31</sup> This dissolution was impossible, he argued. A person’s thought grows organically out of, and always retains its link to, past experiences; it has its own continuity and coherence. Since what has already

happened in a person's life cannot be altered, neither can one's thought be "reformed" at will or according to a superimposed ideology. "Thought Reform" thus amounted, in his view, to an unfeasible denial of the fundamental core of one's personality.

"Some Records" echoes "A Person's Confession" by asking a series of questions (underlined in red by the investigators): "What should I write? What can I still write? [My] pen is already frozen; [my] life is also frozen. All is awaiting liberation, awaiting reform."<sup>32</sup> The most noteworthy section concerns Shen's reaction to a conversation his architect hosts were having, which proved to be a stunningly accurate prophecy:

The three architects are talking about their planned spring trip to see Yingtian Temple's pagoda and discussing the forms of Chinese pagoda in general. But they will never realize that, right in front of them, there is a collapsed pagoda, a ruined mound. All the clay and tile decorations, after years of invisible winds and rains' onslaught from all directions, have gradually been eroded, and eventually collapsed. In the impressions of many, it still retains the shape of a pagoda; through imagination, one can still detect, in the breezes of early autumn and late spring, dawn and midnight, a hint of history in the bells' faint murmur. The story is gentle and quiet, vaguely containing the sorrows accumulated from lived experiences. The precise surveying of this kind of pagoda is an impossible task. Even before the survey started, it had already collapsed, leaving behind only grey and dusty ruins. Eventually, when the ruin is rediscovered, perhaps it would attract a small number of people's attention. But most would turn to praise, celebrate, and worship all those brand-new, abstract structures. The character *ta* (pagoda)'s implication of independence and loneliness, its symbolic meaning in Chinese cultural history, will be ignored by all but a few experts. As to the purely intangible pagoda, built through long years with character and stamina, energy and dedication, no one will recognize it.<sup>33</sup>

The "collapsed pagoda" refers to Shen himself. Thanks to this casual conversation he overheard, the pagoda suddenly pulled on his heartstrings and became a multilayered symbol. First, it echoed the pagoda in his most successful novella, *Border Town*. In that story, a white pagoda is the landmark of the border town Chadong; it overlooks the small family of the teenage girl Cuicui, her grandfather, and a yellow dog. The pagoda has long been a reassuring companion that silently bears witness to the joy and sorrow of the family. Toward the end of the story, it collapses on the same night the grandfather dies.<sup>34</sup> The physical structure seems to be in a state of equilibrium with the invisible but unshakable link between Cuicui and her caring guardian, thus prompting Shen to borrow the pagoda here for a second layer of meaning. Now he, like

the pagoda, had also collapsed—although physically he seemed to be intact, intellectually and spiritually, as a writer, he was already gone.

The coexistence of the tangible and the intangible in the pagoda metaphor produced a third layer of meaning. Shen's hosts Liang Sicheng and Lin Huiyin were both prominent historians of Chinese architecture, and dedicated their lives to surveying, documenting, and protecting ancient structures across the country. Their planned trip was not for leisure but part of their regular and often arduous work, which had now assumed greater significance and urgency: Large quantities of material remains from China's past had been destroyed, and more (such as the ancient city of Beijing) were being threatened by the war that ground on. The new regime was promising a "new China," but intellectuals like Liang, Lin, and Shen naturally wondered what fate awaited old China's material heritage. Their concern was not restricted to the physical dimension, because they understood that abstract cultural values needed a material medium to be sustained and manifested.

Here we might be reminded of the reflections by Simon Leys and Frederick Mote, quoted in this book's introduction, concerning the dialectical relationship between tangible and intangible forms of the past in Chinese culture. Incidentally, Mote's example is also a pagoda—the Great Pagoda of Suzhou, whose continued existence is one of name rather than substance: The current structure is but the latest iteration in a long cycle of collapse and rebuilding. This observation leads Mote to conclude that "Chinese civilization did not lodge its history in buildings. . . . Anyone planning to achieve immortality in the minds of his fellow men might well give a lower priority to building some great stone monument than to cultivating his human capacities so that he might express himself imperishably in words."<sup>35</sup> This observation, insightful as it is, nonetheless betrays two popular biases: the script-centrism often considered typical of Chinese culture and the more universal assumption that, if in other civilizations more so than in China, grandiose monuments are where historical and cultural meanings are stored. It was precisely these two biases that Shen would spend the rest of his life dismantling.

### The Birth of a Collector

It might be true, to a certain extent, that "Chinese civilization did not lodge its history in buildings," but only insofar as "history" is understood narrowly as a particular kind of grand narrative centering on "great man theory," and only insofar as "buildings" are defined narrowly as ambitious and monumental projects. Other types of history, lodged in less conspicuous and imposing physical forms, are no less representative of the Chinese civilization. When

these other forms of material culture converged with Shen's personal life, they became a lifesaving recompense during the greatest crisis in his life, as we see in "On Southwestern Lacquerware," the only other chapter of Shen's aborted autobiography.

On the first page of the manuscript, Shen noted that "between this and the 'Confession' there should be eight chapters," and at the back of page sixteen, he called his present work "the last document before liberation." By "liberation" he meant suicide.<sup>36</sup> The text skips Shen's earlier years and focuses on the period of war closest to the time of his writing, from 1939 to 1946. These details suggest several questions. What kind of urgency propelled him to write about lacquerware, of all things, at precisely the juncture when he was about to give up not only his prized literary career but his life? And what could they possibly have to do with his autobiography?

The chapter begins with a reflection on the concept of *chuji*, a small happening that unexpectedly triggers larger events. The Sino-Japanese War had brought widespread misfortune and suffering, including the displacement of the faculties of Peking, Tsinghua, and Nankai Universities. Evacuated from occupied Beijing to the southwestern province of Yunnan, these scholars formed the temporary National Southwestern Associated University. Shen's decision to move his family to the southwest to join this group, he understood in hindsight, was such a *chuji* that led to his discovery of lacquerwares in the region. During his eight-year sojourn in Yunnan, he was "enlightened" by "something in the remnants of southwestern cultural artifacts, ignored by history, unnoticed by contemporary scholars."<sup>37</sup> Compared with Han-dominated metropolitan centers like Beijing and Shanghai, Yunnan boasted more diverse, distinct, and well-preserved ethnic cultures, in part due to its mountainous geography and proximity to the country's southwest border. Numerous ethnic groups—Bai, Hani, Hui, Miao, and Yi—all lived in the region. While many evacuated scholars treated Yunnan as merely a temporary refuge, a small number, most notably Shen, became fascinated with the area's unique cultural characteristics. Their evacuation, however destabilizing, had afforded these scholars a rare opportunity to revise their long-standing impressions of a monolithic, Han-centric historical narrative.

Shen's enlightenment began when he was making a difficult trip into the province. His vehicle was forced to make frequent stops along the way, but what began as an inconvenience soon turned into an opportunity for him to closely observe everyday utensils in small and remote villages. He noticed that white porcelain cans used to brew tea shared the exact same shape as Ming imitations of *Ge* ware<sup>38</sup> advertised by Beijing's antique dealers. At a public well, he observed a woman drawing water in an ancient manner, using a

bronze hook to catch the ear of a large porcelain jar. The ears were exquisitely decorated with an entwined one-leg mythological animal known as *pankui* in a Song-dynasty style (see fig. 4.1). When shopping for household goods in the provincial capital of Kunming, he discovered some dusty old-stock pottery whose colors, surface textures, shapes, and striking thinness echoed ceramics from sought-after ancient kilns. The locals did not pay any attention to these items. Among the newly arrived professors, only the brothers Liang Sicheng and Liang Siyong, as well as Lin Huiyin, shared Shen's awareness of their importance. Most noteworthy for our discussion, Liang Siyong, an eminent archaeologist, had previously led Academia Sinica's scientific excavation of the Anyang ruins. He confirmed that some of these pottery designs could be traced all the way back to the Shang dynasty.

Admittedly, these initial impressions had not been vetted through rigorous scholarly scrutiny, and Shen had no formal training in relevant fields. But he aimed for something different, anyway. "Even if it was not possible to conduct scientific analysis," he wrote, "one could still attempt to understand



FIGURE 4.1. Pankui wen yi 蟠夔纹匜, a *yi* vessel with *pankui* decorations and a *pankui*-shaped handle. Mid-Spring and Autumn Period (c. 770–481 BCE). National Palace Museum, Taipei, CC BY 4.0 @ [www.npm.gov.tw](http://www.npm.gov.tw).

them generally, in the manner of an artist or a journalist, and gain plenty of insights.”<sup>39</sup> He argued, “Taking into account its climate and geography, as well as its proximity to Burma and India, it can be surmised that this region must have retained cultural remnants not recorded in history that deserve special attention.”<sup>40</sup> These chance encounters prompted Shen to actively seek out locally produced artifacts that might preserve traces of forgotten historical connections.

The scenes we glimpse from this period of his life are fascinating. In one, Shen was visiting a local acquaintance’s home when a lacquered *lian* (cosmetic casket) caught his attention, as it had a striking resemblance to an artifact depicted in *Admonitions of the Court Instructress to the Court Ladies*, one of the earliest extant examples of Chinese handscroll painting dated between 400 and 700 CE (fig. 4.2). Shen guessed the box might retain the ancient design that stored a mirror together with cosmetic powder. He opened it and was excited to find his hypothesis verified: The container had two separate layers, one for a mirror and another for powder. The *lian*’s significance lay in the fact that its style had long been forgotten, despite its being enshrined in one of the most celebrated paintings in Chinese history. According to Shen’s own observations, in the Forbidden City the way bronze mirrors were placed in wooden caskets was of very recent vintage; lacquerware made in the north no longer included *lians*. In Sichuan, Hubei, Hunan, and Guangdong, *lians* were not made in accordance with this ancient design, either. And in Fujian, under the influence of Japan, lacquerware had adopted a five-color scheme instead of the black-and-red one as described in the philosopher Han Fei (c. 280–233 BCE)’s writings. These technical details led Shen to posit that, from a materialist point of view, Yunnan’s culture represented a fresh but often repressed dimension of Chinese history. The cosmetic container was a retention and continuation of an ancient aesthetic that had died out elsewhere.

In itself, Shen’s approach was not new. His investigations here echoed Wang Guowei’s “dual-layer evidence method,” which used archaeological findings and textual materials to verify (or challenge) and illuminate each other.<sup>41</sup> Nor did Shen discover anything of the same extraordinary caliber as the oracle bones. He was simply calling attention to a vast category of artifacts that had been hiding in plain sight and played almost no part in China’s long antiquarian tradition. We can loosely define this category as “applied” or “design” arts, or objects for which everyday functionality is the primary concern. That quotidian quality is precisely what led most scholars to ignore them. Unlike bronze vessels and steles, they did not bear any stately inscriptions recording important historical events, nor did they serve any political,



FIGURE 4.2. *Nüshi zhen tu* 女史箴圖 (*Admonitions of the Court Instructress to the Court Ladies*), scene seven: the makeup, scroll, attributed to Gu Kaizhi 顧愷之 (c. 348–409). British Museum. © The Trustees of the British Museum. All rights reserved. Shared under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) license.

ritualistic, or symbolic function. Unlike calligraphy or literati paintings, they did not demonstrate transcendental brush techniques or idiosyncratic temperaments; and clearly, they could not compete with rare ancient book editions as the carriers of China's elite textual tradition. In some cases, these objects might not even be considered Han Chinese owing to their so-called ethnic minority origin. Their unique value only became apparent when placed in the proper context.

Shen viewed these artifacts as products of “the marriage of the classical tradition and regional styles.”<sup>42</sup> By classical tradition, he was referring to the Confucian core of Chinese culture that nonetheless involved centuries of interactions with heterogeneous regional and ethnic elements and that had—with varying degrees of success—ultimately subsumed these other voices into a singular entity. This homogenizing process took many forms. Besides

violent conquests and peaceful, natural integrations, there was also the urge to “civilize” the “barbarians” by ensuring that they accepted Chinese values. This urge fits Wang Gungwu’s definition of civilization: “A higher stage of development that brings together and swallows up specific cultures. In that sense, ‘civilizing’ is expansionist. It grows, it implies technological and social progress of a kind that is aggressive, which destroys cultures which stand in the way and which gradually brings everything else together into one civilization.”<sup>43</sup> Or as Walter Benjamin succinctly put it, “There is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.”<sup>44</sup>

This process of assimilation was predicated on the idea that the distinction between *Hua* (the central Chinese domain) and *Yi* (the barbarians) did not reside in ethnicity but rather in cultural terms, such as whether China’s political and ethical values had been followed.<sup>45</sup> In the Confucian definition of Chineseness, assigning primacy to culture had always been a central tenet. In his interpretation of the *Zuo Commentary*, the exegete He Xiu distinguished China or the Middle Kingdom from the barbarians by noting the former being “the country of rites.”<sup>46</sup>

On the receiving end of this imposing classical tradition’s influence were numerous regional cultures, such as those that had once existed in Yunnan. Up until the thirteenth century, successive Chinese authorities had retained relatively lax control over the region. With the Mongolian conquest of the Dali Kingdom in 1253, more aggressive integration with China proper was initiated. Subsequently, through the *Gaitu guiliu* policy, the Ming and the Qing regimes gradually replaced the self-governing *Tusis* (chieftains) with directly appointed governors, greatly advancing the integration of Yunnan into the Sinosphere.<sup>47</sup> This fraught relationship, coupled with Yunnan’s unique geography and location, meant that the region experienced steady cultural influx and commingling of heterogeneous elements.

While historians have articulated this relationship in political terms, Yunnan’s material culture provided object-based evidence that complemented and sometimes contradicted the orthodox narrative. By choosing quotidian artifacts as his vantage point and by observing from the periphery where the fusion of heterogeneous elements was most vibrant, Shen waded decisively into the long-standing and highly contentious debate about what constituted “China.” He was keenly aware that it was possible to pinpoint the shifting boundary and inner dynamics of “China” as an elastic cultural organism by tracing the temporal and geographic connections of raw materials, products, techniques, and styles. In the meantime, geographical barriers between Yunnan and the central Chinese domain partially shielded the region from changes happening elsewhere in the country; as a result, many local products

still retained ancient designs that had long vanished in more geographically accessible areas.<sup>48</sup> In other words, these artifacts effectively served as time capsules that provided a glimpse into the styles, aesthetics, techniques, and production materials of the past.

Considering Shen's long-held view on literature, his sensitivity to Yunnan's local culture was not surprising: He had always positioned himself as a spokesperson for repressed traditions. His "Nativist" literary profile was reflective of his upbringing. His hometown Fenghuang was located in a mountainous area in western Hunan Province. Remote from China's urban centers, it was home to the ethnic Tujia and Miao peoples, thus retaining a distinct cultural identity thanks to its peripheral autonomy and ethnic diversity. Shen was partly Miao and had grown up in an environment steeped in indigenous religion, custom, and history. His experiences of the rural western Hunan became firsthand materials for his literary imagination. He did not attempt to disguise his outsider roots but consciously exploited them for his own self-fashioning, crafting and reinforcing his image as a rustic and a spokesperson for the ethnic other.

Added to this geographical dimension was a historical one: Hunan partly overlapped with the territory of the historical Chu state and maintained a spiritual connection with its distinct culture and religion, as represented by the legendary poet Qu Yuan and the *Chu Ci* textual tradition. Although submerged by its dominant northern rivals since the Qin dynasty, the Chu culture remained a countercurrent throughout Chinese history. Shen closely identified himself with this repressed tradition, describing himself as having "the blood of the Chu people."<sup>49</sup> No wonder that once he arrived in Yunnan, he immediately picked up on the ethnic elements that this place had to offer.

Therefore, what began as a minor *chuji* or trigger eventually opened up an entirely new vista for Shen. He became so fascinated by Yunnan's lacquerware that he ended up amassing a substantial collection, and he planned to write a comparative study to explain their cultural and historical importance. Unfortunately, the war cut his project short. The approaching Japanese army made Kunming a major target; at one point, a bomb was dropped near the university dormitory, and he later recalled that "within a minute, eight hundred were dead."<sup>50</sup> He felt unable to continue his work and generously gave away over a hundred pieces of lacquerware to friends and acquaintances. "Thus, these artifacts were gathered and dispersed again, each surviving or perishing in unexpected ways."<sup>51</sup> Another case of "bow lost, bow regained" indeed, though not necessarily in that order.

Back in 1949, now that imminent regime change seemed set to put a full stop to his plan, Shen concluded this autobiographical chapter with a mixture

of resignation and hope. He noted that when Peking University was building the art collection for its museum in 1948, he had donated about a dozen pieces of Yunnan lacquerware still in his possession, with the wish that students would carry on his research.<sup>52</sup> At least half of this supposedly autobiographical piece is not about Shen himself; at bottom, he was writing about his beloved artifacts. To the very end, he remained completely engrossed in their concrete and minute technicalities, despite the inescapable political reality engulfing his personal life. Reading between the lines of the miscellaneous technical details, the reader can sense a burning urgency; the artifacts had formed an intimate connection with Shen's inner life. In this sense, the chapter *is* thoroughly autobiographical, after all. Although the thought that he could no longer realize his ideal through literature had pushed him to despair, he now discovered a different path toward the same goal, which eventually yielded a no less accomplished second career.

### Artifacts as Sentient Structures

Shen's turn to artifacts was not a sudden and surprising twist; his interest in material culture had been with him all along. This aspect is critically important not only for explaining the choices he made after 1949, but also for elucidating the general message of his literary work, which he once described as "abstract lyricism."<sup>53</sup> This interest originated in his formative years. While still a young man in western Hunan, he served as secretary to the local military leader Chen Quzhen, who also happened to be a collector of antiques. Shen had the good fortune of lodging in the building that housed Chen's substantial collection of paintings, bronzes, porcelains, books, and rubbings. One of Shen's tasks was to bind, mark, and organize these objects: "When I was free of assignments, I would take out old paintings one scroll after another, hang them on the wall, and enjoy them by myself. Or I would open books like *Xiqing gujian* or *Xueshi yiqi zhongding kuanzhi* and try very hard to learn the artifacts' names and values by identifying the words and shapes. Or I would randomly browse other titles. . . . That is to say, through this experience, I formed a preliminary and general understanding of the various arts created by the [Chinese] people."<sup>54</sup>

This experience was only the beginning. A few years later, when wandering around Beijing, he discovered the city's antique markets, whose varied and often unexpected offerings exerted a deep influence on him. And as luck would have it, it was a time when the old imperial capital was going through a reshuffling of power and wealth. Institutional and private collections were being dispersed into the marketplace in massive quantities. Shen wrote of over

a hundred stores in the legendary Liulichang market and of smaller dealers who managed estate sales. Mountainous piles of books, paintings, porcelains, and lacquerware dwarfed the National Museum of History's collection in the 1950s. With the Qing Empire gone, artifacts such as official costumes, royally bestowed jadeites, agates, pearls, ivory snuff bottles, and full sets of body armor suddenly lost their relevance and became available as merchandise to everyone.<sup>55</sup> Lacking the means to make purchases, Shen simply tagged along to observe what was on offer. In later years, he repeatedly brought up these experiences to emphasize their transformative role in his intellectual growth.<sup>56</sup>

Although Beijing's antique market nourished countless collectors, Shen's case was special. His lack of a typical antiquarian's training in classical learning, especially philology and bibliography, meant that he was also blessedly free of their biases. His outsider background and unorthodox interests enabled him to appreciate what was looked down upon by connoisseurs. While learned scholars like Luo Zhenyu and Wang Guowei would be on the lookout for texts and artifacts that could elucidate ambiguities in the classics or correct small (though often crucial) discrepancies in historical records, and while Lu Xun would hunt for the precious *yiwen* of mutilated texts, for Shen almost *any* handmade product told a multilayered story—a tale of human warmth and sensibilities, as well as a history of commerce, communication, and technological refinement: “I spent half a year lingering around these places and came to the realization that all these [artifacts] were painstaking products of generations of craftsmen and women. Many of their source materials came from tens of thousands of miles away, representing centuries of cultural exchanges across the world. Their values could not be measured by money; they were filled with goodwill; they could be more meaningful and precious than verbal records, and more capable of elucidating [historical] questions.”<sup>57</sup>

Even after Shen started to pursue his literary career in earnest, his fascination with artifacts stayed with him: “I come to understand my own life through music, and other lives through fine arts.”<sup>58</sup> In creations as small as beehives and spiderwebs, he saw “an industriousness and structural perfection” that conveyed the earnestness, simplicity, and ingenuity of all living creatures. Crucially, it was the humane elements, manifested in the process of manual labor and preserved in material products, that truly enthralled him:

I once saw a young silversmith making silver locks and fishes; for some reason, he was shedding tears as he hammered a little steel model to make decorative patterns. I observed a young carpenter and his young wife doing handicraft work, and realized that besides the physical product itself, there was a whole dimension of the laborer's emotions, from deep immersion to detachment . . . What is especially important is that the colors and shapes, materials and

purposes of these crafts, produced by the working class and provided for the middle class, had the same function as music: they gradually dissolved into my lonesome inner life; they entertained me and educated me; they became intimately intertwined with my spiritual growth. . . .

What I appreciate is not just fine art per se but the character and heart that help craft the lovely and moving products, the genuinely humane, sincere and honest heart. . . . I'm not only interested in the process of crafting, but also in how the craftsman's soul dissolves into the product; his diligence, wish, passion, and practical calculations all enter my heart. All artworks contain their makers' life struggles and mindfulness.<sup>59</sup>

These passages provide two keys to deciphering Shen's lyricism. First, while he was keen to extol these simple yet profound feelings, he by no means considered words to be the most effective medium. In his characteristically modest manner, Shen confessed to choosing literature only because he possessed neither musical talent nor artistic training.<sup>60</sup> It was in everyday artifacts, not in sophisticated verbal articulations, that he found the unfiltered expressions of an intense lyricality. Second, such lyricality came less from the finished product than from the process of labor itself, in which the worker interacted with the material manually, emotionally, and intellectually. They were not working mechanically and blindly but with purpose and wielding total command of the process. When the worker transformed their materials physically, they were also transforming themselves into a more humane, attentive, and sympathetic being.

We can find an exquisite example of manual labor's lyrical qualities in the 1927 short story "Straw Braid" ("Caosheng"). The tale is set in Shawan, a town located in the lower reaches of the Tuo River that flows through Shen's own hometown in western Hunan. The water level usually rises drastically during the rainy season, and the locals would keep a lookout for big fish to catch. But "there are even more stirring desires: the more heavily the river floods, the more joyous they become,"<sup>61</sup> because occasionally all kinds of useful things and even livestock would flow down from upstream, and adventurous villagers would throw themselves into the middle of the river to catch their trophies, then drag them to the bank. To ensure safety, they would tie a straw braid around their waists and fasten the other end to a large aspen tree by the river.

One year, there is plenty of rain, but the water level somehow stays the same. Everyone is getting anxious. An old soldier dreams of the water rising and excitedly goes around telling everyone. The old straw-sandal maker Degui, accompanied by a teenager called Erli, works late into the night to

weave a large straw braid so that he won't miss the predicted flood. As he is busy at work, Degui chats with Erli about what might come from the overflowing river: a calf, a piglet, or perhaps even a large boat? Desperately needing a boost in his quality of life, Degui wants to believe that good fortune is coming his way; "had he any doubt about that old soldier's dream, he wouldn't be weaving the braid so zealously."<sup>62</sup> Throughout their conversation, Erli repeatedly reassures Degui that the flood "definitely will arrive." A sense of suspension permeates the dimly lit room.

In between the conversation and busy activities, Shen keeps an attentive eye on the still artifacts in the workshop:

Inside the room, an oil lamp is hanging on the wall; absorbing the oil, three wicks emit a yellow aura. In the left corner of the wall are a pile of newly woven straw sandals; in another corner is a liquor gourd and an old straw raincoat. Behind the door are some sickles, wooden hammers, long iron nails, and fine ropes. With the door closed, all these objects are illuminated by the lamp.

Squatting in a corner, Erli repeatedly hits the freshly woven straw sandals with a long hardwood hammer, producing a "dong-dong-dong" noise. That hammer is at an advanced age, smooth and reflecting light just like Degui's bald scalp.<sup>63</sup>

These are objects commonly found in a shoemaker's workshop. Under Shen's pen, they show a certain coarseness that testifies to a life history intimately tied to their user's. They are neither exquisite nor pristine, but useful and used; they are aged, rugged, worn, and enduring. They have served practical purposes, and as a result, they bear traces of human strength, stamina, desire, anxiety, and fulfillment. At the center of these silent "characters" is the straw braid, which is in the process of being woven by a pair of strenuous hands: "Degui is almost buried within the neat piles of straw. One of his strong hands grabs the wooden wheel handle and powerfully turns it; the other hand clenches the straws and feeds them into the wheel. The braid grows longer and longer. The 'cha-cha-cha' sound of wooden wheel, the 'zee-zee-zee' sound of the straws being pressed by the wheel, and Erli's rhythmic hitting of the hammer on the straw sandals harmonize into a muffled yet cheerful piece of music."<sup>64</sup>

To understand how physical labor and its product relate to lyricism, we may start from the term's definition. "Lyric," particularly in its post-eighteenth-century sense in Western poetics, refers to "a kind of poetry that expresses personal feeling in a concentrated and harmoniously arranged form and that is indirectly addressed to the private reader."<sup>65</sup> The Chinese equivalent of "lyric," however, reveals something different. *Shuqing* is a compound of the verb *shu*,

meaning “to express,” and the noun *qing*, emotions. *Shu* combines the radical 扌, meaning the hand, and 予, which indicates the pronunciation. It is cognate with 紓, with the hand radical replaced by 糸, which refers to fine silk. Both 紓 and 抒 mean to loosen, dredge, unweave, release, and relieve. In other words, “lyric” is an act that “unweaves the emotion,” echoing the idea that an intense emotion is analogous to a “knot” or a “clog” that can cause pain and sickness, the unraveling or removal of which is essential to a person’s well-being.<sup>66</sup> In fact, physical and psychological pains share at least one thing in common, as both can be considered the ultimate stimuli and elicitors of lyrical expression. No wonder Shen defined lyricism “from a physiological or psychological point of view” as indispensable for “the dredging and release of congealed feelings.”<sup>67</sup>

This reading of lyricism brings forth its structural correlation with an artifact. As Elaine Scarry explains, a made object is “a projection of the human body” and “a materialized structure of a perception.” It is created to meet the desire to be relieved of pain, and in doing so, it transforms the external world into a sentient environment. She writes, “[when] the woven gauze of a bandage is placed over an open wound, it is immediately apparent that its delicate fibers mime and substitute for the missing skin, just as in less drastic circumstances the same weave of threads (called now ‘clothing’ rather than ‘bandage,’ though their kinship is verbally registered in the words ‘dress’ and ‘dressing’) will continue to duplicate and magnify the protective work of the skin, extending even its secondary and tertiary attributes.”<sup>68</sup> Bodily pain creates the urge to find a solution for its relief, which is translated into a material structure that cures the pain. Therefore a useful object, just like a lyrical expression, is a therapeutic release. The straw braid in Shen’s story belongs to this category: Material scarcity generates a stirring desire to improve the quality of life but also necessitates the taking of risks and the accompanying fear of more pain. The desire motivates strenuous labor to weave the straw tightly into a large braid. Desires as such are humane and universal; as the common denominator, they speak to everyone.

To fully appreciate the importance of the lyricality of artifacts, it is crucial to understand that these material solutions to human needs, made manually and stamped with their makers’ inner feelings, represent the laborious process in which manual dexterity, rational calculation, ingenuity, imagination, aesthetic considerations, and myriad longings are invested. In making these objects, human beings become highly sensitive to their own and other people’s physical and psychological vulnerability, thus keeping themselves from devolving into senseless and cruel tools and machines. It is in this tactile and unmediated engagement between humans and their creations that humanity most fully resides.

However, the opposite is equally true. Humans also find ways to twist made objects into serving other purposes. The opposite of “lyrical” artifacts are the “antilyrical” products that, instead of satisfying desires, aim to curb and regulate them, and instead of encouraging people to recognize their commonalities, promote social differentiation. This idea can be found in the mythical foundation of civilizations. When explaining the origin of *wen*, Duan Yucai noted that “The Yellow Emperor’s scribe Cangjie saw traces of animals’ footprints and realized that patterns could be used for *differentiation*.”<sup>69</sup> And according to the *Record of Music*, “rites serve to differentiate.”<sup>70</sup> Therefore, although clothes are worn to keep oneself warm and drinking vessels are used to quench thirst, more often than not both are exploited to visualize and amplify social distinctions. Pre-Qin drinking vessels became key subjects in antiquarian studies because their complex system of naming supposedly corresponded to political hierarchy, a cornerstone of the Zhou dynasty’s elaborate institution. The *Book of Rites* stipulated that “smallness represents prestige: During the ancestral rite, the noble one uses *jue* for sacrifice and the low-ranking one uses *san*; the noble one toasts with *zhi* and the low-ranking one toasts with *jiao*.”<sup>71</sup> Although the reasoning behind their naming is still subject to debate, at least in the view of major commentary traditions the names were related to capacities that prescribed the proper amounts of alcohol to be consumed based on rank.<sup>72</sup> Thus the *Illustrated Catalogue of Antiquities of the Xuanhe Hall* declares that “whenever a ritual artifact was created, it always had a name; a name was always an admonition.”<sup>73</sup>

“Antilyrical” artifacts also shed light on the cultural—rather than ethnic—primacy in the definition of Chineseness. Confucius summed up *ren* (“humanity”), the central tenet of his philosophy, as “tame the self and restore the rites.”<sup>74</sup> Accordingly, in later commentators’ interpretations, China was defined not necessarily in ethnic or territorial terms but primarily by the grandeur of its ritual etiquette and the beauty and appropriateness of the costumes that visualized such etiquette.<sup>75</sup> It is only natural, then, that costumes frequently appeared in discussions on the distinction between China and its cultural others. For example, Confucius reportedly commented that “were it not for [the capable chancellor] Guan Zhong [who set the world in order], we would grow disheveled hair and fold robes on the left side.”<sup>76</sup> When referring to the “barbarians,” the mention of their appearance was enough to make his message clear.

Besides lyrical and antilyrical artifacts, there is a third category—the “alyrical” artifacts, which neither address intrinsic human needs nor reinforce any external order but rather bring forth a state of freedom and detachment from both. We need not search far to find an example. In an unexpected

twist in the story, Shen transforms the straw braid into its “alyrical” opposite. Contrary to expectation, the water level actually falls overnight. Exhausted and disappointed, Degui goes back to business as usual to make straw sandals and patiently awaits his next chance. The story ends with a glance at the unused straw braid: “Those who care about where that almost thirty-meter-long straw braid ends up can check it out by the willow bridge: the swing hanging on the fourth old tree, which the children are fighting to grab and play with—isn’t that the straw braid?”<sup>77</sup>

Just a short while ago, the straw braid was intended as an intermediary between Degui’s dire needs and an unpredictable and not always generous external world. If, in Schopenhauerian terms, all sentient beings are motivated by a blind and raw will-to-live, and this will “springs from lack, from deficiency, and thus from suffering,”<sup>78</sup> then the straw braid as a “lyrical” object helped perpetuate the will’s endless cycle of desire and satisfaction. But now, in a brief moment of joy, it lifts the children out of any care about material scarcity. In this way, it comes close to having the effect of an aesthetic experience that, again according to Schopenhauer, “raises us out of the endless stream of willing,” whereby “the attention is now no longer directed to the motives of willing, but comprehends things free from their relation to the will. Thus it considers things without interest, without subjectivity, purely objectively.”<sup>79</sup> This moment of joy is also a moment of liberating disinterestedness.

The jolly lightness of the ending of Shen’s tale enlivens the previously suspenseful mood. By way of contrast, the alyrical neutrality of the braid as a swing throws into relief the intensely lyrical quality of the braid as a tool, in which are embedded the strength, resilience, and patience of ordinary working people as they cope with the burdens of life. In the meantime, the entire narrative is wrapped within a poetic, lively, and almost cheerful innocence and simplicity. The story has no trace of any antilyrical element—no moral judgment against Degui’s intention to retrieve other people’s property for himself and no political critique of the social cause behind the precarity of the townspeople’s life, two themes that were common and even expected in a cultural climate that was used to heavy politicization of aesthetics. To the end, Shen refused to judge his protagonists.

### The Aesthetics and Politics of Design

“Straw Braid” exemplifies Shen’s overarching vision for both literature and material culture, which can be best summed up as lyrical materialism. As my survey has shown, his ethnic background, intellectual upbringing, diverse experiences, the unusual trajectory of his literary career, and not least his

wartime sojourn in the southwest all contributed to the formation of this vision. Whether his subject was people or artifacts, lyrical materialism was ultimately about the therapeutic impulse ingrained in humanity and manifested in the intimate act of labor. Everyday objects, viewed in this light, inspire observers to reckon with their commonality rather than dwelling on their differences. This impulse materializes through basic and functional artifacts as much as the elevated forms of poetry, music, and visual arts. From Shen's point of view, then, one could find no less genuine an expression of human passion in a heavily used jar or even a raw straw braid than in such supreme masterpieces as *Admonitions of the Court Instructress to the Court Ladies*. And a tarnished piece of lacquerware or a fragile textile fragment contains as much vital information about Chinese people's life as an inscribed oracle bone used by the Shang kings.

By giving voice to ordinary working people, functional artifacts provide a much-needed counterbalance to traditional grand narratives fixated on dynastic changes, monarchical successions, great wars, and monumental projects. To interpret such artifacts, the methods would also need to be adjusted accordingly, and Shen stressed that neither Western archaeology nor traditional Chinese connoisseurship could do full justice to such pieces.<sup>80</sup> Instead of overanalyzing written records, the material and technological aspects of artifacts should speak for themselves, which could shift the focus from a script-centered to a materialist approach.

To realize this goal, Shen had to fight an uphill battle on multiple fronts. For one thing, lyrical materialism did not sit well with China's long-standing antiquarian tradition, which was not only heavily script-centric but also closely linked to the Confucian ideology that emphasized a hierarchical social order and maintained a boundary for Chinese's cultural orthodoxy. Though by no means an iconoclast, Shen was nevertheless not passionate about promoting these values; on the contrary, his advocacy for an ethnically diverse and socially egalitarian interpretation of "Chineseness" had a decentering and destabilizing effect on the conservative agenda.<sup>81</sup>

In the meantime, he also had to contend with the legacy of old-fashioned elitist connoisseurship, whose standard-bearers could barely conceal their disdain for the artifacts that fell under the categories of applied and decorative arts. For them, these items were vastly inferior to calligraphy, inscriptions, rare books, paintings, and other prestigious art objects. As Shen observed, "Up to now, fine arts education still focuses on the feudalist literati paintings, and ignores the ancient working people's artistic achievements, creations and inventions. I made some efforts in this regard and gained a bit of common-sensical knowledge. Since I am working for the new National Museum of

History, it is not wrong for me to systematically study ancient working people's achievements in applied arts."<sup>82</sup> The cause of this indifference could be attributed to the presumed distinction between "beautiful" art intended for aesthetic contemplation and "functional" objects serving mundane purposes, a perspective that Shen powerfully challenged.

If the antiquarians' and the connoisseurs' attitude toward Shen's efforts was one of indifference, then the response from a third camp can be described as openly hostile: Shen's egalitarian view directly contradicted the Communist Party doctrine that human nature was by definition conditioned by social class, as we have seen in comments by Mao and Zhou quoted above. Quite ironic and undoubtedly frustrating for him was the fact that his keen attention to the humanizing effects of manual labor contained unmistakable Marxist-materialist elements. Yet most of those around him turned a blind eye to this obvious affinity, the neglect of which continues to this date, preventing Shen's intellectual and artistic legacies from being fully appreciated. Therefore, the present section will be devoted to recovering this lost link.

Shen's working condition at the museum was abysmal. For years he did not even have an office and was forced to work from a desk in the hallway. He endured waves of political campaigns conducted in the name of "learning from the people," including an extended period of exile in rural Hubei Province from 1969 to 1972 and the calamitous Cultural Revolution. Last but not least, the *Against Squandering* exhibition laid bare the insurmountable intellectual and aesthetic gap between him and his coworkers. Later in life, he would recall the loneliness and neglect he felt during this period.

On a superficial, quotidian level, you can say that I was "completely finished, collapsed." I could hope for nothing anymore. My former colleagues, my old friends such as Ding Ling have all gained high status; even Mao Dun, Zheng Zhenduo, Ba Jin, and Lao She became prominent and very active, always flying around the world as important guests. In comparison, I myself, at that time, would leave home before dawn, buy a roasted sweet potato to warm my hands, take the trolleybus to the Tiananmen [gate], which was not open yet. I would then sit down to look at the sky, the stars, and the moon, and then enter [the Museum] when the door opened. When I went home at night, sometimes there was rain, and I would just wear a gunnysack.<sup>83</sup>

Despite it all, Shen embraced his challenges with perseverance and conviction, willingly making personal sacrifices to further his research agenda. Toward the end of his life, he showed no regret in giving up literature, declaring that his writings were out of touch with reality and should indeed be discarded. But this modest old man looked upon his achievements in material

culture with uncharacteristic pride: “For the country, my shift to material culture and history is a gain rather than a loss, because the research methods I am experimenting with have never been attempted before.”<sup>84</sup>

At the museum, Shen had access to a large number of ancient artifacts. He claimed to have seen over a hundred thousand textiles.<sup>85</sup> His familiarity with the collection was so intimate that “regarding Qing dynasty porcelain dishes and bowls, simply touching their rims and feeling their curves and shapes, with my eyes closed, is enough for me to date them.”<sup>86</sup> The scope of his work soon expanded to cover the entire range of applied arts. Besides making use of the imperial collection, he actively sought out new items on the market based on his own interests and standards. He characterized his work thus: “I have a wishful thought: I want to use cultural objects as the basis for studying the working people’s achievements, [thus creating] ‘a history of labor culture,’ ‘a history of material culture,’ and ‘a new history of fine arts’ focusing on working people, and specialized histories on the developments of pottery, porcelain, silk, lacquerware and metalwork. . . . Since we argue that ‘all culture is created by the working people’s hands,’ we need historical facts to support that argument!”<sup>87</sup>

Of the thirty-two volumes of Shen’s posthumously published *Complete Works*, a total of five are exclusively devoted to writings on material culture. They include extensive studies of jade, porcelain, lacquerware, shell inlay, bronze mirrors, fans, silk, drums, lamps, furniture, chariots, architectural components, and more. Additional essays provide insight into curatorship and practical aspects such as the organization of exhibitions, as well as commentary on recent archaeological findings, which he followed closely. Everything from the minute to the monumental fell within the scope of his survey. He explained the unprecedented aspects of his research in the following way:

The various departments of historic material culture have numerous blind spots, with many objects never studied in the past or present; I have the opportunity to view and touch tens of thousands of them and understand their historic characteristics and mutual influences as they developed. Especially those jars, jugs, pots, flowery patterns that have been looked down upon and ignored by experts, are carefully examined and studied by me. I am like an old beggarwoman in old Beijing who collects ragged clothes. But after collecting [these objects], I follow Laozi’s instruction “to act but not to possess,” and present them to institutions I am connected to for wider use.<sup>88</sup>

If the young Shen strolling through 1920s Beijing resembled Baudelaire’s flaneur, the more mature Shen now assumed a different Baudelairean

persona—that of the ragpicker.<sup>89</sup> The metaphor of “an old beggarwoman in old Beijing who collects ragged clothes” is strikingly reminiscent of the Parisian ragpicker who, living in extreme poverty, scavenged discards in an urban space, recycling and selling them to merchants. To take this comparison further, we can say that Baudelaire’s nineteenth-century Paris was comparable to Shen’s twentieth-century Beijing in that both cities underwent radical transformations, with the new overrunning the old. And yet the old did not just go away. As the refuse of history, it was suppressed and fragmented; it was forgotten but never completely disappeared. It would be left to the ragpicker and their close relative, the collector, to facilitate a reshuffling. Shen was doing exactly that. In a new political climate that emphasized the importance of the working class, he wanted to demonstrate that the old arts and crafts were not just relevant but in fact more relevant than ever—and urgently necessary.

Although Shen had wide-ranging interests, his greatest passion was costumes. His love for them led him to amass a large quantity of materials covering all aspects of textile production, including the techniques of raising silkworms, dyeing, weaving, and designing patterns. He studied the relationship between costumes and political and economic history, literary texts, paintings, and dance, as well as the role they played in the interaction among different ethnic groups. He often had to expend great effort to convince his colleagues that such a thorough knowledge of ancient costumes mattered. The National Museum of History once purchased what was believed to be a precious Song dynasty-bound rubbing, but Shen recognized at first sight that the cover’s decorative pattern belonged to the mid-eighteenth century, and all the pompous claims about this object’s historic significance turned out to be false. In Shen’s view, this was a perfect example of why a thorough knowledge of these artifacts mattered. Another case concerned a scroll depicting the Goddess of the Luo River, attributed to Gu Kaizhi, widely regarded as a priceless national treasure. But Shen pointed out that all the costumes in the painting typically belonged to a period no earlier than 439.<sup>90</sup>

This sustained attention to textile and costume culminated in Shen’s groundbreaking and monumental *A Study of Ancient Chinese Costumes* (hereafter *Chinese Costumes*). Its inception can be traced to a meeting between Zhou Enlai and officials of the Ministry of Culture in the summer of 1964. At this gathering, Zhou lamented that when accompanying foreign guests to theater performances, he often noticed that the costume designs were done carelessly and did not conform to history. Furthermore, on state visits abroad, he noticed that some countries had museums dedicated to costumes and textiles and published specialized histories on these artifacts, but China had nothing of the sort. He wondered if anyone was doing research in

this field and if an illustrated catalogue of Chinese costumes could be produced.<sup>91</sup> Vice Minister of Culture Qi Yanming replied that someone called Shen Congwen was working on exactly that. Under Zhou's order, resources were set aside to support Shen's research and writing of the book, then tentatively titled *References for Ancient Chinese Costumes*.

Although it is unclear which countries and museums Zhou was referring to, based on records of his state visits between 1949 and 1964 it is possible to narrow the sites down to East Berlin, Bucharest, Budapest, and Prague.<sup>92</sup> Alongside Hamburg, Paris, and Vienna, these were key locations in the pan-European art nouveau and *Jugendstil* movements, and each had specialized museums dedicated to applied and decorative arts. An early model for these institutions was London's Victoria and Albert Museum, formerly the South Kensington Museum.<sup>93</sup> The establishment of these institutions and, more generally, the rising importance of applied and decorative arts, owed much to the late nineteenth-century Arts and Crafts movement, itself born out of a revolt against the Industrial Revolution and its perceived corruption of craftsmanship, labor, and the organic connection between humans and their products.<sup>94</sup> It should come as little surprise that this movement had its earliest and most articulate expressions in Britain, where both the Industrial Revolution and modern capitalism had their beginnings.

Much like Shen's stay in Yunnan, this meeting between Zhou and the Culture of Ministry officials constituted yet another *chuj* or trigger, with unintended yet profound repercussions. By facilitating the writing of *Chinese Costumes*, Zhou unwittingly allowed Shen to participate, even if belatedly, in a major international movement that redefined aesthetics, labor, and politics. The Arts and Crafts movement's overall philosophy, which Elizabeth Cumming and Wendy Kaplan summarize as "design unity, joy in labor, individualism and regionalism,"<sup>95</sup> aligned closely with Shen's own, and he would have had no trouble finding comrades among the movement's many ardent practitioners. In fact, many striking similarities existed between Shen and the most prominent leader of the movement, the eclectic artist, designer and writer William Morris (1834–96), despite the fact that they lived in drastically different cultures and times. Both sought to elevate design to an equal footing with art. Like Shen, Morris developed a lifelong passion for pre-industrial craftsmanship, with a similarly strong predilection for textile. Their intellectual profiles were only set apart by the fact that Morris was an active practitioner while Shen remained a researcher.

In terms of regionalism, the Arts and Crafts movement's revival of craftsmanship led to an awakening of local cultural identities across Europe. As Rosalind Blakesley observes, "in Europe's peripheralized nations such as

Hungary, Poland and Finland, the Arts and Crafts evolved out of the broader political landscape of national resurrection and resistance to the oppression of foreign rule.<sup>96</sup> Indeed, many of those involved in the movement found inspiration in local and folkloric sources, which they used to counteract mainstream tastes. Morris developed his own artistic language partly by borrowing from the past (medieval arts and architecture) as well as the foreign (Icelandic culture).<sup>97</sup> We are thus reminded of Shen's excavation of Yunnan's ethnic culture and his affinity with the historical Chu state, both of which paved the way for his renegotiation of "Chineseness." Similar to those in the Arts and Crafts movement, Shen lodged his ideal in a cultural other that disrupted the dominance of a unified grand narrative.

In terms of design unity, the movement advocated for equality among all creative endeavors, seeking to eliminate the bias against applied and decorative arts. It did not consider decorations to be superfluous and dispensable additions but saw them as a vital medium of artistic expression rooted in a careful observation of nature. In the meantime, because of their intimate relation to everyday life the decorative arts could help recover authentic yet transient historical experiences. According to Morris,

So strong is the bond between history and decoration, that in the practice of the latter we cannot, if we would, wholly shake off the influence of past times over what we do at present. I do not think it is too much to say that no man, however original he may be, can sit down to-day and draw the ornament of a cloth, or the form of an ordinary vessel or piece of furniture, that will be other than a development or a degradation of forms used hundreds of years ago; and these, too, very often, forms that once had a serious meaning, though they are now become little more than a habit of the hand; forms that were once perhaps the mysterious symbols of worships and beliefs now little remembered or wholly forgotten.<sup>98</sup>

In other words, decorations were concrete iterations of elusive thinking, imagination, feeling, and the experience of the past. What one needed was a proper "hermeneutics of decoration" to decode these practices and recover what was lost. For this purpose, the British architect Owen Jones produced the pioneering *The Grammar of Ornament* in 1856.<sup>99</sup> Its title provides a crucial hint about its stance: like language, ornament has a grammar; like language, it has something to say. Ornament asks to be properly read and deciphered, and as it grows and degrades it deserves the same philological treatment that language has always enjoyed.

To translate this understanding into Chinese terms, we once again find ourselves returning to *wen*, which evolved to a conceptual meeting point

for patterns, decorations, and scripts. In Shen's hands *wen* (the textual) and *wu* (the material) were seamlessly interwoven through his careful *reading* of ancient Chinese ornaments. It is no coincidence that among Shen's copious writings on pottery, bronzes, jades, lacquerware, and mirrors, ornamental patterns are a recurring focus. Most notably, almost half of *Chinese Costumes* is about the history of textile ornaments. As a case in point, the 1955 essay "What We Can Learn from Ancient Lacquerware" analyzes the patterns on lacquerware recently excavated from Chu tombs.<sup>100</sup> These decorations included the axe-shaped black-and-white pattern *fu*, which is recorded in the *Classic of Poetry* and the *Book of Documents*,<sup>101</sup> and the motif of swan geese among colorful clouds, which showed a particularly "glorious and lavish" character.<sup>102</sup> Shen argued that these patterns could provide clues to solving several long-standing and vexing problems, such as commentarial errors in pre-Qin texts and institutional continuity between the Zhou and the Han dynasties. Furthermore, he described Chu ornaments as vibrant and striking in their color schemes, and lively, unconstrained, and infinitely varied in shape. Although Chu's literature had been well known for its luxurious vocabulary and fantastical poetic imagination, few recognized that its literary style was part of an organic whole that also included an equally colorful material culture.

Owen Jones's book title can in fact be borrowed as an accurate description of Shen's approach. As the above examples show, Shen considered ornaments to possess a *grammar* all their own, calling for a corresponding hermeneutics. In developing this interpretive framework, Shen was not conflating the boundary between language and ornament but reaffirming their commensurate structure in *wen*. It is fair to say that Shen enriched the Arts and Crafts movement with a uniquely Chinese perspective. But his message was also an urgent response to the exigency of the moment. The literary *wen* (functioning as both an artistic and intellectual medium) had been abused to the point of becoming perverse and obsolete, as Shen's own painful fate as a writer testified. Only the overlooked material *wen* still retained the potential for honesty and efficacy.

When it comes to two other features, namely joy in labor and individualism, the Arts and Crafts movement developed a robust alliance with late nineteenth-century socialist activism. Simultaneously nostalgic and revolutionary, these features were embedded in the movement's theoretical foundation, laid by Thomas Carlyle and John Ruskin. Carlyle's *Past and Present* offered a fierce critique of industrialization and capitalism, arguing that the quest for profit and efficiency reduced precious human elements in labor—the worker's feelings, mindfulness, concentration, creativity, imagination,

and respect of the material—to carelessness and mechanical repetition. The resulting product became cheap and unsophisticated, and worst of all, the worker became alienated and dehumanized. In comparison, Carlyle cast medieval times in a utopian light, in which human life was intimately bound to nature through labor, while intellectual and manual work functioned in symbiotic harmony and in ideal proportions to create an art uncorrupted by the greed for profit.<sup>103</sup> Ruskin similarly hearkened back to an idealized Gothic tradition, which for him represented an ethically superior labor relationship. In his magnum opus, *The Stones of Venice*, he set about refuting two premises: “The first, that one man’s thoughts can be, or ought to be, executed by another man’s hands; the second, that manual labor is a degradation, when it is governed by intellect.” The elevation of thinking over handiwork was the cause of both social injustice and the decay of civilizations. “The mass of society is made up of morbid thinkers, and miserable workers.” The solution was to be found in a reappraisal of labor. “It is only by labor that thought can be made healthy, and only by thought that labor can be made happy, and the two cannot be separated with impunity.”<sup>104</sup>

Morris diligently put Carlyle’s and Ruskin’s theory into practice; his wide-ranging and successful design enterprises became influential across the world.<sup>105</sup> But his efforts did not end there. In 1884 he collaborated with Karl Marx’s youngest daughter Eleanor to found the Socialist League, a radical workers’ organization that advocated “Revolutionary International Socialism” and aimed to mitigate the split of society into two classes—one that possessed wealth and one that produced it.<sup>106</sup> His popular novel *News from Nowhere* also evinces a strong socialist leaning.<sup>107</sup> As Caroline Arscott puts it, “[Morris’s] involvement in socialist politics in the 1880s and beyond led him to articulate a politicised art theory that ought to be recognised as the first English-language attempt to produce a Marxist theory of art.”<sup>108</sup>

The Arts and Crafts movement’s impact extended well beyond its Victorian origin into the twentieth century. It inspired many social reform programs, some practical and some utopian.<sup>109</sup> There was also a genealogical connection in Marxism between the Arts and Crafts and the People’s Republic of China’s social engineering projects. The fact that Shen could have such a striking affinity with the former while feeling so out of place in the latter never ceased to mystify and frustrate him. The reason for this situation can be found in the inherent paradoxes of leftist aesthetics, which were reflected in the PRC’s own cultural policies.

First, a common criticism leveled against Morris (and to a large extent the movement as a whole) has been, in Walter Crane’s words, that “he produced costly works for the rich while he professed Socialism.” In Morris’s defense,

Crane pointed out that “according to the quality of the production must be its cost; and that the cheapness of the cheapest things of modern manufacture is generally at the cost of the cheapening of modern labour and life, which is a costly kind of cheapness after all.” Morris’s undertaking was therefore “an indictment against the present system of production, which Socialists wish to alter.”<sup>110</sup> Herein lies a classic dilemma in socialist aesthetics: the democratization of labor incurs a substantial price that is then transferred to the consumer. As a result, a system of production that respects the rights of the laborer ultimately makes the distribution and possession of its products *less*, not *more* accessible. More than a century after Crane’s remarks, socialists are nowhere close to altering this system.

But neither the cost discrepancy between labor and consumption nor the socialists’ failure to resolve it was anything new. The same reasoning lay behind criticisms of Shen’s work. Prior to the planned publication of *Chinese Costumes* in late 1964, the editorial team held a meeting to examine the book’s contents. At the time, Mao had just launched an attack on artistic representations that focused on the wealthy and high-born, where “emperors, kings, generals and ministers, literati and beautiful ladies were dominating the theater stage.” Mindful of this criticism, the editorial team complained that Shen’s book dwelled too much on the ruling class’s luxurious clothes and demanded that it be withdrawn for revision to highlight the role of the working people.<sup>111</sup> Those on the editorial team certainly had not read Morris’s persuasive albeit commonsensical argument: “When men say popes, kings, and emperors built such and such buildings, it is a mere way of speaking. You look in your history-books to see who built Westminster Abbey, who built St. Sophia at Constantinople, and they tell you Henry III, Justinian the Emperor. Did they? or, rather, men like you and me, handicraftsmen, who have left no names behind them, nothing but their work?”<sup>112</sup> Soon after that meeting came the decade-long Cultural Revolution, which put the book’s publication indefinitely on hold. As it turned out, Shen’s aesthetic vision would find no place in the proletarian revolution’s pretended agenda of progress. Works crafted by experienced and caring craftsmen were now considered reactionary and politically incorrect products of a corrupt ruling class, despite the fact that they were in fact handmade by the proletariat.

The other paradox in left-wing aesthetics that contributed to the failure of Shen’s ideas to gain traction was the total instrumentalization of artistic expression for political purposes. Here Shen unfortunately found himself back at square one, for precisely the same instrumentalization had driven him away from literature in the first place. This instrumentalization found its classic articulation early on in Walter Benjamin’s influential essay “The

Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproducibility.” Benjamin observed that modern technology facilitated the reproducibility of a work of art, thus destroying its ritualistic and semireligious aura.<sup>113</sup> For Benjamin, this opened up an unprecedented political possibility: “For the first time in world history, technological reproducibility emancipates the work of art from its parasitical subservience to ritual. To an ever-increasing degree, the work reproduced becomes the reproduction of a work designed for reproducibility. . . . [A]s soon as the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applied to artistic production, the whole social function of art is revolutionized. Instead of being founded on ritual, it is based on a different practice: politics.”<sup>114</sup>

Benjamin’s goal was to exploit art’s technological reproducibility to serve political ends, so that while fascism pursued the “aestheticizing of politics,” communism could respond by “politicizing art.”<sup>115</sup> The Chinese Communist Party’s cultural policy, from Mao’s *Yan’an Talk* to his Cultural Revolution, had been consistent in its attempt to fully realize this agenda. Although Benjamin mainly focused on photography and film in this essay, if we apply his argument to a general consideration of art, we can see that the fate of the handicraft was also at stake, as it is serving as another victim of technological reproducibility. Now that the machine has effectively replaced the human hand, the tactile interaction between craftsmen/women and their material is no longer necessary or even possible; handicrafts’ utility pales in the face of revolutionary propaganda. Initially upheld as a revolutionary reaction against industrialization, the handicraft was now considered an inefficient and elitist impediment to revolution itself.

Due to these misalignments, Shen’s museum work attracted minimal attention while his literary achievements lay dormant for decades. He vanished so completely from public view both inside and outside China that “no one could even dispute a 1968 report from Taiwan that he had died.”<sup>116</sup> His friend and fellow writer-collector Shi Zhecun protested that “[Chinese] literary historians since the founding [of the People’s Republic] sealed their lips tightly over Shen.”<sup>117</sup> As a result, as Teresa Hanen Buczacki recalled, when she taught Chinese literature at Johns Hopkins University, her students from China had not even heard of Shen and had to learn about him through their American classmates.<sup>118</sup> The prediction Shen made back in 1949 turned out to be tragically accurate: that collapsed pagoda “[left] behind only grey and dusty ruins. Eventually, when the ruin is rediscovered, perhaps it would attract a small number of people’s attention. But most would turn to praise, celebrate and worship all those brand-new, abstract structures.”<sup>119</sup> When he died in 1988, this once-towering figure left such an ambivalent legacy that the Chinese media was at a loss as to how to evaluate him.<sup>120</sup>

Today, thankfully, Shen's position in modern Chinese literature is no longer in question, and his contributions to our understanding of ancient material culture have also been acknowledged. But the inner logic that connects these two aspects of his legacy remains elusive. Explanations for his change of profession range from attempted escapism to declining creativity.<sup>121</sup> In this chapter, I have advanced a different theory: Shen's decision to engage the material remains of China's past was a most logical continuation and even the epitome of his original literary ideals.

I therefore arrive at the first concluding point of this chapter. At the heart of his appraisal of Chinese craftsmanship was Shen's innovative reinterpretation of *wen*, which brings us to a recurring theme of the present study: the symbiosis and tension between texts and artifacts. Thanks to the concept of *wen*, the textual has never strayed far from the material, and inscriptions and ornaments have never maintained a clear-cut division. This symbiosis was already apparent in the oracle bones. Another case in point is Ruan Yuan's *Shihuaaji*, in which he interpreted natural stone patterns as if they were painted by famous artists and added his own poetry inspired by these patterns. When Lu Xun contemplated stele rubbings, he struggled to distinguish the signs inscribed by the human hand from those inscribed by time. Shen, however, pressed these ideas even further. His treatment of ancient ornaments as an expression of historical experience represented the most radical departure from Chinese script-centrism because it showed that the text was not the only means—and often not a very reliable one—in the transmission of human experiences. In this claim, of course, he was simply emphasizing *wen's* material dimension. Most importantly, the framework established by Shen allowed the craftsmanship of common people to escape propagandistic simplification and politicization.

This observation leads to my second concluding point: The fact that major literary figures like Shi Zhecun and Shen Congwen all renounced literature and turned to material culture was no coincidence. It was a symptom of the contracting space of literary expression in the face of expanding ideological scrutiny. However, the intolerance of the Communist Party can only receive part of the blame. Behind the new regime's extremist cultural policy, we once again recognize a much older tradition. The long-standing tendency to overtax *wen*, as exemplified by the notorious literary inquisition (*wenziyu*) prevalent in Chinese history, turns language from a means of cultural expression and preservation into a tool of intellectual perversion. No wonder that when words fail, objects have to speak up.

By the time he finished the manuscript of *Chinese Costumes*, Shen had been transferred from the National Museum of History to the Chinese

Academy of Sciences. Now he had to endure yet another insult: probably intended as a courtesy, a perfunctory preface by the president of the Academy graced the front page of Shen's new book. This president was none other than Guo Moruo, the same man who helped destroy Shen's literary career fifteen years before. This was no doubt an act of extremely cruel poetic injustice, but as a matter of fact, and rather ironically, we also have Guo to thank for the existence of *A Study of Ancient Chinese Costumes*, the crowning achievement of Shen Congwen as a true historical materialist.

## EPILOGUE

### Who Owns China's Past?

In 1645, after taking over the Ming capital Beijing, the Qing army swept through eastern and southern China. For the Ming, the last Chinese dynasty ruled by the Han people, there was no question that this was a war between “China” and alien invaders. Along the northern shore of the Yangtze River, the Ming army established four strategic strongholds and offered fierce resistance. Once these defenses fell, the Qing committed massacres so brutal that it was hard to imagine how the scar would ever heal.

Fast-forward to 1912: the Qing's last Manchu emperor, Puyi, abdicated and made way for the founding of the Republic of China. Luo Zhenyu, his loyal Han subject, was so upset by these events that he went into a self-imposed exile in Japan. Luo was born in 1866 in Huai'an, where one of the four strongholds was headquartered, and where the local Han population suffered tremendously at the hands of the Manchu conquerors. Luo's loyalty to the Qing regime and his conviction of its legitimacy<sup>1</sup> seems to suggest that, for many if not all Han Chinese, the scar from that seventeenth-century invasion had healed after all, and much sooner than the painful atrocities would have led some to anticipate. To borrow from Nietzsche, those who believe that a modicum of forgetfulness is vital for a nation's well-being need not have worried: The Chinese seemed at least as good at forgetting history as they were at remembering it.

As it turned out, Luo took things a step further. When the Japanese installed Puyi as the emperor of the puppet state Manchukuo, which lay within the modern Chinese nation's territory, Luo followed him there to serve as a high-ranking minister. Surrounded by the ancient artifacts and books he had collected over the years, including the precious oracle bones, he spent the rest of his life in the Japanese colony Lüshun. It was here that many of his painstakingly preserved treasures were eventually destroyed by the Soviet Red Army.<sup>2</sup> Contrary to popular opinion that regarded him as a traitor to the

Chinese nation, Luo had no doubt that he was acting patriotically. Like many Qing loyalists, he considered the new republic an enemy state.<sup>3</sup>

Luo's unswerving commitment to a ruler whose ancestors were once treated in unambiguous terms as alien enemies tells us about more than just the inevitable sway of historical forgetfulness. It also forces us to reconsider the complex and contradictory meanings of "China" and "Chineseness." His devotion to the Manchu monarch and the preservation of the oracle bones served one and the same purpose: to guard the lifeline of Chinese civilization, the definition of which was predicated on the belief that an unbroken thread of cultural orthodoxy stretched from the Qing back to the Shang kings. It was the republic, not the Manchus, that had usurped the orthodoxy. Remarkably, ethnicity seemed to play no role in his considerations.

This notion of an unbroken thread of orthodoxy is no doubt the result of deliberate efforts in cultural and ideological constructions. It relied on an abstract, spiritual, and timeless concept of "Chineseness" to transcend the physical "China," which was punctuated by ruptures and characterized by cultural, geographical, political, and ethnic fluidity. For people like Luo, at the heart of the abstract "Chineseness" was the supremely venerated and enduring *wen*, thanks to which Chinese history can be seen as a continuously living entity. The oracle-bone script prefigured the modern Chinese script; vocabulary found in the divination texts survives and continues to be in use; events and people mentioned there corroborated, even if indirectly, records handed down through generations; fundamental familial, ethical, and political values implied in these inscriptions seemed to echo later habits of thinking that continue up to the present.<sup>4</sup>

However, this cultural continuity turns out to be built on shaky grounds once we examine it from the perspective of material cultural heritage, which is why this book emphasizes the importance not of the people who used artifacts to tell their own stories, but those who gave the artifacts a chance to speak for themselves—in other words, the collectors. As I have demonstrated, ancient artifacts have been used and misused to construct all kinds of narratives; the same artifact seems capable of supporting completely contradictory and incompatible arguments. Such discrepancies expose the methodological unreliability of using artifacts for interpretive purposes, whether to verify written records, understand the minds of the ancients, or discern any overarching laws of history.<sup>5</sup> In fact, instead of fitting into a coherent and unbroken narrative thread, these artifacts are fragmentary, ambiguous, pluralistic, and disruptive. They simply remain themselves, stubbornly unsympathetic and resistant to the needs and desires of the later generations who came to own and interpret them. Through their vantage

point, we recognize that our understanding of them is probably less about them, and more about us.

As such, we find ourselves coming full circle back to the questions raised at the beginning of this book: How exactly should we articulate a people's and a political entity's relationship to the material culture they inherit? Specifically, what is the use of the wealth of material cultural heritage, if there is any, to the present-day Chinese people who proudly own it? The answers to these questions directly determine the way people deal with the present and make decisions for the future. To answer them, we need to revisit that legendary bow, which Li Qingzhao so poignantly invoked when *her* China was being overrun by foreign forces. We recall that the king of Chu's comment about his lost bow was amended by Confucius and Laozi. From "a Chu person loses a bow, another Chu person will find it" to "a person loses a bow, another person will find it," to "bow lost, bow found,"<sup>6</sup> each step of this whimsical subtraction opens up a new vista onto how we think about the relation between people and artifacts.

Although there is no way—nor any need—to verify the historical authenticity of these anecdotal comments, they respectively conformed to the general views of Confucian and Taoist teachings. The king's gesture of generosity can be taken as a cosmopolitan attitude toward property and ownership. Confucius upgraded this attitude to the international level, affirming the thesis of *Lüshi chunqiu's* "Prioritizing Common Welfare" chapter where this anecdote was recorded, namely: "The world [*tianxia*, all under heaven] is not a private property of any one polity, but shared by all."<sup>7</sup> This outlook is congruent with the Confucian view that "all under heaven serves the common welfare" and "one should be distressed to see goods wasted lying on the ground, but not [be concerned about] hoarding them for oneself."<sup>8</sup> Laozi's Taoist angle, though radical and counterintuitive at first sight, proves to be the most revelatory. If the king and Confucius betrayed quasi-communist dispositions, Laozi went straight beyond the Anthropocene to remind us that ownership and legitimacy can be viewed from the perspective not of the owner, but of that which is being owned. As Chen Qiyou puts it, "lost or found, the bow still lies between heaven and earth, so there is no 'lost' or 'found' to speak of."<sup>9</sup> Adopting the vantage point of the bow reverses the power dynamic. An artifact, even in an irreparably fragmented state, may have a chance to survive the deluge of time longer than any of its owners. The bow simply lies out there unperturbed until it finally dissolves back into nature to benefit other organisms, while successive human "owners" fight for the illusory right to possess and define it. Who, then, can claim to be more legitimate than anyone else?

Now, what happens if we replace “bow” with “oracle bone,” and “Chu” with “China”? What difference does it make for a cultural heritage to change hands, especially if no one of the present time can claim absolute, indisputable legitimacy? As the preceding chapters have shown, collectors like Luo and Shen, though operating privately, never ceased to consider themselves merely temporary custodians of a national heritage. They spent their own money to build collections that they were ready and even eager to turn over to their country; it was their country that was not ready or willing to accept them. The same mentality was shared by many great collectors not covered in this book, such as Zhang Boju and Zheng Zhenduo. With its broad and post-human vision, however, Laozi’s comment allows antiquarian collecting to appear on a wider canvas that presses beyond nationhood. Such a view serves as a useful reminder of the changing world in which collecting takes place. Over the course of the twentieth century, the definition of these collectors’ homeland became ever more ambiguous: the Qing Empire, the Republic of China (both before and after its government’s relocation to Taiwan), Manchukuo, and the People’s Republic of China each represented a radically different conceptualization of “China,” and each was incompatible with the others.

As so often happens, the most compelling and illuminating discourses about “Chineseness” come not from the center but the periphery, the location of diaspora, where the line between orthodoxy and otherness is at its most unstable. The disorienting implications of Chinese cultural heritage are captured by a writer who hails from precisely such a peripheral position (from Sino-centrism’s point of view, of course). The Malaysian-Taiwanese writer Ng Kim Chew (b. 1967) consciously plays with complex identity issues in ethnic Chinese immigrant communities in Southeast Asia to reveal unique historical insights. Born and raised in Kluang, Malaysia, where his family had immigrated from China, Ng went to study at the National Taiwan University in the 1980s and is now a professor of Chinese literature at National Chi Nan University. As a Malaysian Chinese, Ng’s point of view is that of an “alienated native”; as a Malaysian expatriate in Taiwan, his point of view is that of a “native stranger.” These characteristics find concentrated expression in his short story “Fish Bones,” which, though fictional, to a significant extent mirrors Ng’s life and is filled with references to historical events and figures. It blends many of the issues raised by this book, but it also complicates the picture by observing them from the vantage point of a geographical location outside the Chinese domain. In contrast to the many antiquarian collectors in this book who, with the exception of Shen, approached China’s material past from the perspective of the center, “Fish Bones” observes it from the outside. Everything that the Chinese collectors took for granted

here becomes relativized, and the entire system of reference is bracketed, if not turned inside out.

At the heart of “Fish Bones” are the oracle bones, which follow the protagonist in his travels across time and space, and repeatedly drag him back into a mysterious past. The story begins with a series of quotes by Luo Zhenyu, his younger brother Luo Zhenchang, Wang Guowei, and a line from “Biographies of Turtle-(shell) and Stalk (Diviners)” of *The Grand Scribe’s Records*: “The turtle was born in wild grass in the depths of the river.”<sup>10</sup> A few pages later, the narrator discloses an astonishing finding: “When [modern] scholars consulted a tortoise taxonomy compiled by Mr. Gray from the British Museum, they confirmed that these shell fragments came from the same species of giant tortoise that is indigenous to the Malaysian peninsula but which has never been native to China. In other words, the shells had very likely been offered as a tribute from the distant South Seas region. But this was three or four thousand years ago!”<sup>11</sup> Here, ingeniously, Ng places Malaysia on the map of the oracle bones, and in doing so opens up a much wider and more complex web of movement of people, objects, and cultures.

The narrative revolves around a Malaysian-born, Taiwan-based professor of Chinese origin, whose life is torn between a troubled past and an apathetic present. The stories move back and forth across three sets of time-locales: distant antiquity (when the oracle bones were being produced in mainland China), the protagonist’s childhood in Malaysia, and his adult life in Taiwan. During the Malaysian phase, the teenage protagonist is haunted by the unresolved 1952 disappearance of his elder brother, who had secretly participated in local armed struggles against British colonial rule. The protagonist was shielded from his brother’s activities, but he still noticed what was happening around him: young Chinese being executed in the streets, the local Chinese population suffering from political and economic oppression, etc. Fires of rebellion were kindling within immigrant communities, and the homeland in the north was casting a spell on its deprived children far off in the South Seas.

This story’s background has its basis in actual events. The unnamed insurgent force was a reference to the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM), many of whose members were ethnic Chinese. Since its founding, the CPM had maintained a close connection to the Chinese Communist Party. After independence, and especially during the 1960s, the CPM received a sustained influx of military and financial support from the Chinese government. The insurgents’ entanglement with international postcolonial and Cold War politics also had an ethnic and nationalist twist, since many party members had strong emotional attachments to their ancestral homeland and revered Mao

Zedong as their revolutionary leader. Ironically, this was also the time when Mao's Cultural Revolution was unleashing a suicidal blow to China's own cultural heritage. The image of "China" could not have been more ambiguous, malleable, incoherent, and self-contradicting.

In this milieu, the protagonist of Ng's tale is exposed to the alluring image of China by a classmate nicknamed White Mountain, who tells him about the past glories of the motherland. This cultural awakening culminates in the protagonist's discovery of the oracle bones:

One day when they were in high school, White Mountain gave him a fragment of a book—which, in fact, consisted of merely a few sheets. In those termite-eaten pages, he read for the first time about Shang dynasty oracle bone inscriptions, including a brief description of their discovery, characteristics, quantity, and so forth. White Mountain remarked, "Great discoveries like the Shang dynasty oracle bones, the Dunhuang manuscripts, and dinosaur fossils were all made in our ancestral land during a period of extreme instability and crisis, and most of the artifacts were subsequently confiscated by foreign imperialists."<sup>12</sup>

Fearing that he would follow his brother's path, his parents sent him to Taiwan for college. But the seed of obsession was already planted in his heart, and these uncanny ancient remnants would come to dominate the rest of his life: "This discovery [of the oracle bones] left him extremely excited, though he himself could not say why precisely he reacted as he did. Thanks to this serendipitous finding, several years later he found himself in study room #5 of Taiwan University's Chinese Literature department examining black oracle-bone inscription rubbings and dark red oracle-bone fragments, and he suddenly felt an irrepressible sense of euphoria."<sup>13</sup>

Both inside and outside the fictional context, Taiwan was a highly symbolic locale for the oracle bones. On the eve of the 1949 regime change, Academia Sinica was relocated to Taiwan with many of its faculty members, including Fu Sinian and Li Ji. Along with them came the oracle bones they had excavated from Anyang over the years. In the story, the protagonist becomes a professor at his alma mater, specializing in oracle-bone studies. He often locks himself up in his office to contemplate his favorite objects. Now an intricate itinerary of artifact as well as personal diaspora emerges: the turtles were brought as tributes from the South Seas to Anyang, the heart of the Middle Kingdom, and made into oracle bones. Thousands of years later, an expatriate embarks on a homebound journey, except that "home" is not Anyang but Taiwan, where he is reunited with his ancient "compatriot," the turtle shells.

Ng's protagonist soon becomes fixated on these objects. At one point, he notices that "The back of the shell featured a hidden pattern of images from the *Book of Changes*."<sup>14</sup> This detail, even though imaginary, is a reminder of *wen*'s familiar dual meanings as both human language and natural signs. As readers may recall, *Shuowen* adopted a visual approach to interpret *bu* 卜 ("to divine") as a pictograph signifying either "the shape of a plastron being scorched" or "the vertical and horizontal cracks on a plastron" (see figure 1.1).<sup>15</sup> But the protagonist's deeper engagement reveals something entirely different. He goes on to reenact the ancient ritual by baking the turtle shells—after all, the oracle bones will come alive again only as a participant in a ritual. Among all the senses to which the ritual appealed, the most striking one is the aural: "Within ten minutes he would hear a distinct *buk* sound—an ancient turtle language."<sup>16</sup> This is a reference to the popular onomatopoeic interpretation of *bu*, whose pronunciation is believed to imitate precisely that *buk* sound caused by the cracking of the baked turtle shell. Although the ancient checked tone (*rusheng*)'s soft, vowelless "k" mimicking the crispy texture's breaking is lost in Mandarin, it can still be heard in other modern dialects such as Cantonese and Hakka.

This onomatopoeic explanation, though unsupported by ancient sources, represents a crucial twist in "Fish Bones." Now the signification of the oracle bones shifts from the visual to the aural, and the Chinese *wen* tradition is dislodged from its role as the dominant force that sustains a continuous cultural identity. The protagonist, acting as a modern reincarnation of the Shang diviners, derives his qualification not from the ability to read the Chinese *wen*, nor from being Chinese in an ethnic, political, or legal sense, but from his receptiveness to the primordial, half-physical, and half-divine *buk* sound, which is at the same time a linguistic vacuum, an onomatopoeic surplus, and a nexus of overinvested meanings. Is he, then, a legitimate heir to the ancient civilization?

For Ng's character the oracle bones, both as objects and carriers of inscriptions, are never targets of dry academic interest, removed from the present and safely deposited in time immemorial. Instead, they become a sacred yet uncomfortably alienating token in the Malaysian Chinese political struggle against colonial rule and their cultural struggle against the loss of identity. Bachner captures the complexity and ambivalence: "Chinese—understood as an inscriptive tradition—is neither an unequivocal sign of identity for its wielder, nor the exotic other for those outside of its tradition. Instead, in its various contexts and material embodiments, the sinograph is constantly, though subtly, rendered other to itself—or, rather, other to a hallucination of its univocal essence."<sup>17</sup> This perspective adds to the already diverse reactions

of modern Chinese people (in itself a hybrid and problematic category) to the oracle bones and the inscriptions they carry and, by extension, to China's complex cultural heritage as a whole. These disparate attitudes range from admiration, pride, obsession, and identification to indifference, detachment, hostility, and denial, laying bare the contradictions and ruptures in the relationship between a nation's cultural heritage and its modern-day descendants. Fundamental questions like "What is China?," "Who is Chinese?," and "Who owns China's past?" become immensely complicated once we attempt to reconcile the incompatible perspectives of such diverse groups as Malaysian Chinese, Taiwanese, and the numerous ethnic groups living in the People's Republic. This inquiry could also entail a problematic line of argument: Non-Chinese people do not own, nor can they truly understand and identify with, China's heritage.

I should stress that I do not mean "ownership" in the practical or legal senses that have been hotly contested in ongoing controversies over cultural repatriation globally. I mean instead the abstract sense of spiritual continuity, of affinity between a particular group of people and the ancient material remains that coexist in the same space. In his book on the ancient Egyptian myth of Osiris, Thomas Hare, an American professor of Japanese and comparative literature, rejects the argument that evaluates whether one *really* understands a culture "by reference to a putative national, racial, and/or ethnic identity."<sup>18</sup> The underlying assumption of this argument, which goes against the fundamental tenet of cross-cultural understanding, is that if one does not come from and grow up in a culture, one can never truly understand it. However, as Hare rightly points out, "The native speaker's very intimacy with his language may occlude his understanding; his very fluency in his culture may fool him into thinking it is his nature, or even universal Nature. Thus it is with a sense of coincidence and contingency that we must examine issues of who 'we' are and what we 'know' and 'understand.'"<sup>19</sup> In other words, cultural legitimacy based on nativist primacy can bring unique insight, but it is not the only authentic or valid one; and this same "insight" can sometimes blind one from seeing things in a reasoned and balanced manner.<sup>20</sup>

This sense of privilege and entitlement built upon nativist primacy has its root in nationalism. As James Cuno points out,

Nations are made, not born. They are the result of the political ambitions of a powerful group of people who seek—and succeed in gaining—control over a certain territory and its population. Once in power, leaders have to breed loyalty among their subjects or citizens (power alone is never enough, for long). And loyalty comes in great part from identifying with the nation. Identity is where one's loyalties lie. . . . We have to believe in our nationality and identify

with nations if they are to survive. This is the source of nationalism: identity with and loyalty to a nation. And national culture is at once the means and manifestation of that belief, identity, and loyalty.<sup>21</sup>

In this process of identification, antiquity often falls victim to expediency: to the urgent need to justify and legitimize the present, resulting in the present being treated as the starting point and the distant past as retroactively moving goalposts.

If nativism occupies one end of the spectrum of attitudes toward the world's cultural heritage, sitting at the other end is cosmopolitanism; both have their strengths and pitfalls. There is an argument to be made, indeed, that we are all heir to the world's great civilizations, which are shared properties of humanity. Such a cosmopolitan view, however, can easily slip into generalized universalism to justify imperial, colonial, or fundamentalist agendas. These, in turn, are often achieved by forcefully appropriating elements that do not necessarily belong together, as we can see in the British Museum's possession of the Elgin Marbles, in the Pergamon Museum in Berlin's ownership of the Babylonian Ishtar Gate, or in the Japanese historian Naitō Torajirō's argument that Imperial Japan had a divinely ordained role in sustaining and reinvigorating the Chinese civilization.<sup>22</sup> We see it as recently as Russia justifying its invasion of Ukraine in 2022 by revising the founding myth of the Soviet Union to erase Ukraine's historical existence.<sup>23</sup> The rejection of nativism can also be achieved by excluding unwelcome elements that are in fact native, notably in Samuel Huntington's theory that casts the relationship between Islam and the West as one of civilizational clash.<sup>24</sup> But as David Damrosch, using the compelling case of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, reminds us, "*Gilgamesh* and *The Iliad*, the Bible and the Qur'an were not products of isolated, eternally opposed civilizations; they are mutually related outgrowths of the rich cultural matrix of western Asia and the eastern Mediterranean world."<sup>25</sup>

It is not the goal of this book to provide a new standard to determine who can legitimately own and authoritatively interpret a cultural heritage. Nor do I intend to argue for or against any particular version of "China"—after all, nationalism always persists, and so do cultural identities. Instead, my argument is that the very desire to "own" and control the narrative of the past is dangerous, as it generates neither a truthful knowledge of nor a healthy relationship with the past, but only serves the purpose of manipulating the present and attempting to control the future. It is also a sign of anxiety and weakness rather than strength and confidence. There are always uncomfortable elements in the past that we wish had not existed. But the past did not exist for our sake, nor did it exist to make us feel good about ourselves. Like

that precious bow of the Chu king's, the past simply lies between heaven and earth; it is more permanent and enduring than each one of us. If a nation's identity is constructed on the elimination of those uncomfortable elements, this identity is but a forgery born out of insecurity.

It is in this respect that collectors make the most valuable contribution to our attitude toward the past. This is not because collectors do not have their own ideology or political agenda, which they almost inevitably do. Rather, it is because the collector mentality is characterized by the insatiable desire to pile up more and more minute and disparate items of knowledge about the past; it thus has an unstoppable drive to disrupt the construction of coherent, unilinear, teleological, and oftentimes tyrannical narratives. The collector mentality acknowledges and respects the "unknowability" and autonomy of the past, with all its messiness, lawlessness, and nonconformity, and is therefore able to offset any elaborate attempts to subdue it. To quote Walter Benjamin one last time, we can say that his famous angel of history, which was inspired by a painting in his personal collection, Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus*, serves as a perfect allegory of the collector.

His face is turned toward the past. Where a chain of events appears before *us*, *he* sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise and has got caught in his wings; it is so strong that the angel can no longer close them. This storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows toward the sky.<sup>26</sup>

In the angel of history's very *inability* to see the past as a narrative chain of events, in his vision of it being a single catastrophe that piles wreckage upon wreckage, lies the promise to set us, as historically conscious beings, free.



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## Glossary

Ba Jin	巴金
Baihuawen yundong	白話文運動
baocan shouque	抱殘守缺
beixue	碑學
Beiyang	北洋
Biancai	辯才
bianzheng weiwu zhuyi	辯證唯物主義
bo	博
bogu	博古
bowuguan	博物館
bu	卜
buge	不隔
<i>Butian</i>	補天
C. T. Loo	盧芹齋
Cai Mo	蔡謨
Cangjie	倉頡
Cao Xueqin	曹雪芹
<i>Caosheng</i>	草繩
caoshu	草書
<i>Chaban wei'ai shuji tiaokuan</i>	查辦違礙書籍條款
chao gubei	抄古碑
Chen Boda	陳伯達
Chen Mengjia	陳夢家
Chen Quzhen	陳渠珍
Chen Yinke	陳寅恪
Cheng weishi lun	成唯識論
chi	癢
chiren de lijiao	吃人的禮教
Chu Ci	楚辭
Chu Suiliang	褚遂良
chuanshi wenxian	傳世文獻
chui	垂
chuji	觸機

chutu wenwu	出土文物
<i>Cuanbaozi bei</i>	爨寶子碑
Dai Zhen	戴震
Daoguang	道光
<i>Dawanbao</i>	大晚報
Degui	得貴
Ding Ling	丁玲
Dingwuben	定武本
disanzhongren	第三種人
dishuzhi	嫡庶制
Dong Jin (Eastern Jin dynasty)	東晉
Dong Zhongshu	董仲舒
Dong Zuobin	董作賓
Dongguozi	東郭子
Dongwen xueshe	東文學社
Du Fu	杜甫
duanzheng	端正
erchong zhengju fa	二重證據法
Erli	二力
Fan Weiqing	范維清
Fang Yaoyu	方藥雨
Feng Zhiyu	豐之餘
Fenghuang	鳳凰
Fengtian	奉天
fu	黼
Fu Sinian/Fu Ssu-nien	傅斯年
Fu Yunlong	傅雲龍
Fu Zengxiang	傅增湘
Gaitu guiliu	改土歸流
Gao Ershi	高二適
Ge yao (Ge ware)	哥窯
Gongyang	公羊
Gu Jiegang	顧頡剛
Gu Kaizhi	顧愷之
guan	觀
Guan Zhong	管仲
<i>Guangming ribao</i>	光明日報
<i>Gujin shuping</i>	古今書評
Guo Moruo	郭沫若
Gushibian pai	古史辨派
guwan	古玩
Hai	亥
<i>Hai Rui Dismissed from Office</i>	海瑞罷官
Han Fei	韓非
Han Yu	韓愈
<i>Hanjian zhuishu</i>	漢簡綴述

<i>Hanzi Jianhua fang'an</i>	漢字簡化方案
haogu	好古
He Xiu	何休
He Yanzhi	何延之
<i>Hou Hanshu</i>	後漢書
Hu Houxuan	胡厚宣
Hu Shih	胡適
Hu Yujin	胡玉縉
Huaxia	華夏
hui	茴
Ji Kang	嵇康
jiao	角
jiaozhengben	校正本
Jiaqing	嘉慶
<i>Jigu lu</i>	集古錄
Jin dynasty (265–420)	晉朝
Jin dynasty (1115–1234)	金朝
Jin Yuelin	金岳霖
jing	京
Jing'an	靜安
jingjie	境界
Jinshixue	金石學
<i>Jinshu</i>	晉書
jue	爵
Kang Sheng	康生
Kang Youwei	康有為
kaogu	考古
<i>Lanting lunbian</i>	蘭亭論辯
<i>Lantingxu/Lantingjixu</i>	蘭亭序/蘭亭集序
Lao She	老舍
li	禮
Li Cheng	李成
Li Ji/Li Chi	李濟
Li Qingzhao	李清照
Li Shangyin	李商隱
Li Wentian	李文田
Li Yu	李煜
lian	奩
Liang Qichao	梁啟超
Liang Sicheng	梁思成
Liang Siyong	梁思永
Liang Wudi (Emperor Wu of Liang)	梁武帝
Liang Yuandi (Emperor Yuan of Liang)	梁元帝
lin	臨
Lin Huiyin	林徽因
<i>Linhexu</i>	臨河序

lishi weiwu zhuyi	歷史唯物主義
lishu	隸書
Liu E	劉鶚
Liu Huisun	劉蕙孫
Liu Xiaobiao	劉孝標
Liu Xie	劉勰
Liulichang	琉璃廠
<i>Liuwen zhiyao</i>	柳文指要
Long Qian	龍潛
Lu Jiuling	陸九齡
Lu Jiuyuan	陸九淵
Lu Xun	魯迅
Luo Wang zhi xue	羅王之學
Luo Zhenchang	羅振常
Luo Zhenyu/Luo Shuyan	羅振玉/羅叔言
Mao Dun	茅盾
mei shenme yisi	沒什麼意思
<i>Meiguo suocang zhongguo tongqi jilu</i>	美國所藏中國銅器集錄
<i>Meng Xiaoju</i>	孟孝琚
Mengjiashi	夢甲室
Mingjiao	名教
mo	摹
<i>Mujiewen</i>	墓碣文
<i>Nahan</i>	吶喊
Ng Kim Chew	黃錦樹
Nie Chongyi	聶崇義
Nüwa	女媧
Ouyang Xiu	歐陽修
Ouyang Xun	歐陽詢
pankui	蟠夔
pi	癖
Puyi	溥儀
Qi Yanming	齊燕銘
Qian Xuantong/Jin Xinyi	錢玄同/金心異
Qianlong	乾隆
Qigong	啟功
Qilin	麒麟
qing	情
qingkuang	情況
Qu Yuan	屈原
qushui liushang	曲水流觴
ren	仁
<i>Renjian cihua</i>	人間詞話
renyi daode	仁義道德
Rong Geng	容庚
Ruan Yuan	阮元

rusheng	入聲
san	散
<i>Sanlitu jizhu</i>	三禮圖集注
shanben	善本
<i>Shangshu tonglun</i>	尚書通論
Shen Congwen	沈從文
Shenlongben	神龍本
Shi Chong	石崇
shi keyi guan	詩可以觀
Shi Zhecun	施蛰存
shiliao/lishi cailiao	史料/歷史材料
shiqing	事情
<i>Shisilun</i>	釋私論
<i>Shitouji (The Story of the Stone)</i>	石頭記
<i>Shiwu bao</i>	時務報
shoucang jia	收藏家
<i>Shuowen jiezi</i>	說文解字
shuqing	抒情
Sima Zhao	司馬昭
Sizi Vase	嗣子壺
Song Hezhi	宋和之
su	俗
Sui Yangdi (Emperor Yang of Sui)	隋煬帝
Sun Guoting	孫過庭
Sun Yirang	孫詒讓
ta	塔
Tang Taizong	唐太宗
Tao Hongjing	陶弘景
Tianshidao	天師道
tianwen	天文
tianxia	天下
tiexue	帖學
tong	同
Tusi	土司
<i>Wan'anqiao ji</i>	萬安橋記
Wang	王
Wang Guowei/Wang Jing'an	王國維/王靜安
Wang Shixiang	王世襄
Wang Xianzhi	王獻之
Wang Xingzhi	王興之
Wang Xizhi	王羲之
Wang Yangming	王陽明
Wang Yinglin	王應麟
Wang Yirong	王懿榮
Wang Zengqi	汪曾祺
wanwan gudong	玩玩古董

wanwu	玩物
wanwu sangzhi	玩物喪志
wei	唯
weiwu shiguan	唯物史觀
weiwu zhuyi	唯物主義
weixin shiguan	唯心史觀
weixin zhuyi	唯心主義
wen	文
wen	紋
Wen Yiduo	聞一多
wenhua	文化
Wenhua dageming	文化大革命
wenming	文明
wenwu	文物
Wenwu chubanshe	文物出版社
<i>Wenxin diaolong</i>	文心雕龍
<i>Wenxuan</i>	文選
wenxue	文學
wenzhang	文章
wenzi	文字
wenziyu	文字獄
wu	物
Wu Changshou	吳昌綬
Wu Dacheng	吳大澂
Wu Han	吳晗
Wu Kuan	吳寬
<i>Wuwei hanjian</i>	武威漢簡
Xi Jin (Western Jin dynasty)	西晉
Xia	夏
Xia Nai	夏鼐
Xia Zengyou	夏曾佑
<i>Xiangguang bei</i>	祥光碑
Xiao Yi	蕭翼
xiaoshuo	小說
Xiaotun	小屯
Xie Cheng	謝承
xin	心
<i>Xingrangtie</i>	行穰帖
xingshu	行書
<i>Xinsheng</i>	新生
<i>Xiqing gujian</i>	西清古鑒
xiuxi	修禊
<i>Xizhou tongqi duandai</i>	西周銅器斷代
Xu Senyu	徐森玉
Xu Shen	許慎
Xu Zhimo	徐志摩

- Xuanhe bogutu* 宣和博古圖  
 Xuanxue 玄學  
*Xueshi yiqi zhongding kuanzhi* 薛氏彝器鐘鼎款識  
*Xunzi* 荀子  
 Yao Wenyuan 姚文元  
*Yecao* 野草  
 Yi 夷  
 yigu 疑古  
 yilao 遺老  
 yiqieyan 一切眼  
 yitizi 異體字  
 yiwen 逸文  
 yong 用  
 Yongzheng 雍正  
 yu 欲  
 Yu Liqun 于立群  
 Yu Shinan 虞世南  
 Yu Shuo 于碩  
 Yu Yu 虞預  
 Yu Zhengxie 俞正燮  
 Yuan Ang 袁昂  
 Yuan Mei 袁枚  
 Yuan Shikai 袁世凱  
*Yuanyou dangji bei* 元佑黨籍碑  
 yue 約  
 zhan 占  
 zhanbu 占卜  
 Zhang Binglin/ Zhang Taiyan 章炳麟/章太炎  
 Zhang Boju 張伯駒  
 Zhang Shizhao 章士釗  
 Zhang Xuecheng 章學誠  
 Zhang Zhaohe 張兆和  
 zhao 兆  
 Zhao Luorui 趙蘿蕤  
 Zhao Mingcheng 趙明誠  
 Zhao Wanli 趙萬里  
 Zhao Zichen/C. T. Chao 趙紫宸  
 zhen 真  
 zhenben 珍本  
 Zheng Zhenduo 鄭振鐸  
 zhenshu 真書  
 zhi 觶  
 Zhiguo 智果  
 Zhiyong 智永  
 Zhongguo 中國  
*Zhongguo tongqi zongshu* 中國銅器綜述

Zhou Shuren

周樹人

Zhou Zuoren

周作人

Zhu Xi

朱熹

Zhuangzi

莊子

*Zhuanxilu congshu*

纂喜廬叢書

Zhulin qixian

竹林七賢

zi ru qiren

字如其人

□ Gong muzhi kao

《□肱墓志》考

## Notes

### Epigraph

1. Wang Bi 王弼, *Laizi dao de jing zhu* 老子道德經註 (Zhonghua Shuju, 2008), 121.
2. Hans Gerhard Graf, ed., *Jahrbuch der Goethe-Gesellschaft* (Verlag des Goethe-Gesellschaft, 1916), 3:330.
3. Novalis, *Philosophical Writings*, trans. Margaret Mahony Stoljar (State University of New York Press, 1997), 31.

### Introduction

1. Li Qingzhao 李清照, “*Jinshilu houxu*” 金石錄後序, in Li Qingzhao 李清照 and Zhao Mingcheng 趙明誠, *Jinshilu* 金石錄 (Shanghai shuhua chubanshe, 1985), 560.
2. Lü Buwei, *Lüshi chunqiu* 呂氏春秋, annotated by Chen Qiyou 陳奇猷 (Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2002), 45. See also *The Annals of Lü Buwei: A Complete Translation and Study by John Knoblock and Jeffrey Riegel* (Stanford University Press, 2000), 70–71. This version only mentioned “a Chu person” without specifying them being a king. Another version from the Warring States text *Gongsun Longzi* 公孫龍子 did mention a Chu king, but did not include the Laozi sequel. See Wang Xiantang 王獻唐, *Gongsun Longzi xuanjie* 公孫龍子懸解 (Taiwan zhonghua shuju, 1971), 34.
3. See Ronald Egan, “The ‘Afterword,’” in *The Burden of Female Talent: The Poet Li Qingzhao and Her History in China* (Harvard University Asia Center, 2013), 191–212; and Stephen Owen, *Remembrances: The Experience of the Past in Classical Chinese Literature* (Harvard University Press, 1986), 80–98.
4. At different stages throughout the twentieth century, the state’s involvements in cultural heritage preservation varied. While this book does not cover the period since the 1980s, it should be noted that from this time onward, the Chinese government resumed using museums to reconstruct historical memories. See Kirk Denton, *Exhibiting the Past: Historical Memory and the Politics of Museums in Postsocialist China* (University of Hawai’i Press, 2014).
5. For a discussion of the contracting space of moderate thinking in modern China, see Jianmei Liu, *Chinese Thirdspace: The Paradox of Moderate Politics, 1946–2020* (Columbia University Press, 2025), 8–13.
6. See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, rev. ed, translation revised by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (Continuum, 2004).

7. L. P. Hartley, *The Go-Between* (New York Review Books, 2002), 17.

8. This thesis is conditioned by certain caveats specific to Chinese history. The “tradition” that twentieth-century China struggled with originated in the so-called Three Dynasties (c. 2100–256 BCE) that included the Xia, the Shang, and the Zhou dynasties. In traditional historiography, these periods produced the sage kings and great philosophers who established the ideal model of governance and ethical values that later generations emulated. And yet the turbulence between the decline of the Zhou and the founding of the Han (202 BCE–9 CE and 25–220 CE) created a deep rupture in the knowledge of that “golden age.” The intellectual history of later times consisted of repeated attempts to reconstruct and even reimagine this period. In so doing, scholars also created many layers of mediation through their ideological agendas, cultural biases, and methodological limitations. Based on these caveats, while it is difficult to say what was lost, what was transmitted, and what was reconstructed, we may at least conclude that a *discourse* of loss and recovery was deeply embedded in the conception of China’s foundational past.

9. James Cuno, *Who Owns Antiquity? Museums and the Battle Over Our Ancient Heritage* (Princeton University Press, 2008).

10. Important contributions include K. C. Chang, *The Archaeology of Ancient China*, 4th ed. (Yale University Press, 1986); K. C. Chang and Xu Pingfang, *The Formation of Chinese Civilization: An Archaeological Perspective*, ed. Sarah Allan (Yale University Press, 2005); David N. Keightley, ed., *Sources of Shang History: The Oracle-Bone Inscriptions of Bronze Age China* (University of California Press, 1978); David N. Keightley, *These Bones Shall Rise Again: Selected Writings on Early China* (State University of New York Press, 2014); Sarah Allan, *The Shape of the Turtle: Myth, Art, and Cosmos in Early China* (State University of New York Press, 1991); and Lothar von Falkenhausen, *Chinese Society in the Age of Confucius (1000–250 BCE): The Archeological Evidence* (Cotsen Institute of Archaeology, UCLA, 2006). In the field of archaeologically recovered texts and inscriptions, see Edward Shaughnessy’s three important monographs: *Sources of Western Zhou History: Inscribed Bronze Vessels* (University of California Press, 1992); *Before Confucius: Studies in the Creation of the Chinese Classics* (State University of New York Press, 1997); and *Rewriting Early Chinese Texts* (State University of New York Press, 2006). See also Martin Kern, “Zaoqi zhongguo wenxian yanjiu fangfa zhi fansi” 早期中國文獻研究方法之反思, in *Jianbo sixiang wenxian yanjiu: ge’an yu fangfa*, ed. Liu Xiaogan, Zheng Jixiong, and Liang Tao (Dongfang chubanshe, 2019), 121–55.

11. Recent scholarship in this field includes Chen Fangmei 陳芳妹, *Qingtongqi yu songdai wenhuashi* 青銅器與宋代文化史 (Taida chuban zhongxin, 2016); Patricia Buckley Ebrely, *Accumulating Culture: The Collections of Emperor Huizong* (University of Washington Press, 2008); François Louis, *Die Goldschmiede der Tang- und Song-Zeit: Archäologische, sozial- und wirtschaftsgeschichtliche Materialien zur Goldschmiedekunst Chinas vor 1279* (Peter Lang, 1998); François Louis, *Design by the Book: Chinese Ritual Objects and the ‘Sanli tu’* (Bard Graduate Center, 2017); Tao Wang, ed., *Mirroring China’s Past: Emperors, Scholars, and Their Bronzes* (The Art Institute of Chicago, 2018); and Wu Hung, ed., *Reinventing the Past* (Art Media Resources, Inc., 2010). Yunchiahn C. Sena’s *Bronze and Stone: The Cult of Antiquity in Song Dynasty China* (University of Washington Press, 2019) provides a comprehensive and interdisciplinary reconstruction of the Song antiquarian movement. Jeffrey Moser’s *Nominal Things: Bronzes in the Making of Medieval China* (University of Chicago Press, 2023) is especially relevant because it also takes up the universal problem of language’s unreliability, but with a focus on Song antiquarian practices.

In recent years, the related field of comparative or world antiquarianism has placed the Chinese practice in a broader context; see Alain Schnapp, ed., with Lothar von Falkenhausen,

Peter N. Miller, and Tim Murray, *World Antiquarianism: Comparative Perspectives* (Getty Research Institute, 2013), especially Lothar von Falkenhausen, “Antiquarianism in East Asia: A Preliminary Overview,” 35–66; and Peter N. Miller and François Louis, eds., *Antiquarianism and Intellectual Life in Europe and China, 1500–1800* (University of Michigan Press, 2012).

12. Ori Sela’s *China’s Philological Turn: Scholars, Textualism, and the Dao in the Eighteenth Century* (Columbia University Press, 2018) builds upon Benjamin Elman’s pioneering *From Philosophy to Philology: Intellectual and Social Aspects of Change in Late Imperial China* (Harvard University Press, 1985) and provides a more nuanced explanation of this key episode in Chinese intellectual history.

13. A wide-ranging survey on the culture of collecting in relation to China can be found in Vimalin Rujivcharakul, ed., *Collecting China: The World, China, and a History of Collecting* (University of Delaware Press, 2011). Concerning late Qing and early Republican engagements with ancient artifacts, Shana Brown’s *Pastimes: From Art and Antiquarianism to Modern Chinese Historiography* (University of Hawai’i Press, 2011) covers a wide range of fields but emphasizes the prominence of epigraphy within broader antiquarian scholarship and its impact on visual culture. Since the publication of Craig Clunas’s pioneering *Superfluous Things: Material Culture and Social Status in Early Modern China* (University of Hawai’i Press, 2004), various recent studies have taken innovative approaches to deepen our understanding of material culture in different historical periods, such as Michael J. Hatch, *Networks of Touch: A Tactile History of Chinese Art, 1790–1840* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2024); Kai Jun Chen, *Porcelain for the Emperor: Manufacture and Technocracy in Qing China* (University of Washington Press, 2023); Thomas Kelly, *The Inscription of Things: Writing and Materiality in Early Modern China* (Columbia University Press, 2023); and Dorothy Ko, *The Social Life of Inkstones: Artisans and Scholars in Early Qing China* (University of Washington Press, 2017). Taking a distinctly literary approach, Sophie Volpp’s *The Substance of Fiction: Literary Objects in China, 1550–1775* (Columbia University Press, 2022) offers a reminder that fictional objects have a life and logic of their own, and might not always serve as direct equivalents to their historical counterparts. Further studies sharing a similar literary emphasis include Wai-ye Li, *The Promise and Peril of Things: Literature and Material Culture in Late Imperial China* (Columbia University Press, 2022); and Stephen Owen, *All Mine! Happiness, Ownership, and Naming in Eleventh-Century China* (Columbia University Press, 2022).

14. See Wu Hung, *Chinese Art and Dynastic Time* (Princeton University Press, 2022). Wu’s discussion is mostly focused on art history, but it has wider ramifications for all aspects of Chinese history.

15. See Kun Qian, *Imperial-Time-Order: Literature, Intellectual History, and China’s Road to Empire* (Brill, 2016), 6–12.

16. See Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China* (University of Chicago Press, 1995); and Viren Murthy and Axel Schneider, introduction to *The Challenge of Linear Time: Nationhood and the Politics of History in East Asia* (Brill, 2014), 1–8.

17. See Zhao Ziyang, “Advance Along the Road of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics: Report Delivered at the 13th National Congress of the Communist Party of China on October 25, 1987,” *Beijing Review* 30, no. 45 (1987), iii–vi.

18. This repositioning has manifested in many arenas, including the Chinese president Xi Jinping’s emphasis on the importance of archaeology, the establishment in 2022 of four China National Archives of Publications and Culture (中國國家版本館) across the country, and the rise of classicism as a new vogue in popular culture with the blessing of the government. All these measures would not have been imaginable five decades ago. For Xi’s comments on archeology,

see “Jianshe zhongguo tese zhongguo fengge zhongguo qipai de kaoguxue, genghao renshi yuanyuanliuchang bodajingshen de zhonghua wenming” 建設中國特色中國風格中國氣派的考古學，更好認識源遠流長博大精深的中華文明, *Zhongguo wenwu kexue yanjiu* 中國文物科學研究, no. 4 (2020): 2-4. For classicism as a vogue, see Zhiyi Yang, “Sinophone Classicism: Chineseness as Temporal and Mnemonic Experience in the Digital Era,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 81, no. 4 (2022): 657-71; and Zhiyi Yang and David Der-wei Wang, eds., “Classicism in Digital Times: Cultural Remembrance as Reimagination in the Sinophone Cyberspace,” special issue, *Prism: Theory and Modern Chinese Literature* 20, no. 2 (September 2023).

19. “Xionghuai daju bawo dashi zhuoyan dashi, ba xuanchuan sixiang gongzuo zuo genghao” 胸懷大局把握大勢著眼大事，把宣傳思想工作做更好, in “Xi Jinping zhongyao jianghua shujuku” 習近平重要講話數據庫, <https://jhsjk.people.cn/article/22634049>.

20. Note that Falkenhausen, “Antiquarianism in East Asia,” confines itself neither to the Song period (960-1279) nor to inscriptions in antiquarian practice, but maps out a more comprehensive picture of Chinese and East Asian antiquarianism that includes historiography, geography, ethnography. Equally helpful is Brown, “Antiquarianism and Its Genealogies” (*Pastimes*, 13-32), which describes how antiquarianism developed from the Song dynasty through the Yuan, Ming, and the Qing.

21. Peter Miller and François Louis ask a similar question—“Who were the antiquaries?”—and answer it from a professional-disciplinary angle: “Philologists, lawyers, and doctors are the dominant professional identities of antiquaries in the seventeenth century [in Europe]” (*Antiquarianism and Intellectual Life*, 2-3).

22. Honoré de Balzac, *Cousin Pons*, trans. Ellen Marriage (Macmillan Company, 1901), 144; with slight modifications.

23. Jean Baudrillard, *System of Objects* (Verso, 1996), 85.

24. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge University Press, 1997), 75.

25. It is worth noting that, in view of traditional beliefs of Confucius’s relationship to various classics such as the *Classic of Poetry*, the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, and the *Book of Documents*, he was known as a collector, compiler, and editor rather than an “author” in the modern sense.

26. *The Analects*, trans. Simon Leys (W. W. Norton, 2014), 18-19.

27. 君子博學於文，約之以禮，亦可以弗畔矣夫 (*The Analects*, 17).

28. *The Analects* records another very similar saying by Confucius’s disciple Yan Yuan 顏淵, who reported that the master “enlarges my learning with literature, and restrains me with ritual” (58). The meaning in this quote is clear, but unfortunately cannot dispel the ambiguity of the other.

29. *Mencius*, trans. Irene Bloom (Columbia University Press, 2009), 88.

30. Lu Jiuyuan 陸九淵, *Lu Xiangshan quanji* 陸象山全集 (Shijie shuju, 1959), 323.

31. Wang Yangming 王陽明, *Wang Yangming quanji* 王陽明全集 (Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1992), 266.

32. Ying-shih Yu 余英時, *Lun Dai Zhen yu Zhang Xuecheng* 論戴震與章學誠 (Sanlian shudian, 2000), 3.

33. Dai Zhen 戴震, *Dai Zhen wenji* 戴震文集 (Zhonghua shuju, 1980), 10:146.

34. Zhang Xuecheng 章學誠, *Wenshi tongyi* 文史通義 (Huadong shifan daxue chubanshe, 2012), 2.

35. Zhang, *Wenshi tongyi*, 535. See also Yu, *Lun Dai Zhen yu Zhang Xuecheng*, 49-61, for a detailed analysis of Zhang’s thesis.

36. Philip Ivanhoe aptly translates this essay as “Breadth and Economy;” but this doesn’t allow for the possibility that the two words can be both verbs and nouns, nor does it capture the “thread” meaning of *yue*. Therefore, I opt to keep the two words in *pinyin*. See Zhang Xuecheng, *On Ethics and History: Essays and Letters of Zhang Xuecheng*, trans. Philip J. Ivanhoe (Stanford University Press, 2010), 68–75.

37. Zhang, *Wenshi tongyi*, 167.

38. Zhang, *Wenshi tongyi*, 168.

39. See Zhang, *Wenshi tongyi*, 245–55. As an analogy for the distinction between *bo* and *yue*, we can refer to Isaiah Berlin’s famous distinction between the fox and the hedgehog as a way to explain Leo Tolstoy’s thoughts. See Yu, *Lun Dai Zhen yu Zhang Xuecheng*, 83–87.

40. See Lydia Liu, *Translingual Practice: Literature, National Culture, and Translated Modernity: China, 1900–1937* (Stanford University Press, 1995), 275, 292. See also Song Boyin 宋伯胤, *Bowuguanren cong yu* 博物館人叢語 (Shanxi renmin chubanshe, 2002), 197; and Liang Jisheng 梁吉生, “Jiu Zhongguo bowuguan li shi shulue” 舊中國博物館歷史述略, *Zhongguo Bowuguan* 3, no. 2 (1986): 73–87.

41. John Earle, *Micro-cosmographie. Or, A Peece of the World Discovered in Essayes and Characters* (London, 1650), 14.

42. Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning*, in *The Works of Francis Bacon* (London, 1870), 4303.

43. Arnaldo Momigliano, “The Rise of Antiquarian Research,” in *The Classical Foundations of Modern Historiography* (University of California Press, 1990), 54.

44. Arnaldo Momigliano, “Ancient History and the Antiquarian,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 13, no. 3/4 (1950): 285–315.

45. Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning*, 303.

46. Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning*, 303.

47. Many of the items listed by Bacon became well-established modern disciplines that not only are important in their own right but also contribute significantly to general historical studies. Etymologies of words belong to philology, proverbs and traditions are properties of folklore studies and anthropology, names and coins have their own departments in onomastics and numismatics, and so forth.

48. See Momigliano, “Ancient History,” 295–307.

49. Momigliano, “Ancient History,” 313.

50. See Ingo Herklotz, “Arnaldo Momigliano’s ‘Ancient History and the Antiquarian’: A Critical Review,” in *Momigliano and Antiquarianism: Foundations of the Modern Cultural Sciences*, ed. Peter N. Miller (University of Toronto Press, 2007), 127–53.

51. Momigliano, “Ancient History,” 312.

52. A common form of enumeration is the list, an ostensibly primitive and unremarkable method, yet an appropriate one for what it represents. In Umberto Eco’s words, lists are made “where we do not know the boundaries of what we wish to portray. . . . We cannot provide a definition by essence and so, to be able to talk about it, to make it comprehensible or in some way perceivable, we list its properties.” See *The Infinity of Lists*, trans. Alastair McEwen (Rizzoli, 2009), 15. According to James Delbourgo and Staffan Müller-Wille, “the logic of the list is not that of prose or flowing speech. It does not derive from sentences composed of subjects, objects, and predicates. . . . A list is not a statement or an argument. Instead, its logic is spatial. It draws things together . . . abstracting, enumerating, and linking them.” See James Delbourgo and Staffan Müller-Wille, introduction to “Focus: Listmania,” *Isis* 103 (2012): 710.

53. Momigliano, “Ancient History,” 311, emphasis mine; Momigliano, “The Rise of Antiquarian Research,” 58.

54. Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, 62.

55. Various authors write about the same idea. For example, Jorge Luis Borges’s story “Funes, the Memorious” is about someone who gains the ability to remember every detail of the things he observes in his life—or, rather, he loses the ability to forget. See *Ficciones*, trans. Anthony Kerrigan (Grove Press, 1944), 107–15. According to Joseph Brodsky, “What memory has in common with art is the knack for selection, the taste for detail. . . . Memory contains precisely details, not the whole picture; highlights, if you will, not the entire show. The conviction that we are somehow remembering the whole thing in a blanket fashion . . . is groundless. More than anything, memory resembles a library in alphabetical disorder.” See *Less than One* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1986), 489. Zygmunt Bauman compares stories to “searchlights and spotlights” that “brighten up parts of the stage while leaving the rest in darkness. . . . It is the mission of stories to select, and it is in their nature to include through exclusion and to illuminate through casting shadows. It is a grave misunderstanding, and injustice, to blame stories for favoring one part of the stage while neglecting another. *Without selection there would be no story.*” See *Wasted Lives: Modernity and Its Outcasts* (Polity, 2004), 17.

56. A notable recent study among numerous ones that foreground collecting in the said fields is James Delbourgo, *Collecting the World: Hans Sloane and the Origins of the British Museum* (Harvard University Press, 2019).

57. While the figure of the collector is well researched in disciplines from history of science to art history, a number of works study it as a cultural and literary phenomenon, including Baudrillard, *System of Objects*; Emma Bielecki, *The Collector in Nineteenth-Century French Literature: Representation, Identity, Knowledge* (Peter Lang, 2012); Jeremy Braddock, *Collecting as Modernist Practice* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013); Samuel Frederick, *The Redemption of Things: Collecting and Dispersal in German Realism and Modernism* (Cornell University Press, 2021); Annie Pfeifer, *To the Collector Belong the Spoils: Modernism and the Art of Appropriation* (Cornell University Press, 2023); and Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Duke University Press, 1993).

58. See Henry James, *The Spoils of Poynton* (Penguin Books, 1987); Salman Rushdie, “The Prophet’s Hair,” in *East, West: Stories* (Vintage Books, 1996), 33–58; Stefan Zweig, “The Invisible Collection,” in *The Invisible Collection: Tales of Obsession and Desire*, trans. Anthea Bell (Pushkin Press, 2015), 7–24.

59. Li Fang 李昉, ed., *Taiping guangji* 太平廣記 (Zhonghua shuju, 1961), 2229.

60. Judith Zeitlin, *Historian of the Strange: Pu Songling and the Chinese Classical Tale* (Stanford University Press, 1993), 61.

61. See Rey Chow, “Fateful Attachments: On Collecting, Fidelity, and Lao She,” *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 1 (2001): 286–304.

62. Wai-yee Li, “The Collector, the Connoisseur, and Late-Ming Sensibility,” *T’oung Pao*, Second Series 81, Fasc. 4/5 (1995): 272.

63. Li, “The Collector,” 299.

64. *Shujing* 書經 (Chengwen shuchu, 1974), 125.

65. John Hay, *Kernels of Energy, Bones of Earth: The Rock in Chinese Art* (China House Gallery, China Institute in America, 1985), 34.

66. Zeitlin, *Historian of the Strange*, 64.

67. Baudrillard, *System of Objects*, 92.

68. Stewart, *On Longing*, 151–52.

69. Schnapp, “Introduction: The Roots of Antiquarianism,” in *World Antiquarianism*, 3–4; emphasis mine.

70. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Belknap Press, 2002), 211.

71. Bainard Cowan, “Walter Benjamin’s Theory of Allegory,” *New German Critique* 22 (1981): 115.

72. Giorgio Agamben, *The Man Without Content*, trans. Georgia Albert (Stanford University Press, 1999), 105.

73. Bielecki, *The Collector*, 122.

74. Quoted from Baudrillard, *System of Objects*, 102.

75. Baudrillard, *System of Objects*, 102–4, emphasis original.

76. See, for example, Delbourgo’s *Collecting the World*, 317–18, for how the British Museum was reorganized when it was transformed from Hans Sloane’s private collection into a public institution. In particular, the curators wanted to arrange it “in a methodical manner” and favored “a more didactic scheme modelled on the Chain of Being, according to which the cosmos was structured by a hierarchy of being passing from God down through the angels to human beings, animals, plants and minerals. Sloane’s emphasis on variety within object categories was now dismissed as lacking the coherence and harmony deemed appropriate for a public museum.”

77. Baudrillard, *System of Objects*, 100–101.

78. Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. N. I. Stone (Charles H. Kerr & Company, 1904), 11.

79. Guo Moruo first formulated his theory of Marxist periodization of Chinese history in *Zhongguo gudai shehui yanjiu* 中國古代社會研究 in 1928–29. For a general discussion of the topic, see Arif Dirlik, *Revolution and History: The Origins of Marxist Historiography in China, 1919–1937* (University of California Press, 1978).

80. Wang Guowei called communism *chihua zhihuo* 赤化之禍 or “the calamity of the red takeover.” See Wang’s letter to Naoki Kano on December 1, 1924, in *Wang Guowei quanji* 王國維全集, vol. 15 (Zhejiang jiaoyu chubanshe and Guangdong jiaoyu chubanshe, 2009), 840. After the end of World War I, Wang suggested that the international community form a “holy alliance” against the “radical” communist parties to prevent them from causing unfathomable damage to the world. See Wang’s letter to Luo on January 19, 1919, in *Wang Guowei quanji*, vol. 15, 476. Luo concurred with Wang’s view and praised the latter for his foresight. See Luo Zhenyu, “Wang Zhongque Gong yishu xu” 王忠愍公遺書序, in Luo Zhenyu, *Luo Zhenyu xueshu lunzhuji* 羅振玉學術論著集 (Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2010), 10:205–6. For a detailed analysis of Wang’s political views, see Zhou Yan 周言, *Wang Guowei yu minguo zhengzhi* 王國維與民國政治 (Songye wenhua, 2019).

81. Michael Löwy, *Fire Alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin’s “On the Concept of History”* (Verso, 2005), 25.

82. Walter Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, vol. 4, 1938–1940, ed. H. Eiland and M. W. Jennings (Harvard University Press, 2003), 389–400.

83. Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History* (University of Chicago Press, 1949), 44–45.

84. See *The Gongyang Commentary on the Spring and Autumn Annals: A Full Translation*, trans. Harry Miller (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015). The Gongyang tradition was at the heart of long-standing commentarial and hermeneutic debates. See also Zhang Longxi, “Hermeneutics and Politics: Going Beyond the Book,” *KNOW: A Journal on the Formation of Knowledge* 6, no. 2 (2022): 227–400; Newell Ann Van Auken, *The Commentarial Transformation of the Spring and*

*Autumn* (State University of New York Press, 2016); and Yuri Pines, Paul R. Goldin, and Martin Kern, eds., *Ideology of Power and Power of Ideology in Early China* (Brill, 2015).

85. For detailed analyses of this issue, see S. K. Kwong, “The Rise of the Linear Perspective on History and Time in Late Qing China c. 1860–1911,” *Past and Present* (November 2001): 157–90; and Wang Fan-sen 王汎森, “Jindai Zhongguo de xianxing lishi guan: yi shehui jinhuailun wei zhongxin de taolun” 近代中國的線性歷史觀——以社會進化論為中心的討論, in *Jindai zhongguo de shijia yu shixue* 近代中國的史家與史學 (Fudan University Press, 2010), 29–68.

86. See Walter Benjamin, *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, trans. Howard Eiland (Harvard University Press, 2019). The ruin, “from the perspective of the history of scholarship,” as Peter N. Miller points out, “is manifested in the beginnings of modern archaeology. . . . The antiquarian attention to material culture turned history into collecting and landscape into text. . . . Benjamin’s famous ‘theory’ of the ruin grows out of this description of the seventeenth century’s conception of history, in which ruins, quite literally, were observed, described, compared, and collected by contemporary antiquaries.” See “Momigliano, Benjamin, and Antiquarianism after the Crisis of Historicism,” in *Momigliano and Antiquarianism: Foundations of the Modern Cultural Sciences*, ed. Peter N. Miller (University of Toronto Press, 2007), 350.

87. Ranke, preface to *Histories of the Latin and Germanic Nations*, is quoted from Georg G. Iggers, “Historicism: The History and Meaning of the Term,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 56, no. 1 (January 1995): 135–38. For helpful explanations of the history as well as many uses of the term “historicism,” see Iggers’s article and the section “The Crisis of Historicism” in Donald R. Kelley, *Fortunes of History: Historical Inquiry from Herder to Huizinga* (Yale University Press, 2003), 327–33.

88. Historical materialism is also the core subject in Benjamin’s other major writing on collecting, “Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian,” in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin (Harvard University Press, 2008), 116–57.

89. Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” 395.

90. Benjamin, “Eduard Fuchs,” 118.

91. Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” 391. It is worth noting that this conception of time belongs to a broader discourse on temporality in relation to rhetorics and political theory, as it bears a striking resemblance to concept of *kairos*, which is one of two words that refer to “time” in ancient Greek, the other being the much more common *chronos*. Whereas *chronos* describes linear and sequential time, *kairos* indicates the brief yet opportune moment for an action to be taken. As Michael Löwy notes, in a letter to Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno compared Benjamin’s remark that “History is the subject of a construction whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled full by now-time [*Jetztzeit*]” with Paul Tillich’s reading of *kairos* versus *chronos*: rather than the formal time represented by the latter, the former describes “full” historical time “in which each moment contains a unique opportunity, a singular constellation between relative and absolute.” See Löwy, *Fire Alarm*, 87.

92. Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” 396.

93. Benjamin, “Eduard Fuchs,” 118–19, emphases mine.

94. Moser, *Nominal Things*, 1.

95. See Sima Qian, *Shiji* (Zhonghua shuju, 1959), 6:1935–36.

96. Frederick Mote, “A Millennium of Chinese Urban History: Form, Time, and Space Concepts in Soochow,” *Rice Institute Pamphlet—Rice University Studies* 59, no. 4 (1973): 49–51. Simon Leys summarized this same characteristic as “spiritual presence and physical absence of the past.” Paraphrasing historian Qian Mu, Leys noted that “From a very early stage—well before Confucius—the Chinese evolved the notion that there could only be one form of immortality:

the immortality conferred by history. In other words, life-after-life was not to be found in a supernature, nor could it rely upon artefacts: man only survives in man—which means, in practical terms, in the memory of posterity, through the medium of the written word.” Leys went further to argue that material destruction is helpful, if not necessary, for maintaining the Chinese civilization’s capacity for self-renewal, echoing Nietzsche’s and Borges’s emphasis on the importance of historical forgetfulness. See Simon Leys, “The Chinese Attitude Towards the Past,” in *The Hall of Uselessness: Collected Essays* (New York Review Books, 2013), 293–95.

97. Kelly, *The Inscription of Things*, 34–36.

98. Nie Chongyi 聶崇義, *Xinding sanlitu 新定三禮圖* (1175; reprint, Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1985). For a study of Nie’s work, see Louis, *Design by the Book*; for an analysis of Nie’s method, see Moser, “Picturing Names,” in *Nominal Things*, 55–81.

99. *Xuanhe bogutu 宣和博古圖* (Xinxing shuju, 1969).

100. Leys, “The Chinese Attitude Towards the Past,” 290.

101. Brown, *Pastimes*, 1.

102. Cao Xueqin 曹雪芹, *Hongloumeng 紅樓夢* (Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2005), 3–4.

103. Kelly argues that, in the late Ming and early Qing, the act of inscribing became “a central means through which writers grappled with the material contingencies and technical preconditions of writing in general” (*The Inscription of Things*, 1). For other important discussions of how inscriptions change meanings of objects and the wider world, see Kelly, *The Inscription of Things*; Robert E. Harrist Jr., *The Landscape of Words: Stone Inscriptions from Early and Medieval China* (University of Washington Press, 2008); Hay, *Sensuous Surfaces*; and Dagmar Schäfer, “Inscribing the Artifact and Inspiring Trust: The Changing Role of Markings in the Ming Era,” *East Asian Science, Technology and Society: An International Journal* 5 (2011): 239–65.

104. Here I list as examples several representative studies that excavate the myriad meanings of *wen* in different historical periods: Lothar von Falkenhausen, “The Concept of *Wen* in the Ancient Chinese Ancestral Cult,” *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews (CLEAR)* 18 (1996): 1–22; Martin Kern, “Ritual, Text, and the Formation of the Canon: Historical Transitions of *Wen* in Early China,” *Toung Pao*, Second Series 87, Fasc. 1/3 (2001): 43–91; David Schaberg, *A Patterned Past: Form and Thought in Early Chinese Historiography* (Harvard Asia Center, 2002), 57–95; Tamara Chin, *Savage Exchange: Han Imperialism, Chinese Literary Style, and the Economic Imagination* (Harvard Asia Center, 2014), 7–11; Peter K. Bol, “*This Culture of Ours*”: *Intellectual Transitions in Tang and Sung China* (Stanford University Press, 1992); and Pablo Ariel Blitstein, “From ‘Ornament’ to ‘Literature’: An Uncertain Substitution in Nineteenth-Twentieth Century China,” *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 28, no. 1 (2016): 222–72.

105. See Duan Yucai 段玉裁, *Shuowen jiezi zhu 說文解字注* (Zhonghua shuju, 2013), 761.

106. Duan, *Shuowen*, 761.

107. According to Duan, when referring to texts in the belles-lettres sense, the word 文章 is a simplified form of 文彰, with the radical 彡 denoting decorative patterns (*Shuowen*, 425). Haun Saussy provides a more comprehensive list of *wen*’s meanings: “*Wen* is (to cite several dictionaries at once) ‘markings; patterns; stripes, streaks, lines, veins; whorls; bands; writing, graph, expression, composition; ceremony, culture, refinement, education, ornament, elegance, civility; civil as opposed to military; literature (specifically belletristic prose in its distinction from poetry).’ The coexistence of these various meanings is suggestive; to say ‘*wen* is *wen*’ is never just a tautology.” See *Great Walls of Discourse and Other Adventures in Cultural China* (Harvard University Asia Center, 2001), 36. See also James J. Y. Liu, *Chinese Theories of Literature* (University of Chicago Press, 1975), 7–9.

108. See Ruan Yuan 阮元, *Shihuaqi 石畫記* (Xuehaitang, 1877). See Hatch, *Networks of Touch*, chapter 6, “The Limits of Touch,” for a discussion of this book.

109. Stephen Owen, *Readings in Chinese Literary Thought* (Harvard University Press, 1992), 189.

110. David Der-wei Wang, ed., *A New Literary History of Modern China* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2017), 14.

111. The compound *wenxue* was first used by the Jesuit missionary Giulio Aleni in 1623 to translate the concept of European belles-lettres. See Federico Masini, *The Formation of Modern Chinese Lexicon and Its Evolution Toward a National Language: The Period from 1840 to 1898* (University of California Press, 1993), 204. See also Blitstein, “From ‘Ornament’ to ‘Literature,’” and Milena Doleželová-Velingerová, “Literary Historiography in Early Twentieth-Century China (1904–1928): Constructions of Cultural Memory,” in *The Appropriation of Cultural Capital: China’s May Fourth Project*, ed. Milena Doleželová-Velingerová and Oldřich Král (Harvard University Asia Center, 2001), 121–66. Note as well Satoru Hashimoto’s analysis of the rupturing of the concept of literature in the course of cultural transmission from a specifically textual point of view in *Afterlives of Letters: The Transnational Origins of Modern Literature in China, Japan, and Korea* (Columbia University Press, 2023), 7–10 and 113–14.

112. See Hashimoto, “Liang Qichao’s Suspended Translation,” in Wang, *A New Literary History of Modern China*, 166.

113. David Wang explains this difference thus: “Writers and readers of Chinese literature tend to associate literary exercises not only with the endeavor of using the word to represent the world, but also with the continued process of illuminating a cosmic pattern, a process that purportedly emanates from the mind and finds manifold manifestations—in corporal, artistic, sociopolitical, and natural terms—in the world” (*A New Literary History of Modern China*, 5).

114. Ni Haishu 倪海曙, ed., *Lu Xun lun yuwen gaige* 鲁迅論語文改革 (Shidai chubanshe, 1949), 10.

115. For the politicization of the Chinese script prior to the 1950s, see John DeFrancis, *Nationalism and Language Reform in China* (Princeton University Press, 1950).

116. For three different approaches to the history of language reform in relation to Chinese modernity, see Yurou Zhong, *Chinese Grammatology: Script Revolution and Literary Modernity, 1916–1958* (Columbia University Press, 2019); Jing Tsu, *Kingdom of Characters: The Language Revolution That Made China Modern* (Riverhead Books, 2022); and Uluğ Kuzuoğlu, *Codes of Modernity: Chinese Scripts in the Global Information Age* (Columbia University Press, 2023).

117. Zhou Dunyi 周敦頤, *Zhouzi Tongshu* 周子通書 (Zhonghua shuju, 1921), n.p.

118. Andrea Bachner, *Beyond Sinology: Chinese Writing and the Scripts of Culture* (Columbia University Press, 2014), 1–17.

119. While the Chinese script system has always been an important subject of study, it became a hotly contested *problem* in the twentieth century as it was put in comparison with other script systems. Three earlier publications exploring the history of the script remain relevant: Qiu Xigui 裘錫圭, *Chinese Writing*, trans. Gilbert L. Mattos and Jerry Norman (Society for the Study of Early China and The Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 2000); William G. Boltz, *The Origin and Early Development of the Chinese Writing System* (American Oriental Society, 1994); and John DeFrancis, *The Chinese Language: Fact and Fantasy* (University of Hawai‘i Press, 1984). Paola Demattè’s *The Origins of Chinese Writing* (Oxford University Press, 2022) is especially relevant to the present study because it takes a refreshing look at the history of Chinese writing from an art-historical point of view and treats the script not only as a linguistic but also a visual phenomenon.

Other recent publications continue to examine the Chinese script’s theoretical relevance to current and past political, cultural, and technological issues. They include Eric Hayot, Haun

Saussy and Steven G. Yao, eds., *Sinographies: Writing China* (University of Minnesota Press, 2007); Bachner, *Beyond Sinology*; and Ross King, ed., *Cosmopolitan and Vernacular in the World of Wen 文: Language, Writing and Literary Culture in the Sinographic Cosmopolis*, vol. 5 (Brill, 2023). A special issue on the Chinese script, originally planned for the journal *Frontiers of Literary Studies in China*, became a target of censorship and was withdrawn by the authors. It was later published in *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews (CLEAR)*. See Lorraine Wong and Jacob Edmond, “Flipping the Script: An Introduction to Three Essays and a Note to the Problem of Censorship in Chinese Studies,” in *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews (CLEAR)* 40 (December 2018): 141–44.

## Chapter One

1. Jorge Luis Borges, “The Garden of Forking Paths,” trans. Donald A. Yates, in *Labyrinths: Selected Stories & Other Writings* (New Directions Books, 2007), 20.

2. *The Book of Songs: The Ancient Chinese Classic of Poetry*, trans. Arthur Waley (Grove Press, 1987), 248. See the *Siku quanshu*'s introduction to Hu Xu's *Bufa xiangkao* 卜法詳考 (“Detailed Investigation of divination methods”) for a comprehensive list of ancient texts that mentioned this practice. *Siku quanshu* 四庫全書 (Taipei: Commercial Press, 1982), 849–50.

3. Sima Qian 司馬遷, “Turtle-(shell) and Stalk (Diviners), Memoir 681,” trans. Edward Shaughnessy, in *The Grand Scribe's Records: The Memoirs of Han China*, vol. 11, part 4 (Indiana University Press, 2019), 236. The original version of this chapter by Sima Qian was lost; what we have is a subsequent reconstruction by Chu Shaosun 褚少孫. Although the latter's quality and reliability have been questioned, it still provides valuable information about this ancient practice.

4. For general surveys of oracle-bone studies, see Ping-chuan Chang 張秉權, *Jiaguwen yu jiaguxue* 甲骨文與甲骨學 (Guoli bianyiguan, 1988); Wang Yuxin 王宇信 and Yang Shengnan 楊升南, eds., *Jiaguxue yibainian* 甲骨學一百年 (Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 1999); Wang Yuxin, *Jiaguxue tonglun* 甲骨學通論 (Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2015); and Edward Shaughnessy 夏含夷, “Qiyu jiagu—xifang hanxuejia shangzhou jiaguwen yanjiu gaiyao” 契于甲骨——西方漢學家商周甲骨文研究概要, in *Xiguan hanji: xifang hanxue chutu wenxian yanjiu gaiyao* 西觀漢記: 西方漢學出土文獻研究概要 (Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2017), 85–200.

5. Chris Gosden and Yvonne Marshall, “The Cultural Biography of Objects,” *World Archaeology* 31, no. 2 (1999): 170–72. See also Igor Kopytoff, “Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process,” in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge University Press, 1988), 64–91.

6. Hu Shih 胡適 famously began his course on the history of Chinese philosophy at Peking University with Laozi and Confucius, cutting off all the contents before them on the grounds that there were no reliable sources to support their authenticity. See Hu Shih, *Zhongguo zhexueshi dagang* 中國哲學史大綱 (Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1919).

7. Andrea Bachner, “Oracle Bones, That Dangerous Supplement . . .” in Wang, *A New Literary History*, 159.

8. See Margarita Diaz-Andreu and Timothy Champion, “Nationalism and Archaeology in Europe: An Introduction,” in *Nationalism and Archaeology in Europe*, ed. Margarita Diaz-Andreu and Timothy Champion (University College London Press, 1996), 1–23.

9. Duan, *Shuowen*, 761.

10. Sima Qian, *Shiji* 史記 (Zhonghua shuju, 1959), 10:3224.
11. Hu Xu 胡煦, *Bufa xiangkao* 卜法詳考, in *Siku quanshu* 四庫全書 (Taipei: Commercial Press, 1982), 860.
12. James Mellon Menzies, *Jiagu yanjiu* 甲骨研究 (Qilu shushe, 1996), 6–7.
13. Ken-ichi Takashima and Paul L.-M. Serruys, *Studies of Fascicle Three of Inscriptions from the Yin Ruins* (Institute of History and Philology, Academia Sinica, 2010), 354.
14. Hu, *Bufa xiangkao*, 909.
15. According to later reconstructions of the now lost original *Shuowen*, the origin of 兆 was a pictograph depicting “cracks on turtle [plastrons]” 兆者如龜之坼. Yet Duan Yucai disputed this interpretation, which he argued was a misreading by later editors (*Shuowen jiezi zhu*, 128).
16. In Gu Yewang’s 顧野王 *Yupian* 玉編, 兆 means “prognosis” 事先見也. See *Siku quanshu huiyao*, vol. 79 (Shijie shuju, 2012), 12.
17. Duan, *Shuowen*, 128.
18. Duan, *Shuowen*, 128.
19. Early sources on the oracle bones’ discovery were recorded in Liu E, *Baocan shouque zhai riji sanzhe* 抱殘守缺齋日記三則 (Kaogushe, 1936); Dong Zuobin 董作賓 and Hu Houxuan 胡厚宣, *Jiagu nianbiao* 甲骨年表 (Institute of History and Philology, Academia Sinica, 1976); Liu Huisun 劉蕙孫, *Tieyun xiansheng nianpu changbian* 鐵雲先生年譜長篇 (Qilu shushe, 1982); Luo Zhenchang 羅振常, *Hengluo fanggu youji* 涇洛訪古遊記 (Henan renmin chubanshe, 1987); Chen Mengjia 陳夢家, *Yinxu buci zongshu* 殷墟卜辭綜述 (Zhonghua shuju, 1988). For a comprehensive survey of all the early sources see Ren Guangyu 任光宇, “Wang Liu lianhe faxian shuo’ he jiaguwen faxian yanjiu xinlun” “王劉聯合發現說” 和甲骨文發現研究新論, *Guangxi shifan daxue xuebao* 54, no. 6 (2018): 1–15.
20. See Chen, *Yinxu*, 3.
21. Possibly the earliest published version of this story is a 1931 article by a certain Xi Weng 汐翁 in *North China Daily* 華北日報. See Li Xueqin 李學勤, “Xi Weng guijiaowen yu jiaguwen de faxian” 汐翁《龜甲文》與甲骨文的發現, in *Yindu xuekan* 3 (2007): 1–3. Li pointed out that this account contains a number of inaccuracies and unlikely scenarios. Based on these findings, Li argued that the whole Xi Weng story, especially its medicine/pharmacy element, was not trustworthy. However, Jiang Yixue 蔣逸雪 recorded a detail, not quoted by Li, that supports the medicine scenario. Jiang recalled what his friend Wang Xiantang 王獻堂, a noted philologist, told him in 1941: it was not Wang Yirong but his wife who was ill; Wang’s nephew Zhou Hanguang 周漢光 noticed the inscriptions when preparing the medicine, and informed Wang, who was alerted and went to the pharmacy to investigate. Although he could not immediately determine what these inscriptions were, he sensed that they must be very ancient and asked the pharmacy to purchase more on his behalf. This sequence was related by Zhou to Wang, who subsequently passed it on to Jiang. See Jiang Yixue, “Laocan youji kaozheng” 老殘遊記考證, in Liu E 劉鶚, *Laocan youji* 老殘遊記 (Shijie shuju, 1962), 231–66.
22. Li Shizhen 李時珍, *Bencao gangmu* 本草綱目, ed. Wu Yuchang (Shanghai: Hongbaozhai, 1916), 8:33.
23. Menzies, *Jiagu yanjiu*, 6–7.
24. See Luo Zhenyu, *Wushiri menghen lu* 五十日夢痕錄, in *Luo Zhenyu xueshu lunzhu ji*, 11:172.
25. See Liu Huisun, “Jiagu jusan suoyi” 甲骨聚散瑣憶, in *Liu Huisun lunxue wenji* 劉蕙孫論學文集 (Fujian jiaoyu chubanshe, 2000), 365.
26. See Wang Yirong, *Tianrangge zaji* 天壤閣雜記, in Tu Long 屠隆, *Kao pan yu shi and two other works* 考槃餘事及其他二種 (Taipei: Commercial Press, 1966).

27. My account of Liu E's life is based on the following sources, some of which were written by people who knew him in person: Luo, *Wushiri*; Jiang Yixue, *Liu E nianpu* (Qilu shushe, 1980); Jiang, "Laocan youji kaozheng;" Jiang, "Guanyu laocan youji de zuozhe" 關於老殘遊記的作者, in Liu E, *Laocan youji*, 117–206; and Liu Huisun, *Tieyun*.

28. For a discussion of Wu Dacheng's antiquarian pursuits and his scholarship, see Bai Qianshen 白謙慎, *Wanqing guanyuan shoucang huodong yanjiu: yi Wu Dacheng jiqi youren wei zhongxin* 晚清官員收藏活動研究—以吳大澂及其友人為中心 (Guangxi shifan daxue chubanshe, 2019), which is especially relevant to the present study because of its comprehensive examination of the social mechanisms surrounding Wu and his circle's collecting activities.

29. Liu E's courtesy name was Tieyun 鐵雲, hence "Mr. Tie."

30. Liu E, *Liu E ji* 劉鶚集, ed. Liu Delong 劉德隆 (Jilin wenshi chubanshe, 2007), 1:565.

31. Liu, *Liu E Ji*, 1:565.

32. Liu, *Liu E Ji*, 1:565.

33. Zaiyi 載漪, Prince Duan 端王, was the Minister of Foreign Affairs and a main supporter of the Boxer Rebels.

34. Liu, *Liu E Ji*, 1:574.

35. See Liu, *Liu E ji*, 1:685–743.

36. Liu Huisun, *Tieyun*, 82–83.

37. Liu, preface to *Tieyun Cang Gui*, in *Liu E ji*, 21.

38. *Chuang-tzu: The Inner Chapters*, trans. A. C. Graham (Hackett, 2001), 161.

39. See Schäfer, "Inscribing the Artifact," 239–65.

40. Momigliano, "The Rise of Antiquarian Research," 58.

41. Luo Zhenyu, "Treatise on the Study of Ancient Artifacts," trans. and introduced by Guangchen Chen, *West 86th: A Journal of Decorative Arts, Design History, and Material Culture* 31, no. 1 (2024): 131.

42. Brown, *Pastime*, 81.

43. The protagonist of his novel *Laocan youji* is called Laocan, an obvious autobiographical reference.

44. Hu Houxuan, *Wushi nian jiaguwen faxian de zongjie* 五十年甲骨文發現的總結 (Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1951), 10–12.

45. Li Ji, *Anyang* (University of Washington Press, 1977), 3–4.

46. Sun Yirang did some interpretations of the oracle-bone characters in *Qiwén jūli* and incorporated these findings in the theoretical work *Ming Yuan*. See *Qiwén jūli*, *Mingyuan* 契文舉例, 名原 (Zhonghua shuju, 2016).

47. Regarding Zhang's attitude toward the oracle bones, see Dong and Hu, *Annals*, 63. Since the antiquities trade had always been plagued by forgery, it was no surprise that many people believed the oracle bones were no more than yet another ridiculous modern invention. And to make the situation worse, forgers duly created fake oracle bones for the market. See Li, *Anyang*, 19–20.

48. See Wu Dacheng, *Shuowen guzhou bu* 說文古籀補 (Zhonghua shuju, 1988).

49. Liu, *Tieyun Canggui*, 22.

50. "Guocui qiugu gaobai" 國粹求沽告白, in *Liu E ji*, 670.

51. See Liu Huisun, "Jiagu jusan suoyi," 365.

52. In recent years, Luo Zhenyu has attracted some attention from historians in the Anglophone world. A notable publication is *Lost Generation: Luo Zhenyu, Qing Loyalists and the Formation of Modern Chinese Culture*, ed. Yang Chia-Ling and Roderick Whitfield (Saffron Books, 2012). Shana Brown has written extensively on Luo in the context of early Republican

era antiquarianism, including a chapter in her monograph *Pastimes* and the following articles: “What Is Chinese About Ancient Artifacts? Oracle Bones and the Transnational Collectors Hayashi Taisuke and Luo Zhenyu,” in Rujivacharakul, *Collecting China*, 63–72; “Archives at the Margins: Luo Zhenyu’s Qing Documents and Nationalism in Republican China,” in *The Politics of Historical Production in Late Qing and Republican China*, ed. Robert Culp and Tze-ki Hon (Brill, 2007), 249–70.

53. Luo, *Wushiri*, 172.

54. Li, *Anyang*, 29.

55. See Pai Shih-Ming, “‘Returning to the Classics, Trusting the Ancient’: Luo Zhenyu’s Exploration of Traditional Chinese Identity in Modern China,” in *Lost Generation*, 77.

56. Luo Zhenyu, *Yinshang zhenbu wenzi kao* 殷商貞卜文字考, in *Luo Zhenyu xueshu lunzhu ji* (Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2010), 1:67.

57. Borges, “The Garden of Forking Paths,” 20.

58. 龜雖壽，三千歲；永不朽，在文字。Luo Zhenyu, *Yinxu shuqi kaoshi sanzhong* 殷墟書契考釋三種 (Zhonghua shuju, 2006), 91. *Gui sui shou* 龜雖壽 was a quote from Cao Cao’s 曹操 poem “Buchu xiamen xing” 步出夏門行. See *Cao Cao ji* 曹操集 (Zhonghua shuju, 1974), 1:21.

59. Leys, “The Chinese Attitude Towards the Past,” 293.

60. Through rigorous textual analysis, Yan Ruoqu 閻若璩 proved that the “Old Text” chapters of the *Book of Documents* were pseudepigrapha. Cui Shu’s 崔述 *Kaixinlu* 考信錄 cast doubt on numerous other ancient texts. A more influential if less objective and reliable doubter of antiquity was Kang Youwei, who argued that several key Confucian classics were forgeries. See Benjamin Elman, “Gongyang Imaginary and Looking to the Confucian Past for Reform,” in Wang, *A New Literary History of Modern China*, 68.

61. See Wang Cheng-hua, “Luo Zhenyu and the Formation of *Qiwu* and *Qiwuxue* in the First Decade of the Republican Era,” in *Lost Generation*, 32–57; and Guangchen Chen, “Luo Zhenyu: Collector and Antiquarian,” *West 86th: A Journal of Decorative Arts, Design History, and Material Culture* 31, no. 1 (2024): 122–31.

62. Luo summarized his life’s achievements as these four projects. See his letter to Wang Guowei of April 27, 1922, in Luo Zhenyu and Wang Guowei, *Luo Zhenyu Wang Guowei wanglai shuxin* 羅振玉王國維往來書信 (Dongfang chubanshe, 2000), 530; and the eulogistic couplet he composed for himself, in Luo, *Lunzhuji*, 10:908.

63. Yang, *Lost Generation*, 19.

64. The Grand Secretariat documents, whose loss was twice prevented thanks to Luo’s active interventions, will be discussed in chapter 2. For a detailed chronicle and analysis of the documents’ history see Brown, “Archives at the Margins.”

65. See, for example, Fu’s “Zhongguo xueshu sixiangjie zhi jiben miuwu” 中國學術思想界之基本謬誤, in Fu Sinian, *Fu Sinian quanji* 傅斯年全集 (Hunan jiaoyu chubanshe, 2000), 1:21–28.

66. Fu Sinian, “Shixue fangfa daolun” 史學方法導論, in *Shixue fangfa daolun: Fu Sinian shixue wenji* (Zhongguo renmin daxue chubanshe, 2004), 2.

67. Quoted from Brown, “Archives,” 262.

68. Fu Sinian, “Lishi yuyan yanjiusuo yanjiu gongzuo zhi zhiqu” 歷史語言研究所工作之旨趣, in *Zhongyang yanjiuyuan lishi yuyan yanjiusuo jikan* 1, no. 1 (1928): 6–9.

69. Brown, “Archives,” 257.

70. Millard B. Rogers, *Foreword*, in Li, *Anyang*, viii.

71. A prime example is the aforementioned *Shuowen* dictionary by Xu Shen. Those (such as Zhang Binglin) convinced that Xu had the last word on the evolution of Chinese writing felt a certain antipathy toward the oracle bones because this new evidence threatened to reopen what they considered a closed case. See Li, *Anyang*, 31.

72. Agamben, *The Man Without Content*, 108; emphasis mine.

73. Zhu Qianzhi 朱謙之, *Laozi jiaoshi* 老子校釋 (Zhonghua shuju, 1984), 310.

74. Wang, *Quanji*, 1:121.

75. Wang, *Quanji*, 8:119.

76. Luo, *Lunzhuj*, 10:251–52.

77. Wang, *Quanji*, 1:121; emphasis mine.

78. Zhu, *Laozi*, 310.

79. *The Analects*, annotated and translated by Yang Bojun 楊伯峻 (Zhonghua shuju, 1980), 185.

80. Wang, *Quanji*, 14:94.

81. Wang, *Quanji*, 1:155.

82. Wang, *Quanji*, 1:461, 1:472, 1:478. Based on Wang's writings, it is possible to identify two likely inspirations for his emphasis on *guan*. The first is the Song philosopher Shao Yong's 邵雍 *Huangji jingshi* 皇極經世: "The sage is able to grasp the principle of ten thousand things' essence because he is able to reflect. The so-called reflection means not to contemplate objects through the observing self. Not contemplating objects through the observing self means contemplating the object through the object itself. If one is able to contemplate the object through the object itself, how would 'I' appear in it?" (Quoted from Wang, *Quanji*, 1:15). The other is Schopenhauer, whose appreciation of Dutch still-life paintings in *The World as Will and Representation* invoked the ideal of disinterested contemplation. Such aesthetic disinterestedness made it possible to liberate a person from the shackles of the Will. See Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. E. F. J. Payne (Dover Publications, Inc., 1969), 1:196.

83. Ondřej Dadejick, Olga Lomová, and Vlastimil Zuska, "Wang Guowei's Aesthetics in Transcultural Perspective: 'Jingjie' and 'Atmosphere,'" *Philosophy East and West* 72, no. 4 (October 2022): 910.

84. Dadejick, Lomová, and Zuska, "Wang Guowei's Aesthetics," 910.

85. Liu Huisun, "Jiagu jusan suoyi," 388–90.

86. Wang Guowei, "Yin buci suojian xiangong xianwang kao" 殷卜辭所見先公先王考, in *Quanji*, 8:263–301.

87. Wang Guowei, "Yinzhou zhidu lun" 殷周制度論, in *Quanji*, 8:302–20.

88. Brown, *Pastime*, 140.

89. Brown, *Pastime*, 139.

90. See Wang Deyi 王德毅, *Wang Guowei nianpu* 王國維年譜 (Lantai chubanshe, 2013), 188.

91. Wang Guowei, "Yin buci," 263–64. See also Wang Deyi, *Nianpu*, 188.

92. In fact, for a period the sons of two brothers took turns to ascend the throne, and Wang suspected that it must have involved intense power struggles, leading *The Grand Scribe's Records* to refer to this period as "the chaos lasting nine reigns after King Zhongding" (中丁以後九世之亂). See Wang, "Yinzhou zhidu lun," 304.

93. Wang, "Yinzhou zhidu lun," 306.

94. Wang, "Yinzhou zhidu lun," 302.

95. Wang, "Yinzhou zhidu lun," 303.

96. Wang, “Yinzhou zhidu lun,” 305.
97. See Wang, *Guantang jilin* 觀堂集林, vol. 3, in *Quanji*, 8:68–100.
98. Wang, “Yinzhou zhidu lun,” 306; emphasis mine.
99. Wang, *Quanji*, 8:4; emphasis mine.
100. It suffices to mention that already in the 1950s, Chen Mengjia pointed out that “Yinzhou zhidu lun” was Wang’s statement of political belief, which reversed the order of cause and effect. See Chen Mengjia, *Yinxu buci zongshu* 殷墟卜辭綜述 (Zhonghua shuju, 1956), 629–31. Also notable is Edward Shaughnessy’s “The Duke of Zhou’s Retirement in the East and the Beginnings of the Ministerial-Monarch Debate in Chinese Political Philosophy,” *Early China* 18 (1993): 41–72, which casts doubt on whether the Duke of Zhou truly enjoyed the status of a sage statesman. For recent scholarship on early Chinese thoughts on succession supported by new archeological evidence, see Sarah Allan, *Buried Ideas: Legends of Abdication and Ideal Government in Early Chinese Bamboo-Slip Manuscripts* (State University of New York Press, 2015).
101. Wang Guowei, “Gushi xinzheng” 古史新證, *Quanji* 11:241–42.
102. See Hu Shih, *Hu Shih riji quanbian* 胡適日記全編 (Anhui jiaoyu chubanshe, 2001), 3:775; and Lu Xun, “Budong de yinyi” 不懂的音譯, in *Lu Xun quanji* (Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2005), 419.
103. Wang, *Quanji*, 15:908.
104. See Chen Pingyuan and Wang Feng, eds., *Zhuiyi Wang Guowei* 追憶王國維 (Zhongguo guangbo dianshi chubanshe, 1996).
105. Gu Jiegang 顧頡剛, “Dao Wang Jing’an xiansheng” 悼王靜安先生, in Chen and Wang, *Zhuiyi Wang Guowei*, 128.
106. Fu Sinian, “Yinlipu xu” 殷曆譜序, in Dong Zuobin 董作賓, *Yinlipu shisi juan* 殷曆譜十四卷 (Institute of History and Philology, Academia Sinica, 1945), 2.
107. Guo Moruo, “Lu Xun yu Wang Guowei” 魯迅與王國維, in Chen and Wang, eds., *Zhuiyi Wang Guowei*, 175.
108. Chen Mengjia, *Yinxu buci zongshu*, 58.
109. Zheng Zhong 鄭重, “Chen Mengjia: Wuwo heyi de shoucang jingjie” 陳夢家: 物我合一的收藏境界, in *Shoucang shijia* (Baihua wenyi chubanshe, 2008), 354.
110. Chen Mengjia, *Chen Mengjia shi quanbian* 陳夢家詩全編 (Zhejiang wenyi chubanshe, 1995), 209–10.
111. See Ziyi 子儀, *Chen Mengjia xiansheng biannian shiji* 陳夢家先生編年事跡 (Zhonghua shuju, 2021), 84.
112. For extensive documentations of Chen’s research in North America and Europe, see Elinor Pearlstein, “Chinese Bronzes, Western Collections, International Perspectives,” in Chen Mengjia, *General Study of Chinese Bronzes* (Zhonghua shuju, 2019), 369–401; and Wang Liqun 王黎群, *Yiduo yehua: Chen Mengjia jishi* 一朵野花: 陳夢家紀事 (Huangshan shushe, 2020), 154–85.
113. See Chen Mengjia, “Qinghua daxue wenwu chenlieshi chengli jingguo” 清華大學文物陳列室成立經過, in *Mengjiashi cunwen* 夢甲室存文 (Zhonghua shuju, 2006), 262–63.
114. See Chen Mengjia, “Luoyang chutu cizihu guiguo ji” 洛陽出土嗣子壺歸國記, in *Mengjiashi cunwen*, 311.
115. Pi Yuanchang 皮遠長, “Chen Mengjia xiaozhuan” 陳夢家小傳, *Wuhan daxue xuebao shehui kexue ban* 6 (1985): 118.
116. See Wang Shixiang 王世襄, “Huainian Mengjia” 懷念夢家, *Mingpao Monthly* (January 1992): 141–42.

117. See Fang Jixiao 方繼孝, *Suijin lingjian: wenhua mingren de moji yu wangshi* 碎錦零箋：文化名人的墨跡與往事 (Shandong huabao chubanshe, 2009), 29; and Fang Jixiao, *Chen Mengjia he tade pengyoumen* 陳夢家和他的朋友們 (Sanlian shudian, 2021), 350–56.

118. Tang Zhihui 湯志輝, “Yundong zhongde Chen Mengjia” “運動”中的陳夢家, *Yuehai feng* 3 (2015): 73–82.

119. Ziyi, *Chen Mengjia*, 349.

120. Fang, *Suijin lingjian*, 20–21. This was a reference to the requirement that historical materialism be used in the analysis of Chinese history. See chapter 3 for further discussion on this issue.

121. Wu Ningkun 巫寧坤, *Yidi lei* 一滴淚 (Yuanjing shiye chuban youxian gongsi, 2007), 21.

122. Ma Simeng 馬思猛, *Jinshimeng gugongqing: Wo xinzhong de yeye Ma Heng* 金石夢故宮情：我心中的爺爺馬衡 (Beijing tushuguan chubanshe, 2009), 361.

123. See Chen Mengjia, “Guanyu hanzi de qiantu” 關於漢字的前途, in *Mengjiashi cunwen*, 245–47.

124. Zhong, *Chinese Grammatology*, 6.

125. See Chen, *Mengjiashi cunwen*, 226–51.

126. See Rong Geng 容庚, “Hanzi Jianhua burong fan’an” 漢字簡化不容翻案, in *Rong Geng zazhuji*, ed. Zeng Xiantong (Zhongxi shuju, 2014), 255–58. Other fiercely worded articles included the editorial “Chi youpai fenzi chen mengjia” 斥右派分子陳夢家, *Kaogu tongxun* 5 (1957): 5–10; Luo Ying 駱瑛 and Wang Zhongshu 王仲殊, “Chen Mengjia, ni daodi shi nayijia?” 陳夢家，你到底是哪一家？, *Guangming ribao* (August 12, 1957): 3; and “Youpai fenzi Chen Mengjia ‘guanyu hanzi de qiantu’ yiwen kandeng hou de laigao qingkuang” 右派分子陳夢家《關於漢字的前途》一文刊登後的來稿情況, *Guangming ribao* (December 12, 1957): 3.

127. For an overview of Chen’s contribution to the Han bamboo slips studies, see Shen Songjin 沈頌金, “Chen Mengjia yu Hanjian zhuishu” 陳夢家與漢簡綴述, in *Ershi shiji jianboxue yanjiu* 二十世紀簡帛學研究 (Xueyuan chubanshe, 2003), 127–44.

128. See Fang, *Chen Mengjia*, 378.

129. Xia Nai 夏鼐, *Xia Nai riji* 夏鼐日記 (Huadong shida chubanshe, 2011), 7:238–39. See also Peter Hessler, *Oracle Bones: A Journey Between China’s Past and Present* (HarperCollins, 2006) for a reconstruction of the last days of Chen’s life.

130. Wang Guowei’s extensive accumulation of materials pertaining to ancient popular drama included *Qulu* 曲錄, *Youyulu* 優語錄, and *Xinbian luguibu jiaozhu* 新編錄鬼簿校註; based on them, he wrote *Guju jiaose kao* 古劇腳色考, *Tang Song daqu kao* 唐宋大曲考, *Xiqu kao yuan* 戲曲考源, and most notably *Song Yuan xiqu shi* 宋元戲曲史, tracing various theatrical genres’ origins and histories. See Wang, *Quanji*, vols. 1, 2 and 3.

131. Wang, *Song Yuan xiqu shi*, in *Quanji*, 3:3.

132. Dadejik, et al., “Wang Guowei’s Aesthetics,” 910.

133. Wang, *Renjian cihua*, in *Quanji*, 1:472.

134. See Hu Shih, *Baihua wenxue shi* 白話文學史 (Xinyue shudian, 1928).

135. Chen held a historically informed and balanced view on the relationship between China’s literary and vernacular languages. See Chen Mengjia, “Shuyu” 書語, in *Mengjiashi cunwen*, 220–23.

136. See Tsu, *Kingdom of Characters*, 172–78, and Bachner, *Beyond Sinology*, 7–9, for the historical connection between the New Culture Movement and the various waves of language reform movements.

137. See Doleželová-Velingerová, “Literary Historiography,” 123–66, for a reflection on the vernacular literature movement as a historiographical project.

138. Chen Mengjia, “Mengjiashi zihua” 夢甲室字話, in *Mengjiashi cunwen*, 209.
139. See Chen Mengjia, “Shenzhong yidian ‘gaige’ hanzi” 慎重一點“改革”漢字, in *Mengjiashi cunwen*, 240–43.
140. Chen Mengjia, “Luelun wenzixue” 略論文字學, in *Mengjiashi cunwen*, 237–38.
141. See Robert Lifton, *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism: A Study of “Brainwashing” in China* (University of North Carolina Press, 1989) for an analysis of this strategy. Examples of how this strategy affected Chen, his family, friends, and colleagues were documented in Fang Jixiao’s *Chen Mengjia he tade pengyoumen*.
142. Beside Chen’s mentor Rong Geng, the leading linguist Wang Li 王力 published “Pipan youpai fenzi Chen Mengjia guanyu fandui hanzi gaige de huangmiu yanlun” 批判右派分子陳夢家關於反對文字改革的荒謬言論, *Wenhui bao* (October 10, 1957); the historian Tang Lan 唐蘭 wrote “Youpai fenzi Chen Mengjia shi xuezhe ma?” 右派分子陳夢家是“學者”嗎?, *Zhongguo yuwen* (October 1957). All were fiercely worded smears on Chen’s character and scholarship. Chen’s own student Li Xueqin 李學勤, who later became director of the Institute of History at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and a professor at Tsinghua University, wrote “Ping Chen Mengjia Yinxu buci zongshu” 評陳夢家殷虛卜辭綜述, *Kaogu xuebao* 3 (1957): 119–30, with a personal attack on his teacher. Peter Hessler recorded his confrontation with Li over this incident in *Oracle Bones*, 386.
143. Tsu, *Kingdom of Characters*, xiv.
144. Tsu, *Kingdom of Characters*, xiii.
145. For Chen’s attachment to his furniture collection, see Zheng Zhong, “Chen Mengjia: wuwo heyi de shoucang jingjie”; and Fang Jixiao, “Jiaju chuanqi gong jiebo: Ji Chen Mengjia yu Wang Shixiang” 家具傳奇共劫波——記陳夢家與王世襄, *Dushu*, no. 1 (2018): 52–57.

## Chapter Two

1. Lu Xun 魯迅, *Lu Xun quanji* 魯迅全集 (Renmin wenzue chubanshe, 2005), 15:273.
2. Lu Xun, diary of May 12, 1912, in *Quanji*, 15:1.
3. Mao Zedong 毛澤東, “Lun Lu Xun” 論魯迅, in *Mao Zedong wenji* 毛澤東文集 (Renmin chubanshe, 1993), 43.
4. Hashimoto’s *Afterlives of Letters* has shed valuable light on the historical and “anachronistic” aspects of Lu Xun (111–30 and 186–94).
5. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 211.
6. See Brown, “Archives at the Margins,” 249–56, for a chronicle of this saga.
7. Lu Xun, “Tan suowei Danei Dang’an” 談所謂“大內檔案”, in *Quanji*, 3:585.
8. Lu Xun, “Tan suowei Danei Dang’an,” 589. Giving his side of the story, Fu noted that he found some extremely high-value Song-dynasty editions and placed them in the National Museum of History. He also confirmed that certain valuable objects ended up in the marketplace. See Fu Zengxiang 傅增湘, *Cangyuan qunshu tiji* 藏園群書題記 (Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1989), 66.
9. Lu Xun, “Tan suowei danei dang’an,” 589.
10. For an introduction to *Siku qianshu*’s creation, see R. Kent Guy, *The Emperor’s Four Treasuries: Scholars and the State in the Late Ch’ien-lung Era* (Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1987).
11. Jorge Luis Borges, “The Library of Babel,” trans. Eliot Weinberger, in Jorge Luis Borges, *Selected Non-Fictions* (Penguin, 1999), 116.

12. See Endymion Wilkinson, *Chinese History: A Manual* (Harvard University Asia Center for the Harvard-Yenching Institute, 2000), 274.

13. See Jonathan Spence, *Treason by the Book* (Viking, 2001); and Lydia Liu, *The Clash of Empires: The Invention of China in Modern World Making* (Harvard University Press, 2004), 81–88, for accounts of Yongzheng's literary inquisition. See Luther Carrington Goodrich, *The Literary Inquisition of Ch'ien-lung* (Paragon Book Reprint Corp., 1966) for how Yongzheng's successor Qianlong continued the practice. See also Lawrence D. Kessler, "Chinese Scholars and the Early Manchu State," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 31 (1971): 179–200.

14. Wu Zhefu 吳哲夫, 'Siku quanshu' zuanxiu zhi yanjiu 四庫全書纂修之研究 (Guoli gongong bowuyuan, 1990), 240–50. See *Siku jinhui shu congkan* 四庫禁燬書叢刊 (Beijing chubanshe, 1997), for the most complete list to date of titles banned in the process of compiling *Siku quanshu*. Earlier documentary efforts included Yao Jingyuan, *Qingdai jinhui shumu sizhong* 清代禁燬書目四種 (Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1937); and Sun Dianqi 孫殿起, *Qingdai jinshu zhijianlu* 清代禁書知見錄 (Shijie shuju, 1965). See also Xu Xudian 徐緒典, "Qianlong jinhui shujikao" 乾隆禁燬書籍考, *Xieda xuebao* 1 (1949): 1–66, which includes a list of primary sources.

15. Frederick Mote, "Reflections on the First Complete Printing of the *Ssu-k'u Ch'üan-shu*," *The Gest Library Journal* 2, no. 1 (1987): 31.

16. Lu Xun, "Binghou zatan zhiyu" 病後雜談之餘, in *Quanji*, 6:188.

17. For the question of Chinese national identity in relation to ethnicity during the Qing era, see Pamela Kyle Crossley, *A Translucent Mirror: History and Identity in Qing Imperial Ideology* (University of California Press, 2002). For a discussion of the referent for the term "China," see Liu, *The Clash of Empires*, 70–107.

18. Lu Xun, "Binghou zatan zhiyu," 189.

19. Lu Xun, "Siku quanshu zhenben" 四庫全書珍本, in *Quanji*, 5:283.

20. Elman, *From Philosophy to Philology*, 153.

21. See Sun Dianqi, *Liulichang xiaozhi* 琉璃廠小志 (Shanghai shudian chubanshe, 2010) for early accounts of the history of Liulichang. More recent works in English on Liulichang include Shana Brown, "The Women of Liulichang: Female Collectors and Bibliophiles in the Late Qing," in *Material Women, 1750–1950: Consuming Desires and Collecting Practices*, ed. Maureen Goggin and Beth Tobin (Ashgate, 2009), 279–94; Guy, *The Emperor's Four Treasuries*; Emily Mokros, "Reading the Guides, Directories, Manuals, and Anthologies of Liulichang," *East Asian Publishing and Society* 7, no. 2 (2017): 127–36; Susan Naquin, "Paul Houo 霍明志, A Dealer in Antiquities in Early Twentieth Century Peking," *Revue de l'Association Française d'Études Chinoises* 34, no. 2 (2015): 203–44; and Christopher Reed, "Dukes and Nobles Above, Scholars Below: Beijing's Old Booksellers' District Liulichang 琉璃廠, 1769–1941—and Its Influence on 20th-Century Shanghai's Book Trade," *East Asian Publishing and Society* 5 (2015): 74–128.

22. Lu Xun, "Binghou zatan zhiyu," 191.

23. Lu Xun, *Quanji*, 15:1.

24. Lu Xun, *Kuaiji jun gushu zaji* 會稽郡故書雜集, in *Quanji*, 10:35.

25. Lu Xun, *Quanji*, 10:39.

26. Not to be confused with Fan Ye 范曄's more widely known work under the same title.

27. Lu Xun, *Quanji*, 10:6.

28. Lu Xun, *Quanji*, 10:13.

29. Lu Xun, *Quanji*, 15:80.

30. Lu Xun, *Quanji*, 15:81.

31. The various versions are published in facsimile in *Lu Xun jijiao guji shougao* 魯迅集校古籍手稿 (Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1993).

32. Ji Kang's life was recorded in the *History of Jin* (*Jinshu* 晉書), the *History of the Three Kingdoms* (*Sanguo zhi* 三國志), and *A New Account of Tales of the World* (*Shishuo xinyu* 世說新語). Lu Xun gave a lecture in Guangzhou in 1927, later published as "Weijin fengdu ji wenzhang yu yao ji jiu de guanxi" 魏晉風度及文章與藥及酒的關係, in *Quanji*, 3:523–53, in which he discussed the extraordinarily rich culture of the Wei-Jin period, with a focus on the life and thoughts of Ji Kang.

33. See Lu Xun, "Ji Kang Ji zhulu kao" 《嵇康集》著錄考, in *Quanji*, 10:55–63.

34. Lu Xun, *Quanji*, 10:73–86.

35. Lu Xun, *Quanji*, 10:51–54.

36. Lu Xun, "Ji Kang ji xu" 《嵇康集》序, in *Quanji*, 10:64.

37. Ji Kang, *Ji Kang ji jiaozhu* 嵇康集校註, ed. Dai Mingyang 戴明揚 (Renmin wuxue chubanshe, 1962), 234.

38. For the meaning of *Mingjiao*, see, for example, Hu Shih, "Mingjiao" 名教, in *Hu Shih wenji* 胡適文集 (Peking University Press, 1998), 4:51–59; and Yu Ying-shih, "Mingjiao sixiang yu Wei-Jin shifeng de yanbian" 名教思想與魏晉士風的演變, in *Shi yu zhongguo wenhua* (Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1987), 401–40.

39. Ji, *Ji Kang ji jiaozhu*, 237.

40. Ji, *Ji Kang ji jiaozhu*, 237.

41. See Gu Nong 顧農, "Guanyu Lu Xun jiaoben Ji Kang ji shougao" 關於魯迅校本《嵇康集》手稿, *Lu Xun yanjiu yuekan* 8 (1994): 27–32, for a detailed description of Lu Xun's editorial process, as well as a summary of the principles he followed.

42. For Lu Xun's annotated manuscripts of this text, see Lu Xun, *Lu Xun jijiao guji shougao*, case 5, vols. 1–4.

43. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. C. K. Ogden (Routledge, 1999), 30.

44. See Halvor Eifring, ed., *Love and Emotions in Traditional Chinese Literature* (Brill, 2004), especially Christoph Anderl, "The Semantics of Qing in Chan Buddhist Chinese," 149–224.

45. See, for example, David Der-wei Wang, *The Lyrical in Epic Time: Modern Chinese Intellectuals and Artists Through the 1949 Crisis* (Columbia University Press, 2015).

46. Lu Xun, *Lu Xun quanji* 魯迅全集 (Lu Xun quanji chubanshe, compiled in 1938, published in 1948).

47. Ji Kang, *Ji Kang ji* 嵇康集, ed. Lu Xun (Wenxue guji kanxingshe, 1956).

48. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Goethe's Werke, Vollständige Ausgabe Letzter Hand*, 40 vols. (Stuttgart and Tübingen, 1827–1830).

49. Lu Xun, *A Madman's Diary*, trans. Yang Hsien-yi and Gladys Yang, in *Selected Stories of Lu Hsun* (Foreign Languages Press, 1972), 14.

50. Ronald Egan, *The Problem of Beauty: Aesthetic Thought and Pursuits in Northern Song Dynasty China* (Harvard University Asia Center, 2006), 26.

51. Quoted from Egan, *The Problem of Beauty*, 27.

52. Egan, *The Problem of Beauty*, 27.

53. For a more nuanced discussion of this subject see Wu Hung, "On Rubbings: Their Materiality and Historicity," in *Writing and Materiality in China*, ed. Judith Zeitlin and Lydia Liu (Harvard University Asia Center, 2003), 29–72.

54. Liang Qichao, *Zhongguo jin sanbainian xueshushi* 中國近三百年學術史 (Beijing: Commercial Press, 2011), 25. Qing philology of course arose from a much more complex social,

political, and intellectual fabric than Liang's explanation encapsulated. For an extensive account of this movement, with a focus on its key figure Qian Daxin 錢大昕, see Sela, *China's Philological Turn*, part I, "The Way of Man: Scholarly Networks and the Social History of Scholarship," 21–81.

55. Lu Xun, *Selected Stories*, 2.

56. Lu Xun, *Selected Stories*, 2.

57. Lu Xun, *Selected Stories*, 2–3.

58. Lu Xun, *Selected Stories*, 3.

59. Lu Xun, *Selected Stories*, 4.

60. Lu Xun, *Selected Stories*, 4.

61. Lu Xun, *Selected Stories*, 4.

62. Zhou Zuoren, "Chao gubei de mudì" 鈔古碑的目的, in *Lu Xun de gujia* 魯迅的故家 (Hebei jiaoyu chubanshe, 2002), 345–46.

63. In the aforementioned essay, Zhou Zuoren gave a well-known contemporary example: the military general Cai E 蔡鐸 who secretly plotted against Yuan Shikai, but openly fashioned himself as a dandy who only cared about romantic affairs.

64. See, for example, Qian Liqun 錢理群, "Shinian chenmo de Lu Xun" 十年沉默的魯迅, *Zhejiang shehui kexue bao* 1 (2003): 133–39.

65. Martin Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?*, trans. Fred D. Wieck and J. Glenn Gray (Harper & Row, 1968), 16.

66. See Qian Xuantong, "Zhongguo jinhou zhi wenzi wenti" 中國今後之文字問題, *Xin qingnian* 4, no. 4 (April 15, 1918): 350.

67. See Ni Haishu 倪海曙, ed., *Zhongguo yuwen de xinsheng: ladinghua Zhongguo zi yundong ershinian lunwenji* 中國語文的新生：拉丁化中國字運動二十年論文集 (Shidai huabao chubanshe, 1949), for a collection of debates and proposals over the movement to romanize the Chinese script.

68. Lu Xun, "Guanyu xin wenzi" 關於新文字, in *Quanji*, 6:165.

69. Lu Xun, "Kong Yiji" 孔乙己, in *Selected Stories*, 21–22.

70. Bachner, *Beyond Sinology*, 57–59.

71. This disappointment with the unrealized promises of the revolution is prominently on display in two other short stories by Lu Xun, "In the Wine Shop" (*Zai jiu lou shang* 在酒樓上) and "The Misanthrope" (*Guduzhe* 孤獨者). See *Selected Stories*, 144–55 and 176–96.

72. Lu Xun, "Diary of a Madman" 狂人日記, in *Selected Stories*, 10.

73. Hashimoto, *Afterlives of Letters*, 118.

74. Zhou Zuoren, "Chao bei de mudì," 345–46.

75. See Lu Xun, *Lu Xun jijiao shike shougao* 魯迅集校石刻手稿 (Shanghai shuhua chubanshe, 1986). See also Lu Xun, □ *Gong muzhi kao* 《□肱墓志》考 [the first character is either illegible or missing in the original inscription], in *Quanji*, 8:71–75; *Xu Fazhi muzhi kao* 《徐法智墓志》考, in *Quanji*, 8:76–78; and *Lü Chao muzhiming ba* 《呂超墓志銘》跋, in *Quanji*, 8:81–85. The last was a particularly fragmentary text, with more than half of the characters missing or indecipherable (*Quanji*, 8:84n7).

76. Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?*, 16.

77. Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (Norton, 1961), 38.

78. Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (MIT Press, 2006), 59.

79. Jesper Svenbro, *Phrasikleia: An Anthropology of Reading in Ancient Greece* (Cornell University Press, 1993), 44.

80. Svenbro, *Phrasikleia*, 45–46.

81. William Wordsworth, "Upon Epitaphs," in *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth, Vol. II: Aesthetical and Literary* (AMS Press, 1967), 31–32. It is no coincidence that this and other essays on epitaph were the subject of Paul de Man's deconstructionist analysis of the dis/embodyed voice as a rhetorical device. See "Autobiography as De-facement," *Comparative Literature* 94, no. 5 (December 1979): 919–30.

82. Erwin Panofsky, "Et in Arcadia Ego: Poussin and the Elegiac Tradition," in *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (University of Chicago Press, 1955), 257.

83. Panofsky, "Et in Arcadia Ego," 259.

84. Lu Xun, *Yecao* 野草, in *Quanji*, 2:207–8.

85. Lu Xun, *Selected Stories*, 4.

86. Lu Xun, *Quanji*, 2:357–69.

87. Nicholas A. Kaldis, *The Chinese Prose Poem: A Study of Lu Xun's "Wild Grass"* (Cambria Press, 2014), 229.

88. Kaldis, *The Chinese Prose Poem*, 229.

89. Adriana Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*, trans. A. Kottman (Stanford University Press, 2005), 46.

90. Leo Ou-fan Lee, "The Erotic, the Fantastic, and the Uncanny: Shi Zhecun's Experimental Stories," in *Shanghai Modern: the Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China, 1930–1945* (Harvard University Press, 1999), 154.

91. See Lu Xun, "Lun disanzhongren" 論第三種人, in *Quanji*, 4:450–56.

92. See Lu Xun, "Weile wangque de jinian" 為了忘卻的紀念, in *Quanji*, 4:943–504.

93. Lu Xun, "Chongsan ganjiu" 重三感舊, in *Quanji*, 5:342–43.

94. See the collection *Zhun Fengyuetan* 准風月談, in *Quanji*, vol. 5, which collects all the published words of the debate between Lu Xun and Shi.

95. See Shi Zhecun, "Guanyu weijiao" 關於圍剿, in *Beishan sanwenji* (Huadong shida chubanshe, 1996), 434–36.

96. See Yang Yingping 楊迎平, "Shi Zhecun hua youpai de qianyin houguo" 施蛰存劃“右派”的前因後果, *Xinwenxue shiliao* 4 (2017): 66.

97. See Yang, "Shi Zhecun," 71. See also Xu Zhongyu 徐中玉, "Huiyi Zhecun xiansheng" 回憶蛰存先生, in *Xiari zuihou yiduo meigui: jiyi Shi Zhecun* 夏日最後一朵玫瑰: 記憶施蛰存, ed. Chen Zishan (Shanghai shudian chubanshe, 2008), 33.

98. Shi Zhecun, *Beishan Jigu lu* 北山集古錄 (Bashu shushe, 1989), 1; emphasis mine. "Tiger tail" is the nickname Lu Xun gave to his studio in Beijing; see Xu Qinwen 許欽文, "Zai laohu weiba de Lu Xun xiansheng" 在老虎尾巴的魯迅先生, *Yuzhoufeng yikan* 31, no. 2 (1940): 2.

99. Whereas Shi Zhecun's collection of rubbings has been posthumously dispersed into the marketplace, a substantial number have been reproduced and collected into *Beishanlou jinshi yiji* in three volumes. See Shen Jianzhong 沈建中, ed., *Beishanlou jinshi yiji* 北山樓金石遺跡 (East China Normal University Press, 2021).

100. Shi Zhecun, *Suijingzhu beilu* 水經註碑錄 (Tianjin guji chubanshe, 1987), n.p.

101. Quoted from John Forrester, *Dispatches from the Freud Wars: Psychoanalysis and its Passions* (Harvard University Press, 1997), 111.

### Chapter Three

1. T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," in *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition*, ed. Anthony Cuda and Ronald Schuchard (Johns Hopkins University Press), 106–7.

2. Guo Moruo 郭沫若, “You Wang Xie muzhi de chutu lundao Lantingxu de zhenwei” 由王謝墓志的出土論到蘭亭序的真偽, in *Wenwu* 6 (1965): 1–25. A version with slight yet significant modifications is included in *Lanting lumbian* 蘭亭論辯 (Wenwu chubanshe, 1973), 5–32, and will be discussed below.

3. Baudrillard identifies “the nostalgia for origins and the obsession with authenticity” as “two distinct features of the mythology of the antique object” (*The System of Objects*, 80).

4. David R. Knechtges has pointed out that “Lan” in Lanting was in fact a place name, and “ting” meant a precinct house rather than a pavilion. See “Jingu and Lanting: Two (or Three) Jin-Dynasty Gardens,” in *Studies in Chinese Language and Culture: Festschrift in Honour of Christoph Harbsmeier on the Occasion of His 60th Birthday*, ed. Christoph Anderl and Halvor Eifring (Hermes Academic Publishing, 2006), 395–405.

5. The Bathing Festival was originally an ancient festival of purification held in the first ten days of the third lunar month when the people would go to sacrifice and bathe in a nearby river or lake. During the Six Dynasties period, its early religious significance was lost, and it became a social occasion for the literati to gather and write poetry.

6. See *Zhuangzi*, chapter 12: “Confucius said, ‘Life and death are the greatest of matters, indeed, but he [Wang Tai] is unaffected by them. Although Heaven may overturn and the Earth might sink, it is no loss to him. He carefully observes whatever is pure and does not let things influence him. He recognizes as fate the transformation of things and holds fast to their guiding principles.’” Here, Confucius is ironically made to espouse Zhuangzi’s philosophy by praising a cripple, Wang Tai, who had his foot cut off as a penalty yet gathered as many disciples as Confucius himself.

7. See *Zhuangzi*, chapter 5: “No one has lived longer than Shangzi and Pengzu died young.” Zhuangzi paradoxically reverses the common belief that Pengzu lived for eight hundred years, longer than any other man, and that Shangzi died in his youth.

8. Translated by Richard Strassberg, with transliterations changed to pinyin and paragraphing slightly modified; notes are the translator’s; in *The Shorter Columbia Anthology of Traditional Chinese Literature*, ed. Victor H. Mair (Columbia University Press, 2000), 351–53.

9. See He Yanzhi 何延之, “Lanting shimo ji” 蘭亭始末記, in *Quan Tang wen* 全唐文, ed. Dong Gao 董誥 (Zhonghua shuju, 1983), 301:3059.

10. See He, “Lanting shimo ji,” 3059–60.

11. Liu Yiqing, *Shih-shuo Hsin-yu: A New Account of Tales of the World*, trans. Richard B. Mather (University of Michigan Press, 2002), 338, with minor modifications. The original is in Liu Yiqing 劉義慶, *Shishuo xinyu* 世說新語, annotated by Xu Zhenè 徐震堦 (Zhonghua shuju, 2008), 2:341.

12. Fang Xuanling 房玄齡, et al., *Jinshu* 晉書 (Zhonghua shuju, 1974), 1:2093.

13. Yuan Ang 袁昂, *Gujin shuping* 古今書評, in *Lidai shufa lunwen xuan* 歷代書法論文選 (Shanghai shuhua chubanshe, 1979), 1:73.

14. Commentators were also aware of this assumption’s weakness—naturally, not all great calligraphers were morally and temperamentally superior persons, and vice versa. See, for example, Su Shi 蘇軾’s ambivalent attitude shown in “Ti Lugong tie” 題魯公帖, in Ji Fukun 季伏昆, ed., *Zhongguo shulun jiyao* 中國書論輯要 (Jiangsu meishu chubanshe, 1988), 557. See also Bai Qianshen, “Cong Fu Shan he Dai Tingshi de jiaowang lun ji Zhongguo shufa zhong de yingchou he xiuci wenti” 從傅山和戴廷枏的交往論及中國書法中的應酬和修辭問題, *Gugong xueshu jikan* 故宮學術季刊 16, no. 4 (1999): 95–133, and 17, no. 1 (1999): 137–56, for an informative and insightful discussion of this question.

15. Lu Xun, “Wei-Jin fengdu,” in *Quanji*, 3:526.
16. Liu and Mather, *A New Account*, 197.
17. Wai-ye Li, “*Shishuo xinyu* and the Emergence of Aesthetic Self-Consciousness in the Chinese Tradition,” in *Chinese Aesthetics: The Ordering of Literature, the Arts, and the Universe in the Six Dynasties*, ed. Zong-qi Cai (University of Hawai‘i Press, 2004), 237.
18. Liu and Mather, *A New Account*, 289.
19. See *Jinshu*, 2098.
20. See Chen Yinke, “Tianshidao yu binhai diyu zhi guanxi” 天師道與濱海地域之關係, *Bulletin of the National Research Institute of History and Philology, Academia Sinica* 3, part 4 (1933): 439–66; and Lothar Ledderose, “Some Taoist Elements in the Calligraphy of the Six Dynasties,” *T’oung Pao*, vol. 70, livre 4/5 (1984): 271–72. For Wang Xizhi’s religious life, see Chen Zhaokun 陳昭坤, “Lun Wang Xizhi de daojiao xinyang yu huodong” 論王羲之的道教信仰與活動, in *Zhanghua shida guowen xuezhì* 33: 133–58.
21. *Jinshu*, 2101.
22. Sun Guoting 孫過庭, *Shupu* 書譜, in *Lidai shufa lunwen xuan*, 129.
23. See Tao Hongjing 陶弘景 and Xiao Yan 蕭衍, *Tao Yinju yu Liangwudi lunshu qi* 陶隱居與梁武帝論書啟, in *Fashu yaolu* 法書要錄 ed. Zhang Yanyuan 張彥遠 (Zhejiang renmin meishu chubanshe, 2012), 37–44. See also Ledderose, *Mi Fu*, 33–39; Robert E. Harrist, “Replication and Deception in Calligraphy of the Six Dynasties Period,” in Cai, *Chinese Aesthetics*, 31–59; and Robert E. Harrist, “Copies, All the Way Down: Notes on the Early Transmission of Calligraphy by Wang Xizhi,” *The East Asian Library Journal* 10, no. 1 (2001): 176–96.
24. Ledderose, *Mi Fu*, 25.
25. He, “*Lanting shimo ji*,” 3059–60. For an extensive discussion of this piece see Han Chuang (John Hay), “Hsiao I Gets the Lan-t’ing Manuscript by a Confidence Trick,” *National Palace Museum Bulletin* 5, no. 3 (July–August 1970): 1–13, and no. 6 (January–February 1971): 1–17. A more succinct and less dramatic version of the story can be found in Liu Su 劉餗, *Suitang jiahua* 隋唐嘉話 (Zhonghua shuju, 1979), 53.
26. Leys, “The Chinese Attitude Towards the Past,” 295.
27. He Jianjun, “Reading Politics in Calligraphy: The Debate over the Authenticity of the Lanting Preface on the Eve of the Cultural Revolution,” *Monumenta Serica* 71, no. 2 (December 2023): 517–39, provides a thorough account of the debate’s political and intellectual background, with additional details not covered here. His article is more focused on the political manipulation behind the scenes; his conclusion, with which I concur, is that “scholarship in revolutionary China was rife with opportunism, as research and debates could be endlessly and advantageously transformed into commentaries on contemporary issues. However, scholars’ conclusions always required a final verdict from the top party leaders. The Lanting Debate was no exception” (533).
28. Harrist, “Copies, All the Way Down,” 177.
29. My summary of Guo’s article is derived from the original version published in *Wenwu* 6 (1965): 1–25.
30. Here a few words about geography in relation to dynastic terms are necessary. The Western and Eastern Jin dynasties were named as such because of the relative locations of their capitals: The Western Jin’s capitals Luoyang and Chang’an (modern-day Xi’an) were in central China, whereas the Eastern Jin’s capital Jiankang (modern-day Nanjing) was located to their southeast. However, the Eastern Jin only occupied the southern portion of

its predecessor, so it was sometimes referred to as the south, in contrast to the Western Jin being the north.

31. Liu and Mather, *A New Account*, 344. The full text of *Jingu shi xu* 金谷詩序 is preserved in Liu, *Shishuo xinyu*, 1:291. For an English translation see Liu and Mather, *A New Account*, 284.

32. Adapted from Strassberg's translation. The last paragraph is derived from Mather's translation in *A New Account*, 345.

33. He flagged a few suspicious details, such as the fact that emperor Taizong whispered to his son emperor Gaozong about his dying wish to take *Lantingxu* with him to the underworld. Guo noted that it was highly unlikely for such intimate details to be known to outsiders. See Guo, "Authenticity," 11.

34. Guo, "Authenticity," 13.

35. Guo, "Authenticity," 14.

36. For a recent study of Guo's life and work, see Wang Pu, *The Translatability of Revolution: Guo Moruo and Twentieth-Century Chinese Culture* (Harvard University Asia Center, 2018).

37. The Cultural Revolution launched by Mao in 1966 targeted people in power, from school principals to the head of state Liu Shaoqi 劉少奇. But special protection was provided for a select group of people, and Guo was number two on the list. See Zhou Enlai 周恩來, "Guanyu baohu ganbu de ruogan dianwen" 關於保護幹部的若干電文, in *Zhou Enlai xuanji* (Renmin chubanshe, 1984), 450.

38. Guo, "Authenticity," 15.

39. Gao Ershi 高二適, "*Lantingxu de zhenwei boyi*" 《蘭亭序》的真偽駁議, *Lanting lunbian*, 2:4–10. The other articles included Yan Beiming 嚴北溟, "Cong dongjin shufa yishu de fazhan kan lantingxu zhenwei" 從東晉書法藝術的發展看《蘭亭序》真偽, *Xueshu yuekan* 8, no. 104 (1965): 64–69; and Shang Chengzuo 商承祚, "Lun dongjin de shufa fengge bingji *Lantingxu*" 論東晉的書法風格並及《蘭亭序》, in *Lanting lunbian*, 2:11–25.

40. A sub-theme within this debate concerned the historical definitions of various calligraphic types such as *lishu*, *xingshu*, *zhenshu* 真書, *caoshu* 草書, and *zhangcao* 章草. See, for example, Gao, "Boyi," 8–10; and Shang, "Lun dongjin," in *Lanting lunbian*, 2:14–20. Since there were never any strict and universally agreed-upon definitions of these types, and their meanings changed across time and with different authors, it is unrealistic to expect any definitive conclusion from these debates.

41. With later excavations of stone inscriptions from that period in a wide array of script styles, Gao's argument has been proven true. See Zhu Tianshu 朱天曙, preface, in Liu Zhengcheng 劉正成, ed., *Zhongguo shufa quanji* 中國書法全集, vol. 15, *Sanguo liangjin nanbeichao bian* 三國兩晉南北朝編 (Rongbaozhai chubanshe, 2024), 1–17.

42. For a thorough discussion of this issue see Hua Rende 華人德, "Lun dongjin muzhi jianji *Lanting lunbian*" 論東晉墓志兼及蘭亭論辨, *Shufa yanjiu* 書法研究 6 (1997): 1–24. For an English translation of Hua's article, see Hua Rende and Ian H. Boyden, "Eastern Jin Epitaphic Stones—With Some Notes on the 'Lanting Xu' Debate," *Early Medieval China* 1 (1997): 30–88.

43. See Wang Su 王素, "Luetao *Lanting lunbian de jingguo jiqi jiazhi yu yiyi*" 略談《蘭亭論辨》的經過及其價值與意義, *Zijin Cheng* 紫禁城 9 (2011): 121.

44. This has been proven false by archeological findings. Examples can be found in Liu Zhengcheng 劉正成 and Hua Rende 華人德, eds., *Zhongguo shufa quanji* 中國書法全集, vol. 13, *Sanguo liangjin nanbeichao bian* 三國兩晉南北朝編, *Sanguo liangjin nanbeichao muzhi juan* 三國兩晉南北朝墓志卷 (Rongbaozhai chubanshe, 2010).

45. Mao Zedong 毛澤東, *Jianguo yilai Mao Zedong wengao* 建國以來毛澤東文稿 (Zhongyong wenxian chubanshe, 1996), 404.

46. Mao, *Wengao*, 402. He Jianjun argues that Mao provided a kind of “false academic freedom,” which “was no doubt a political design aimed to flush out different voices and ideological dissent” (“Reading Politics in Calligraphy,” 534).

47. Guo followed up with three more articles to reinforce his view, which were collected in *Lanting lunbian*. Gao wrote another response, but it was not published until 1982. See Gao Ershi, “Lantingxu zhenwei zhi zai boyi” 蘭亭序真偽之再駁議, *Shufa yanjiu* 書法研究 1 (1982): 7–11.

48. Long Qian, Qigong, Xu Senyu, and Zhao Wanli’s articles were collected in *Lanting lunbian*. See Mu Xin 穆欣, *Ban Guangming ribao shinian zishu* 辦《光明日報》十年自述 (Zhongyang dangshi chubanshe, 1994), 151–57, for a detailed description of eminent scholars’ reactions. Mu was the chief editor of *Guangming ribao*, which published several articles of the debate. He provided a unique perspective on how these scholars carefully weighed their positions on this matter.

49. In 1950, the film *The Life of Wu Xun* (*Wu Xun zhuan* 武訓傳), about a nineteenth-century figure, was severely criticized by Mao, which led to universal and heavily politicized condemnation of the film’s entire production team. This was the first of many such government-led political campaigns triggered by interpretations of history. See Chao Cheng-Yi 趙成儀, “The First Literature and Art Rectification of the PRC—A Critical Research on the Film *Wu Hsun*” 中共建政後第一次文藝整風—電影《武訓傳》批判之回顧, in *Zhanwang yu tansuo* 展望與探索 5, no. 6 (2007): 71–87.

50. See Qigong, *Qigong koushu lishi*, 211–16. The article in question is anthologized in *Lanting lunbian*, 69–76.

51. Mo Wu 莫武, “Lanting lunbian: bimo guansi de beihou—Ji Guo Moruo, Kang Sheng zhi Gong Weizhen de liangfeng xin” 蘭亭論辯：筆墨官司的背後—記郭沫若、康生致宮維楨的兩封信, *Shufa zazhi* 2 (April 2004): 28–35.

52. See Mu, *Zishu*, 147–48. The background of the *Lantingxu* debate is extensively documented in Zheng Zhong 鄭重, Huimou Lanting lunbian 回眸“蘭亭論辯,” *Wenhui bao* (November 26, 1998); and Ji Hong 紀紅, “Lanting lunbian shi zenyang de bimo guansi” “蘭亭論辯”是怎樣的“筆墨官司,” *Shuwu* 1 (2001): 22–28.

53. For discussions of Wu Han’s play in connection to the Cultural Revolution, see James R. Pusey, *Wu Han: Attacking the Present Through the Past* (Harvard University Press, 1969); Rudolf Wagner, *The Contemporary Chinese Historical Drama: Four Studies* (University of California Press, 1990). See also He, “Reading Politics in Calligraphy,” 534–36, for parallels and similarities between the *Lantingxu* and the *Hairui* debates. Alessandro Russo’s recent monograph *Cultural Revolution and Revolutionary Culture* engages in an in-depth analysis of Yao Wenyuan 姚文元’s article “Ping xinbian lishiju Hai Rui ba guan” 評新編歷史劇《海瑞罷官》, which Mao used as a springboard to launch the Cultural Revolution. By treating Yao’s writing as a serious intellectual discourse rather than the opportunistic and ideologically jargon-laden attack that it actually was, and by selectively (mis)interpreting history to cater to Maoist denialism, Russo hopes to dismiss the fact that, in his own wording, Yao’s article “was nothing but a conspiracy of the old ‘Red Emperor’ seeking to restore the grandeur of his own personality cult and rid himself of his opponents. This narrative has it that he found the excuse for dealing with both in the essay written by Yao. . . .” The case of the *Lantingxu* debate proves that what the old Red Emperor needed was exactly a useful excuse and nothing more. See Alessandro Russo, *Cultural Revolution and Revolutionary Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 11–88.

54. *Lanting lunbian*, n.p.

55. Marx, *A Contribution*, 11–13.
56. Guo Moruo, *Zhongguo gudai shehui yanjiu* 中國古代社會研究, in *Guo Moruo quanji* (Renmin chubanshe, 1982 [1930]), 1:3–314.
57. Dirlik, *Revolution and History*, 139.
58. Dirlik, *Revolution and History*, 140.
59. Guo Moruo, *Yinqi cui bian* 殷契粹編 (Kexue chubanshe, 1965).
60. Guo Moruo, *Buci tongzuan* 卜辭通纂 (Kexue chubanshe, 1982).
61. Guo later changed his view and, concurring with Chairman Mao, considered the Zhou to be a feudal society. See “Zhongguo gudaishi de fenqi wenti” 中國古代史的分期問題, in *Guo Moruo quanji*, history section, 3:3. An English translation of the article as “The Periodization of Chinese History” was published in *Chinese Studies in History* 6, no. 4 (1973): 3–15. See also Dirlik, *Revolution and History*, chapter 5, “Guo Moruo and Slavery in Chinese History,” 137–79, for an overview of Guo’s thoughts on these issues.
62. Joseph Stalin, “Dialectical and Historical Materialism,” in *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks)*, ed. Commission of the Central Committee of the CPSU (B) (International Publishers, 1939), 116.
63. Wolfgang Lippert, *Entstehung und Funktion einiger chinesischer marxistischer Termini: der lexikalisch-begriffliche Aspekt der Rezeption des Marxismus in Japan und China* (F. Steiner, 1979), 229–35.
64. Ledderose, *Mi Fu*, 17, 21.
65. Wu, *Chinese Art and Dynastic Time*, 5.
66. Guo Moruo, letter to Chen Mingyuan, in *Guo Moruo shuxinji* (Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1992), 2:158.
67. For the life of Ruan Yuan, see Betti Wei, *Ruan Yuan, 1764–1849: The Life and Work of a Major Scholar-Official in Nineteenth-Century China Before the Opium War* (Hong Kong University Press, 2006).
68. Ledderose, *Mi Fu*, 21.
69. “Paper” is a makeshift translation of *tie* 帖. No single English word can accurately render the concept of *tie*, which roughly corresponds to calligraphy written on paper and silk slips for relatively casual and private purpose; Wang Xizhi and especially his *Lantingxu* were at the core of this tradition. The style born out of these writings was later canonized and carved on stones during the Song dynasty as a kind of universal model for students of calligraphy. Ledderose translates it as “model script” or “Musterschrift.” See Ledderose, *Die Siegelschrift (Chuan-shu) in der Ch’ing-Zeit. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der chinesischen Schriftkunst* (Franz Steiner Verlag GmbH, 1970), 62. See also Ledderose, *Mi Fu*, 10–12.
70. See also Michael J. Hatch, *Networks of Touch: A Tactile History of Chinese Art, 1790–1840* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2024), chapter 1, “Calligraphy’s New Past,” for an analysis of these two essays and a discussion of how Ruan applied a new material awareness to his reinterpretation of calligraphic history.
71. See Ruan Yuan, “Nanbei shupai lun” 南北書派論 and “Beibei nantie lun” 北碑南帖論, in *Yanjingshi ji* 掣經室集 (Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1936), 8:553–59. While Ruan’s core argument remains relevant, he was likely oversimplifying the stylistic division between northern and southern calligraphy. See Kang Youwei’s 康有為 rectification of Ruan’s view in *Guang Yizhou shuangji* 廣藝舟雙楫 (Zhejiang renmin meishu chubanshe, 2018), 58.
72. Bao Shichen 包世臣, *Yizhou shuangji* 藝舟雙楫 (Zhejiang renmin meishu chubanshe, 2017).
73. Ye Changchi 葉昌熾, *Yushi* 語石 (Zhejiang daxue chubanshe, 2018).

74. It is worth mentioning that, besides being an erudite and eloquent calligraphy theorist, Kang is more widely known as an influential albeit controversial reformist in modern China. He was the leader of the failed Hundred Days' Reform that attempted to establish constitutional monarchy. In *Guang Yizhou shuangji*, Kang argued that the development of calligraphy follows the same laws that govern social change.

75. See Qianshen Bai, *Fu Shan's World: The Transformation of Chinese Calligraphy in the Seventeenth Century* (Harvard University Asia Center, 2003), which traces the rise of epigraphy studies and its influence on calligraphy to the late Ming and the early Qing.

76. For a discussion of these two categories, see Jeffrey Moser, "Learning with Metal and Stone: On the Discursive Formation of Song Epigraphy," in *Powerful Arguments: Standards of Validity in Late Imperial China*, eds. Martin Hofmann, Joachim Kurtz, and Ari Daniel Levine (Brill, 2020), 135–75.

77. Readers will recall the case of Zhang Taiyan, briefly discussed in chapter 1, who strenuously rejected the authenticity of the oracle bones mainly because what they showed about the history of the Chinese script was not commensurate with *Shuowen jiezi*, the authoritative dictionary since the second century. Written after a period of ruptures and most likely with no firsthand knowledge of the oracle bones, *Shuowen* had to base its interpretation of script history on limited sources. It then became the starting point of an organic and ever-evolving scholarly tradition spanning hundreds of years. When the oracle bones suddenly came along to challenge this long-standing and living tradition, the debate inevitably veered toward the question of which of the two types of evidence was more reliable.

78. See Wang Guowei, "Gushi xinzheng," in *Wang Guowei quanji*, 11:241–42.

79. See Gu Jiegang, "Yu Qian Xuantong xiansheng lun gushi shu" 與錢玄同先生論古史書, in *Gu Jiegang quanji* (Zhonghua shuju, 2010), 1:181. Here I use Ursula Richter's translation of *leiceng de zaocheng de Zhongguo gushi guan* 累層地造成的中國古史觀, from "Historical Skepticism in the New Culture Era: Gu Jiegang and the 'Debate on Ancient History,'" *The Bulletin of the Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica* 23 (June 1994): 368. For a thorough examination of the Doubting Antiquity School's intellectual background and cross-cultural inspirations see also Rudolf Wagner, "The Global Context of a Modern Chinese Quandary: Doubting or Trusting the Records of Antiquity," *Monumenta Serica* 67, no. 2 (2019): 441–504.

80. Gu, "Yu Qian Xuantong," 181.

81. Eugene Y. Wang, "The Taming of the Shrew: Wang His-chih (303–361) and Calligraphic Gentrification in the Seventh Century," in *Character and Context in Chinese Calligraphy*, ed. Cary Y. Liu, Dora C. Y. Ching, and Judith G. Smith (The Art Museum, Princeton University, 1999), 133.

82. Antje Richter, "Beyond Calligraphy: Reading Wang Xizhi's Letters," *T'oung Pao*, Second Series 96, Fasc. 4/5 (2010): 407.

83. Martin Kern, "Made by the Empire: Wang Xizhi's *Xingrangtie* and Its Paradoxes," *Archives of Asian Art* 65, no. 1–2 (2015): 130.

84. Kern, "Made by the Empire," 132.

85. See Guo Moruo, "Lantingxu and Lao-Zhuang sixiang" 蘭亭序與老莊思想, in *Lanting lumbian*, 42–45. See also Donald Holzman, "On the Authenticity of the 'Preface' to the Collection of Poetry Written at the Orchid Pavilion," in *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 117, no. 2 (1997): 306–11, for an informed and balanced review of Wang Xizhi's Taoist thought.

86. A number of twentieth-century theories (which, due to the limited scope of this chapter, I am unable to pursue in detail here) promote the work as a self-referential entity separated

from its author, and thus provide illuminating perspectives for cases such as *Lantingxu's* authenticity. See, for example, John Crowe Ransom, *The New Criticism* (New Directions, 1941); Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” trans. S. Heath, in *Image, Music, Text* (Fontana, 1977), 142–48; Michel Foucault, “What is an Author?,” in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews by Michel Foucault*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Cornell University Press, 1980), 113–38. A recent study by Heng Du, “The Author’s Two Bodies: The Death of Qu Yuan and the Birth of *Chuci zhangju* 楚辭章句,” *T’oung Pao* 105 (2019): 259–314, is an especially successful example in engaging these theories to investigate the problem of authorship in ancient China.

87. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 158.
88. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 160.
89. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 157.
90. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 305.
91. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 161.
92. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” 106–7.
93. Jorge Luis Borges, “Kafka and His Precursors,” trans. Eliot Weinberger, in Jorge Luis Borges, *Selected Non-Fictions* (Penguin, 1999), 365.
94. Quoted from Borges, “Kafka,” 363.
95. Yang Bojun, *Chunqiu zuozhuan zhu* (Zhonghua shuju, 1981), 1680–82.
96. Borges, “Kafka and His Precursors,” 363.
97. Brett Levinson, “The Possibility of the Unicorn in Borges and Kafka,” in *The Yearbook of Comparative Literature* 63 (2017): 59.
98. Ruan Yuan, “Wang Youjun Lantingshixu tie erba” 王右軍蘭亭詩序帖二跋, in *Yanjingshi ji*, 560.
99. Borges, “Kafka and His Precursors,” 365.
100. See Harrist, “Copies, All the Way Down,” 181–82.
101. Jin Dan notes the difference between a practitioner of tracing copying and one of free-hand copying: while the latter was typically a calligrapher, the former was considered a highly skillful technician. See Jin Dan 金丹, “Ruan Yuan yu *Lantingxu*” 阮元與《蘭亭序》, *Dongnan wenhua* 7 (2001): 61.
102. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 115.
103. Ruan, “Nanbei shupai lun,” 554–55.
104. See Jin, “Ruan Yuan yu *Lantingxu*,” 57–61. It is debatable whether the copies attributed to Ouyang Xun and Chu Suiliang were exclusively freehand copies while the one attributed to Feng Chengsu was exclusively a tracing copy.
105. Benjamin, “Eduard Fuchs,” 118.
106. Walter Benjamin, “Paralipomena to ‘On the Concept of History,’” in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, 4:402.
107. Michael P. Steinberg, *Walter Benjamin and the Demands of History* (Cornell University Press, 1996), 92.
108. Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” 395.
109. Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” 396.
110. Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” 391.
111. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 304.
112. Duara, *Rescuing History*, 17.
113. Duara, *Rescuing History*, 5.
114. Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” 391; emphasis mine.

115. Ruan Yuan, “Fu Cheng Zhu’an bianxiu Bangxian shu” 復程竹盒編修邦憲書, in *Yanjingshi ji*, 562. The *Dingwu* 定武 copy was a stone carving believed to be based on a copy made by Ouyang Xun. Here Ruan was suggesting that Ouyang’s Northern School background and hints of his *lishu* style “improved” Wang’s original.

116. Since then, many stele inscriptions in *xingshu* and other styles from the fourth century have been discovered. See “Liuchao jiazou mudi kaogu you zhongda shouhuo” 六朝家族墓地考古有重大收穫, in *Zhongguo wenwu bao* 中國文物報 (January 17, 1999), and Wang Yuchi 王玉池, “Youguan Lanting lunbian erti” 有關“蘭亭論辨二題”, in *Lanting lunji* 蘭亭論集, ed. Bai Qianshen and Hua Rende 華人德 (Soochow University Press, 2000), 279–83. Numerous examples can also be found in Liu Zhengcheng, ed., *Zhongguo shufa quanji*, vol. 15.

117. Richter, “Beyond Calligraphy,” 373.

## Chapter Four

1. Duan, *Shuowen*, 429.

2. See Shen Congwen, “Wucong xunfu de banma” 無從馴服的斑馬, in *Shen Congwen quanji* (Beiyue wenyi chubanshe, 2002), 27:379–82.

3. It should be noted that nativism was only one among a wide range of themes in Shen’s literary oeuvre, which also included modernist and experimental works focused on urban life.

4. This negligence has begun to be addressed in recent years, thanks to an ever-deepening inquiry into Shen’s work. Most notable among them is Xiaojue Wang’s “Fragments of Modernity: Shen Congwen’s Journey from Asylum to Museum,” in *Modernity with a Cold War Face: Reimagining the Nation in Chinese Literature Across the 1949 Divide* (Harvard University Asia Center, 2013), 54–107, which offers an in-depth analysis of Shen’s intellectual transition in this period, with a focus on Cold War politics and the discourse of insanity. See also David Wang, “The Three Epiphanies of Shen Congwen,” in *The Lyrical in Epic Time*, 79–112. Zhang Xinying, 張新穎 *Shen Congwen de houbansheng* 沈從文的後半生 (Sanlian shudian, 2018), although focusing on Shen’s life after 1949, is of mostly documentary value.

5. See Jeffrey C. Kinkley, *The Odyssey of Shen Congwen* (Stanford University Press, 1987), 270, 273–74.

6. Quoted from Xiaojue Wang, *Modernity with a Cold War Face*, 58.

7. Xiaojue Wang, *Modernity with a Cold War Face*, 58.

8. David Wang, *The Lyrical in Epic Time*, 81.

9. Xiaojue Wang, *Modernity with a Cold War Face*, 58.

10. In this sense, Shen’s work echoes Sarah E. Fraser’s concern about Han-centrism in archeology. See “Antiquarianism or Primitivism? The Edge of History in the Modern Chinese Imagination,” in *Reinventing the Past*, ed. Wu Hung, 342–68.

11. Shen, letter to his brother, in *Quanji*, 18:515.

12. Shen, letter to Ji Liu, in *Quanji*, 18:517.

13. See, for example, “On the General and the Specialized,” in *Shen Congwen quanji*, 17:260–64, where he criticized efforts to treat literature and language as pure propaganda during the Sino-Japanese War. In “All the Significance of the Literary United Front,” in *Shen Congwen quanji*, 17:109–13, he complained about the League of Left-Wing Writers’ sweeping simplification of literature and called for toleration of different opinions within the Front. “A New View on Literature,” in *Shen Congwen quanji*, 17:168, dismissed the simplistic but widely held opinion

that “although there are many types of political parties, there are only two types of literature: either left or right, either friend or enemy,” predicting that it would lead to the stifling of genuine literary creativity. These are but a few examples of numerous such articles he published during the war.

14. Mao Zedong, *Talk at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art* (People's Press, 1975), 26.

15. Mao, *Talk at the Yan'an Forum*, 32.

16. David Wang, *The Lyrical in Epic Time*, 81.

17. For an explanation of the history of the term, see Dou Kang 寶康, “Cong disanzhongren dao disanzhongren jituan—zhongguo xiandai wenxueshi shang de disanzhongren zhi yanbian” 從「第三種人」到「第三種人」集團——中國現代文學史上的「第三種人」之演變, in *Ershi shiji wangluo ban* 11 (February 28, 2003). Primary sources of the debate are collected in Ji Mingxue 吉明學, *Sanshi niandai wenyi ziyou bianlun ziliao* 三十年代〈文藝自由論辯〉資料 (Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1990).

18. Guo, *Quanji*, 16:289.

19. Guo, *Quanji*, 16:289.

20. See Zhang, *Shen Congwen*, 136.

21. Shen, *Quanji*, 27:242–43.

22. For Shen's failed attempts to adapt to the new ideological requirements as a writer, besides Zhang's *Shen Congwen*, see also Li Yang 李揚, *Shen Congwen: zuihou sishimian* 沈從文：最後四十年 (Zhongguo wenshi chubanshe, 2005).

23. Kinkley, *The Odyssey of Shen Congwen*, 270.

24. It was Zhang Zhaohe's brother Zhang Zhonghe who sent Shen to a mental health hospital after the latter's suicide attempt. Zhaohe referred to Shen's condition as *jingshen shichang* (mental disorder).

25. Xiaojue Wang, *Modernity with a Cold War Face*, 80–97.

26. Shen, *Quanji*, 19:9. Here I use Xiaojue Wang's translation.

27. Zhou Enlai 周恩來, *Zhou Enlai jiaoyu wenxuan* 周恩來教育文選 (Jiaoyu kexue chubanshe, 1984), 40. For more details of the campaign, see Robert Lifton, *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism: A Study of “Brainwashing” in China* (University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 246. Lifton's book, especially part 3, “Thought Reform of Chinese Intellectuals,” remains an indispensable source for understanding the psychological dimension of this political campaign and how it shaped the mindset of generations of intellectuals.

28. See Shen Huchu 沈虎雛, “Renjian zhenqing—guanyu Shen Congwen de sanpian yigao” 人間真情——關於沈從文的三篇遺稿, in *Xinwenxue shiliao* 新文學史料 4 (2014): 18–23.

29. Shen, *Quanji*, 27:3.

30. Shen, *Quanji*, 27:5.

31. Shen, *Quanji*, 27:6.

32. Shen, *Quanji*, Supplement vol. 2, 121.

33. Shen, *Quanji*, Supplement vol. 2, 121.

34. Shen Congwen, *Border Town*, trans. Jeffrey C. Kinkley (Harper Perennial, 2009), 150–51.

35. Mote, “A Millennium of Chinese Urban History,” 51–53.

36. Shen, *Quanji*, 27:37.

37. Shen, *Quanji*, 27:29.

38. *Ge* ware is considered one of “Five Great Kilns” of the Song dynasty. See Regina Krahl, “Guan and Ge Wares,” in “China, VIII, 3: Ceramics: Historical Development,” *Oxford Art Online*, accessed October 10, 2023, doi.org/10.1093/gao/9781884446054.article.T016513.

39. Shen, *Quanji*, 27:31.
40. Shen, *Quanji*, 27:30.
41. Wang Guowei, “Gushi xinzheng” 古史新證, in *Wang Guowei quanji*, 11:241–42.
42. Shen, *Quanji*, 27:30.
43. Wang Gungwu, “The Chinese Urge to Civilize: Reflections on Change,” in *The Chineseness of China: Selected Essays* (Oxford University Press, 1991), 146.
44. Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” 392.
45. For example, Mencius was recorded as saying that although Shun and King Wen were both people of Yi, “when they realized their intentions and implemented them in the Middle Kingdom, it was like uniting the two halves of a tally: the sage who came earlier and the sage who came later were one in their dispositions” (*Mencius*, 86). The idea that Chineseness was defined in cultural terms was strengthened through successive dynasties, despite the central Chinese states’ continual clash and integration with neighboring peoples. See also Qian Mu, *Zhongguo wenhuashi daolun* 中國文化史導論 (Sanlian shudian, 1988), 35, and Yu Ying-shih, “Guojia guannian yu minzu yishi” 國家觀念與民族意識, in *Wenhua pinglun yu zhongguo qinghuai* 文化評論與中國情懷 (Yunchen, 1988), 19.
46. See He Xiu 何休, *Chunqiu Gongyangzhuan zhushu* 春秋公羊傳註疏 (Peking University Press, 1999), 57.
47. For the history of China’s conquest and assimilation of the southwestern region, see John E. Herman, *Amid the Clouds and Mist: China’s Colonization of Guizhou, 1200–1700* (Harvard University Asia Center, 2007); Hu Siao-chen, *Ming Qing Wenxue zhong de Xinan Xushi* 明清文學中的西南敘事 (Taida Chuban Zhongxin, 2017); and Leo K. Shin, *The Making of the Chinese State: Ethnicity and Expansion on the Ming Borderlands* (Cambridge University Press, 2006).
48. Shen, *Quanji*, 27:32–34.
49. Shen, “Xuzhu” 虛燭, in *Quanji*, 12:39. See also “Xiangxing sanji xu” 湘行散記序, in *Quanji*, 16:394.
50. Shen, *Quanji*, 27:36.
51. Shen, *Quanji*, 27:36.
52. Shen, *Quanji*, supplement vol., 35.
53. Shen, *Quanji*, 16:527. For a detailed analysis of this concept, see David Wang, *The Lyrical in Epic Time*, chapter 2, “The Three Epiphanies of Shen Congwen.”
54. Shen, *Quanji*, 13:356.
55. Shen, *Quanji*, 27:411–12.
56. See, for example, Shen, *Quanji*, 12:385–86, and 27:411–12.
57. Shen, *Quanji*, 27:413.
58. Shen, *Quanji*, 27:22.
59. Shen, *Quanji*, 27:22–23.
60. Shen, *Quanji*, 27:24.
61. Shen, “Caosheng” 草繩, in *Quanji*, 1:225.
62. Shen, *Quanji*, 1:225.
63. Shen, *Quanji*, 1:225.
64. Shen, *Quanji*, 1:224.
65. V. Jackson, “Lyric,” in *The Princeton Handbook of Poetic Terms*, 3rd ed., ed. Roland Greene and Cushman Stephen (Princeton University Press, 2016), 182.
66. See Zeitlin, *Historian of the Strange*, 63, and David Wang, *A New Literary History*, 5. An example can be found in *The Dream of the Red Chamber*: the immortal Crimson Pearl Flower,

who later incarnated as Lin Daiyu, had “an infinite and convoluting longing” for Jia Baoyu. This longing was “congealed up and harden within its five inner organs,” causing her boundless sadness. See Cao, *Hong Lou Meng*, 2.

67. Shen, *Quanji*, 16:535–36.

68. Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford University Press, 1985), 281–82.

69. Duan, *Shuowen jiezi zhu*, 429; emphasis mine.

70. Scott Cook, “Yue Ji 樂記—Record of Music: Introduction, Translation, Notes, and Commentary,” *Asian Music* (Spring/Summer 1995): 42.

71. Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 and Kong Yingda 孔穎達, *Liji zhengyi* 禮記正義 (Zhonghua shuju, 1921), 23:23.

72. According to *Zhouli zhushu*, a vessel with the capacity of “one sheng 升 [a measuring unit] is called *jue*, with two sheng is called *gu*, with three sheng is called *zhi*, with four sheng is called *jiao*, with five sheng is called *san*.” See *Shisanjing zhushu* (Peking University Press, 2000), 1334. For this issue, see also Jeffrey Moser, “Why Cauldrons Come First: Taxonomic Transparency in the Earliest Chinese Antiquarian Catalogues,” *Journal of Art Historiography* 11 (December 2014): 1–23. For a more general analysis of how artifacts reflect and articulate social status, see Martin J. Powers, *Pattern and Person: Ornament, Society, and Self in Classical China* (Harvard University Asia Center, 2006).

73. *Xuanhe bogutu*, 1099.

74. *The Analects*, trans. Leys, 33.

75. See Kong Yingda, *Chunqiu Zuozhuan zhengyi* (Peking University Press, 1999), 1587. See also Wai-yee Li, “Hua-Yi zhibian, Hua-Yi zhibian: cong Zuozhuan tanqi” 華夷之辨、華夷之辯：從《左傳》談起, *Lingnan Journal of Chinese Studies* 13 (2020): 19–50.

76. *The Analects*, trans. Leys, 42, with modification.

77. Shen, *Quanji*, 1:229.

78. Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, 196.

79. Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, 196–97.

80. Shen, *Quanji*, 27:245 and 249.

81. Nor did the new regime find Shen’s regionalism to be useful. As Kinkley observes, “Regionalism . . . became a major current in post 1949 literature, thanks to Mao’s emphasis on peasants and patriotism. . . . Shen, however, valued regional writing for evoking not just a feeling of organic relatedness, but a sense of particularity and autonomy. Mao’s ‘regional socialist realism’ tolerated only the former. Dialects were in, but subjective definitions of regions were out. Sectional identity was simply subversive” (*The Odyssey of Shen Congwen*, 278).

82. Shen, *Quanji*, 27:193–94.

83. Shen, *Quanji*, 27:247.

84. Shen, *Quanji*, 12:386.

85. Shen, *Quanji*, 27:244.

86. Shen, *Quanji*, 12:112.

87. Shen, *Quanji*, 27:245.

88. Shen, *Quanji*, 27:380.

89. See Charles Baudelaire, “The Ragpicker’s Wine,” in *The Flowers of Evil*, trans. C. F. MacIntyre (New Directions, 1963), 136.

90. Shen, “Why I Never Leave the National Museum of History,” in *Quanji*, 27:242–56.

91. See Shen, postscript to *A Study of Ancient Chinese Costumes*, in *Quanji*, 32:526.

92. See Barbara Barnouin, *Zhou Enlai: A Political Life* (Chinese University Press, 2006), 204.
93. Marie-Louise von Plessen, “Art and Design for All: Victoria and Albert Museum,” in Julius Bryant, ed., *Art and Design for All: Victoria and Albert Museum* (V&A Publishing, 2011), 11–24.
94. The spread of the Arts and Crafts movement from Britain to continental Europe and beyond is discussed in Rosalind Blakesley, *The Arts and Crafts Movement* (Phaidon, 2006), and Wendy Kaplan, ed., *The Arts and Crafts Movement in Europe & America: Design for the Modern World* (Thames & Hudson, 2004).
95. Elizabeth Cumming and Wendy Kaplan, *The Arts and Crafts Movement* (Thames and Hudson, 1991), 7.
96. Blakesley, *The Arts and Crafts Movement*, 8.
97. See Michael Alexander, *Medievalism: The Middle Ages in Modern England* (Yale University Press, 2007).
98. William Morris, *The Decorative Arts, Their Relation to Modern Life and Progress: An Address Delivered before the Trades’ Guild of Learning* (Ellis and White, 1878), 8.
99. Owen Jones, *The Grammar of Ornament: Illustrated by Examples from Various Styles of Ornament. One Hundred Folio Plates Drawn on Stone by F. Bedford* (London, 1856), 2.
100. Shen Congwen, “What We Can Learn from Ancient Lacquerwares,” in *Quanji*, 28:179–94.
101. For a discussion of *fu* see Martin J. Powers, “The Figure in the Carpet: Reflections on the Discourse of Ornament in Zhou China,” *Monumenta Serica* 43 (1995): 223.
102. Shen again lamented that scholars at the time still confined themselves to matching bronze inscriptions with textual sources and ignored these strikingly beautiful lacquerwares. The neglect led to further loss of such precious relics. Incidentally, one of the very few scholars noted by Shen who paid attention to these objects was none other than Chen Mengjia. See Shen, “Ancient Lacquerwares,” 180.
103. Thomas Carlyle, *Past and Present* (London, 1843), 63–65.
104. John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*, vols. 1 & 2 (Boston, 1890), 168–70.
105. Morris was probably best known for founding the Kelmscott Press, which produced delicately illuminated, limited-edition books. Beginning in the 1860s, his decorative arts firm Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co. was involved in numerous high-profile projects, most notably the Green Dining Room at the South Kensington Museum. As Fiona MacCarthy describes, “Morris had a deep attachment to things, and a huge reservoir of knowledge of their history. . . . He was in the great tradition of the Victorian connoisseur. But unlike most connoisseurs he was himself a maker. With an almost manic industriousness Morris set out to rediscover lost techniques for fabricating, in succession: embroidery; stained glass; illumination and calligraphy; textile dyeing, printing and weaving; high-warp tapestry.” See *William Morris: A Life for Our Time* (Knopf, 1995), ix.
106. William Morris, “The Manifesto of The Socialist League,” *Commonweal* (February 1885): 1–2.
107. E. P. Thompson, *William Morris, Romantic to Revolutionary* (Stanford University Press, 1955), 36.
108. Caroline Arscott, “William Morris: Decoration and Materialism,” in Andrew Hemingway, ed., *Marxism and the History of Art: From William Morris to the New Left* (Pluto Press, 2006), 9.
109. One notable example is the Bauhaus school of design, whose founder Walter Gropius’s proclamation of intention was clearly an echo of Morris’s: “Architects, sculptors, painters, we must all turn to the crafts. Art is not a ‘profession.’ There is no essential difference between

the artist and the craftsman. The artist is an exalted craftsman. . . . Let us create a new guild of craftsmen, without the class distinctions which raise an arrogant barrier between craftsman and artist” (quoted in MacCarthy, *William Morris*, 605).

110. Walter Crane, “William Morris and His Work,” in *William Morris and Whistler: Papers and Addresses on Art and Craft and the Commonwealth* (G. Bell & Sons, 1911), 39.

111. Zhang, *Shen Congwen*, 175.

112. Morris, *The Decorative Arts*, 7.

113. Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility,” second version, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Harry Zohn, in Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*, 22.

114. Benjamin, “The Work of Art,” 24.

115. Benjamin, “The Work of Art,” 42.

116. Kinkley, *The Odyssey of Shen Congwen*, 265.

117. Shi Zhecun, “Dianyu puyu hua Congwen” 滇雲浦雨話從文, *Xinwenxue Shiliao* 4 (1988): 171.

118. Wu Shiyong 吳世勇, ed., *Shen Congwen nianpu* 沈從文年譜 (Tianjin renmin chubanshe, 2006), 642.

119. Shen, *Quanji*, supplement vol. 2, 121.

120. See Wu, *Nianpu*, 659–60.

121. Kinkley, for example, suggests that “there will always be a nagging doubt that inner blocks, not just the bad environment, hindered his further development [as a writer]” (*The Odyssey of Shen Congwen*, 279).

### Epilogue

1. When visiting the Temple of Confucius in Qufu after the fall of the Qing dynasty, Luo wrote emotionally about how exalted a position Confucianism enjoyed under the Qing rule, even when compared to many ethnic Han dynasties, but said nothing about the Qing’s ethnic background or the way it treated the Han population. See Luo, *Wushiri*, 166.

2. See Bao Wei 寶衛 and Wang Ruo 王若, “Luo Zhenyu jiacang dang’an shimo” 羅振玉家藏檔案始末, in *Zhonghua dushu bao* 中華讀書報 (September 21, 2011): 15.

3. See Lin Zhihong 林志宏, *Minguo nai diguo ye: Zhengzhi wenhua zhuanxing xia de qing yimin* 民國乃敵國也：政治文化轉型下的清遺民 (Zhonghua shuju, 2013).

4. For the role the Shang dynasty and its predecessors played in the formation of “Chineseness,” see Keightley, *These Bones Shall Rise Again*, 1–86.

5. Colin Renfrew, for instance, contends that “Archaeology has, however, so far failed to formulate universal laws, and it seems unlikely that it will be able to do so.” See *The Emergence of Civilisation: The Cyclades and the Aegean in the Third Millennium B.C.* (Oxbow Books, 2011), 16.

6. Lü, *Lüshi chunqiu*, 45.

7. Lü, *Lüshi chunqiu*, 45.

8. Zheng and Kong, *Liji zhengyi*, 21:2.

9. Lü, *Lüshi chunqiu*, 49.

10. Ng Kim Chew, “Fish Bones,” in *Slow Boat to China and Other Stories*, trans. Carlos Rojas (Columbia University Press, 2016), 98.

11. Ng, “Fish Bones,” 114–15.

12. Ng, “Fish Bones,” 114.

13. Ng, “Fish Bones,” 115.
14. Ng, “Fish Bones,” 101.
15. Duan, *Shuowen*, 128.
16. Ng, “Fish Bones,” 110. Here I change “puk” in Rojas’s translation to “buk” to conform to modern Cantonese pronunciation.
17. Bachner, *Beyond Sinology*, 146. Using other examples from Ng’s works and those by Zhang Guixing 張貴興 and Chen Li 陳黎, Bachner calls attention to the uncanny otherness of the Chinese script (or sinograph) and the ways it is used to contest rigidly defined identities in the context of diaspora.
18. Thomas Hare, *ReMembering Osiris: Number, Gender, and the Word in Ancient Egyptian Representational Systems* (Stanford University Press, 1999), xiii.
19. Hare, *ReMembering Osiris*, xiv.
20. Martin Kern makes another compelling case against nativism in Chinese studies in “Beyond Nativism: Reflections on Methodology and Ethics in the Study of Early China,” in *At the Shores of the Sky: Asian Studies for Albert Hoffstädt*, ed. Paul W. Kroll and Jonathan A. Silk (Brill, 2020), 83–98.
21. Cuno, *Who Owns Antiquity?*, 17.
22. Naitō Torajirō, *Treatise on China* (Bungeishunjū, 2013). See also Joshua Fogel, *Politics and Sinology: the Case of Naitō Konan (1866–1934)* (Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1984).
23. See Michael Schwartz, Maria Varenikova, and Rick Gladstone, “Putin Calls Ukrainian Statehood a Fiction, History Suggests Otherwise,” *The New York Times*, February 21, 2022, [www.nytimes.com/2022/02/21/world/europe/putin-ukraine.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/21/world/europe/putin-ukraine.html); and Björn Alexander Düben, “‘There Is No Ukraine’: Fact-Checking the Kremlin’s Version of Ukrainian History,” *LSE International History*, July 1, 2020, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lseih/2020/07/01/there-is-no-ukraine-fact-checking-the-kremlins-version-of-ukrainian-history>.
24. See Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (Simon & Schuster, 1996).
25. David Damrosch, *The Buried Book: The Loss and Rediscovery of the Great Epic of Gilgamesh* (H. Holt, 2007), 271.
26. Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” 392.

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