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Brown/Pastimes

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If you love ancient inscriptions, then gather them, judge them, contemplate them, and transmit them. Seek ancient calligraphy; seek examples of the concerns of the ancients; seek forms of lost ancient characters.

—Chen Jieqi, 1875 letter to Wang Yirong

The great eighteenth-century novel *A Dream of Red Mansions* begins with a curious episode. A monk discovers a stone dropped from heaven and, instead of feeling satisfied with its unadorned beauty, wants to “engrave some characters” on it so “people can see at a glance that you’re something special.”¹ This preference animated many forms of Chinese connoisseurship, including the desire to possess ancient objects. Indeed, in the discourse of the eighteenth century, artifacts without texts hardly merited collecting.

A century or so later, another fantastic, perhaps apocryphal, discovery seemed to affirm this preference. In 1899, the paleographer Wang Yirong (1845–1900) fell ill with malaria in Beijing. An expert in *jinshi* (the study of bronze vessels and stone steles; the word rhymes with “insure”), Wang purchased some medication from a nearby pharmacy. The packet contained a variety of natural and exotic ingredients, including, most astonishingly, shards of bone engraved with unusual characters.² As was later determined, these were pieces of ancient divination implements dating to the Shang Dynasty (c. 1600–1100 BC). Now called oracle bones in English, they contain some of the earliest examples of written Chinese, and their chance—yet momentous—discovery exhilarated specialists in history and paleography worldwide.³
Both stories are animated by appreciation for ancient texts and objects, but in fact the tale of the heavenly stone and the discovery of the oracle bones took place in different conceptual worlds. During the eighteenth century, the prevailing hermeneutics of classical texts emphasized kaozheng (the school of textual criticism or philology), which privileged etymology and phonology while reading bronze and stele inscriptions. Late-Qing scholars, in contrast, embraced the concept of artifact studies, an approach suggested by natural science that persuaded them to research a far more diverse set of sources, including materials without inscriptions. Their studies of antiquity also reflected the desire to solve the unique political and social problems of the day. In combination, these factors weakened the importance of kaozheng and encouraged antiquarians to apply their insights to other fields, including history, that were believed to have great practical relevance at the turn of the century.

The group of men who led this transformation included several members of Wang Yirong’s social circle, such as Wu Dacheng (1835–1902), a renowned specialist in ancient calligraphy, and the political reformer and educator Sun Yirang (1848–1908). In turn, their antiquarian activities influenced two of the most famous scholars of the early twentieth century: the philosopher and literary critic Wang Guowei (1877–1927), and his mentor Luo Zhenyu (1866–1940), an art dealer and publisher as well as expert on antiquities. Wang and Luo showed historians how to research oracle bones and bronzes, demonstrating how they could supplement literary sources in describing China’s ancient politics and society. They used the methods of traditional Chinese antiquarianism or jinshi as the starting point for a new form of research that came to dominate the modern historiography of ancient China.

**Why Antiquarianism?**

Antiquarianism is a way to understand the past through the systematic investigation of material artifacts and one-of-a-kind inscriptions. For Chinese scholars, this form of research is almost as ancient as the source materials themselves. For millennia, rulers and elites preserved important documents by recording them on durable surfaces like stone steles. Often colossal in size, these plinths were embellished with ornate carvings and affixed to bases in the shape of turtles or other animals that symbolized longevity. Chinese rulers also forged important texts onto the interiors of bronze vessels, like ding (tripods), whose outside...
surfaces were decorated with taotie (mythical beast designs) or shaped in the form of fantastic creatures. By the Warring States period (476–221 BC), these texts were collectively referred to as “bronze and stone” inscriptions, or jinshi. The philosopher Mozi (470–c. 391 BC) possibly made the earliest use of the phrase when he spoke of the words of the philosophers “written on bamboo and silk, and engraved on bronze and stone”; another early reference is found on a Qin Dynasty (221–206 BC) stele that refers to political documents copied onto bronze and stone for preservation.4

By the Northern Song (960–1127), jinshi no longer referred simply to durable writing surfaces but to a scholarly field whose practitioners used inscriptions as evidence for the ritual ceremonies, language, calligraphy, and politics of the past.5 Song elites considered this form of research a creative and pleasurable activity—a way to “pass the days” in retirement, according to Ouyang Xiu (1007–1072).6 But jinshi was not trivial; on the contrary, it was a pastime in the sense that Wang Guo-wei intended when he defended leisure pursuits like literature and art as potent tools to demonstrate one’s intelligence and stature—essentially, the Nietzschean will to power.7 And between the publication of the first surviving jinshi catalog in 1092 and the 1920 discovery of the first Stone Age archaeological sites—temporal bookends suggested by the archaeologist K.C. Chang (1931–2001)—the field was more than prestigious—it was venerated.8 Inscriptions preserved words, and jinshi preserved inscriptions. Safeguarding history with their research, antiquarians were the guardians of China’s cultural patrimony.9

But the field’s longevity and pedigree should not be confused with stasis. Although Song antiquarians were revered by successive generations of specialists, the pastime continued to develop. There was particularly dramatic change in the nineteenth century, when a diverse group of scholars entered the field and altered its purpose and methodologies through their concerns with educational reform, foreign learning, and visual culture, contributing to a “revolution in traditional linguistics” observed by the journalist and historian Liang Qichao (1873–1929) in the study of bronze inscriptions.10 The adoption of antiquarian methodologies by Chinese historians in the 1920s was just another phase in a field under evolution for centuries.

One thing about the pastime, however, remained constant—notably, its name. The field continued to be referred to as jinshi even after its actual focus came to encompass many more kinds of artifacts than bronzes and stone steles, including artifacts without texts.11 The term
has a complex emotional valence as well. Often accompanied by terms like *kaogu* (the systematic investigation of antiquity) or *haogu* (the love for or affinity with antiquity), *jinshi* evokes the proud mastery of syntactically difficult documents, as well as a bittersweet longing for the vanished past they represent. Because of the range of meanings that the pastime evoked for Chinese scholars as well as the diversity of research materials and methodologies that it could encompass, I have chosen to translate *jinshi* as “antiquarianism” rather than relying on more literal or narrow renderings such as “bronze-and-stele studies” or “epigraphy.” And of course, using antiquarianism is also a useful way to suggest common features and differences between *jinshi* and its European counterparts.

European antiquarianism is arguably of more recent vintage than *jinshi*, but it was just as vital to the development of history and empirical studies. Derived from *Antiquitates*, the study of Roman history and culture, antiquarianism expressed an admiring attitude towards the past and its material remains. The field bloomed after the sixteenth century when a robust consumer culture (partly fueled by colonial empires) encouraged scholars to demonstrate wealth, cosmopolitanism, and intelligence by collecting exotic artifacts, artworks, and objects of scientific wonder. As a subset of this larger phenomenon, the connoisseurship of Roman and Greek relics became a way to express support for the values of the classical world, the essence of Renaissance humanism. Much of the resulting research on coins, statues, and vessels established the groundwork for the rediscovery of the classical world. Yet, as Arnaldo Momigliano (1908–1987) argued, this research did not count as academic history because it did not articulate a particular narrative. When scholars like the English historian Edward Gibbon (1757–1794) finally began to reference nonliterary sources, it was considered a profound innovation.

The European tradition is a helpful comparison as we consider the popularity of antiquarianism in China. The economic boom times of the late-Ming and mid-Qing periods also made possible a robust consumer culture, which encouraged scholars to demonstrate taste and status through the collection of ancient artifacts. Artifacts like bronze vessels symbolized the centralization of the cultural heartland by the Shang and Zhou, analogous to the classical world admired by the humanists. Similar to their Renaissance counterparts, *jinshi* scholars invoked a vision of antiquity to justify innovation, whether in the guise of political reform, new learning, or novel calligraphic forms. In addi-
tion, Chinese scholars had increasing contact with Europeans and other foreigners, comparable perhaps to the Western imperial reach, which whetted their appetites for the exotic, including unusual artifacts from their own domain. Finally, in both contexts there was a research tradition focusing on nonliterary sources, which was gradually integrated into historical practice.

Yet, just as in Europe, the path uniting antiquarianism and historiography meandered—far more than is commonly recognized. Song antiquarians like Ouyang Xiu remained justifiably famous for using stele inscriptions in historical research. But over the centuries, historiography was only a part of jinshi. Ritual studies were also significant, particularly when it came to studying bronze inscriptions and other artifacts that predated the Han Dynasty (206 BC–220 AD). These were prized for their capacity to illuminate passages in the classics that described ancient ceremonies. Furthermore, not all antiquities were of use in studying history, anyway—they were too recent. As Craig Clunas reminds us, Chinese connoisseurs used the word gu, meaning old or ancient, to refer to something made millennia ago or just a few decades ago. In jinshi practice, this meant that some catalogs of antiquities began with Zhou bells, while others included stele inscriptions carved only decades earlier.

By the nineteenth century, even old steles were not always valued for historical research—not because they were unimportant sources, but because philology in general had come under attack. Up to that point, most Qing antiquarians were allied with the kaozheng movement, whose principal goal was to examine the language of Confucian texts in order to determine their meaning and authenticate their age. This kind of research was considered a form of kaoju, a more broadly defined process of “exegetical learning,” or interpreting and comparing texts. But whereas these related approaches were dominant in jinshi and historiography for more than a century, by the late eighteenth century there was a notable cooling of enthusiasm. Philosophers like Zhang Xuecheng (1738–1801) charged that the kaozheng approach to reading ancient texts was little more than “compiling and preparing documents and calling it historical editing, collecting and referencing documents and calling this historical research.” If that were not enough, several centuries of enthusiastic but sloppy research further discredited jinshi. Zhu Yixin (1846–1894) cautioned that there were so many mistakes in catalogs of inscriptions that they were valuable only to connoisseurs of calligraphy and not for their factual contents.
the very moment when European historians were beginning to utilize nonliterary sources, their Chinese counterparts were drawing back in distrust of the field.

As a consequence, for most of the nineteenth century jinshi enthusiasts did not consider themselves historians, but rather proponents of the art movement known as the Epigraphic School. They collected hundreds of artifacts and studied their physical properties with exacting devotion, using their inscriptions as inspiration for calligraphy and antiquarian painting. But even without being labeled history, their scholarship encouraged an approach towards antiquities as material artifacts, an approach that was later essential to historians. They emphasized the study of excavated materials long before the introduction of Western archaeology. And for scholars coming of age in the late nineteenth century, their purpose in researching antiquity was to establish an ethical foundation to debate contemporary political affairs. A methodological revolution was under way, and the study of antiquity was about to enter one of its most dynamic periods.

Art and Science

Chinese antiquarianism was much more than paleography. It was an important corollary to art practice and the connoisseurship of calligraphy, all fuelled by the passion for accumulation for which Chinese scholars are justly famous. As a consequence, the history of the field entails many issues related to art and visual culture, including the production of images and the circulation of artifacts. Indeed, the very modernity of the field grew out of this complex interplay between art, antiquarianism, and historiography.

To begin, jinshi was always allied with art and other forms of visual culture. Indeed, some of the earliest Chinese antiquarian texts are pictorial catalogs of artifact collections. Produced by individual scholars as well as the imperial court since the Song Dynasty, these albums are made up of a distinct intellectual lineage, with conventions of representation that endured for centuries. Although their usefulness for archaeology is limited, they eloquently document an extraordinary passion for building collections of artifacts as both status items and objects of historical and ritual research, for rulers and courtiers and scholars. However, just as the persistent use of the term jinshi can mask dramatic changes in methodologies over time, so too can the sustained collection of artifacts and their representation in catalogs camouflage consider-
able changes in collecting practices, research methodologies, and aesthetic taste; this is particularly true during the nineteenth century.

Art historians have been arguing for some time that the nineteenth century represented a turning point in Chinese art and visual culture. Not only were fresh styles of portraiture and perspective popular among Chinese artists but also there was a boom in media culture and a proliferation of print images, thanks to the introduction of technologies like photolithography. As photographic processes became more common, Chinese readers were offered a feast of representations whose range of subject matter—old and new, foreign and domestic—encouraged a corresponding sense of “multiplicity, fluidity, and internal alterity,” in Laikwan Pang’s phrase. Particularly in metropolitan centers such as Shanghai and the capital (modern-day Beijing), pictorial literacy was increasingly significant to botany and medicine. In their quest for visual mastery or world-picturing, Chinese intellectuals participated in a broader moment, experienced in many parts of the world, when the reproduction of images made possible by industrial technologies—such as in the print medium, with posters, postcards, and magazines, to name just a few examples—became inexorably linked to claims of political, cultural, and social authority. The scopic experiences made possible by mechanical technology in the nineteenth century are crucial signifiers of modern life. They outline that critical caesura between a world dominated by customary social and cultural practices, typically paced by preindustrial technologies, and the faster, more chaotic, and more fractured world that replaced it.

It is not a coincidence that jinshi was in transition precisely at the moment when Chinese visual culture and its technologies, and other markers of political and cultural modernity, were in critical flux. Nineteenth-century antiquarians developed their own pictorial styles, such as three-dimensional epigraphic rubbings, that took advantage of new technologies like photolithography. Even when they studied ancient calligraphy—a form of research enjoyed by antiquarian scholars from Ouyang Xiu to Wu Dacheng and his mentor Chen Jieqi (1813–1884)—they cultivated unorthodox script forms and linked their appreciation for exotic and unorthodox styles to their increasingly cosmopolitan worldview and desire for political reform. At the same time, antiquarianism, which had generally been a hobby for the wealthy and politically exalted, began to appeal to a social stratum that was increasingly important in the nineteenth century—those who were less well-heeled, hungry for social and political connections, and eager for re-
form of the educational and political systems. These new connoisseurs and collectors demanded new kinds—and greater numbers—of artifacts, pushing the commercial antiquities market into uncharted waters and encouraging the establishment of entirely new classes of artifacts. In turn, this led to a broadening of antiquarian methodologies, further testing the boundaries of the concept of *jinshi*.

My emphasis on the importance of visual culture to *jinshi* indicates how my approach differs from some earlier accounts of Chinese antiquarianism. Benjamin Elman, in his first study of Chinese eighteenth-century philology, for example, acknowledged “the inseparability of technical and artistic interests” among Qing antiquarians, but still argued that the revival of stele-style calligraphy was “stimulated by epigraphical studies,” rather than the other way around. Although his research brilliantly situates the mid-Qing revival of antiquarianism in relation to *kaozheng*, Elman’s relative disinterest in visual culture unintentionally reflects prejudices among Chinese archaeologists, who criti
cized connoisseurs for overvaluing the calligraphic beauty of ancient inscriptions. Many Chinese historians in the early twentieth century also downplayed the art-historical elements of *jinshi*, preferring to em
phazize aspects of the pastime that appeared more “cool and systematic” or scientific, like philology. At the time, they were obsessed with proving to themselves (and to the outside world) that there was an in
digenous scientific tradition in China. But a century later, we should no longer feel the same need to denigrate visual culture in order to elevate science.

Indeed, recent research on the history of science suggests that we should take precisely the opposite approach. From the perspective of the Western natural sciences, for example, the production of visual culture, along with the collector’s passion for material artifacts, helps explain which objects were chosen as suitable for systematic research, as well as the qualities that were valued by scientists. It is indeed relevant that *jinshi*, particularly in the eighteenth century, was one of the “pre
cedents of modern scientific practice” that existed prior to the arrival of Western learning in China. But Chinese antiquarians were systematic in their appreciation for antiquities as historical sources and obsessed with the aesthetic, monetary, and ritual values that they represented. Furthermore, to consider art and collecting invites us to think beyond the motivations of individual collectors and to consider the institution
al contexts—both formal and informal—in which collecting and the production of visual culture occurred, including the commercial market
in antiques and the then-nascent Chinese museum system. Indeed, the topic of antiquarianism at the turn of the century leads to the intriguing question of why museums were not always favored by Chinese scholars, and helps explain the preference for private libraries and artifact collections long after government and university institutions could presumably have taken the lead.

The comparison of jinsbi and science does point to an important methodological quandary, however. What is the best way to discuss the persistence of traditional learning in the twentieth century without either disregarding or giving too much importance to the disdain of modernists? As the debate over science suggests, Republican intellectuals were very opinionated about the shortcomings of their predecessors. Although it is important to “decenter” the critiques of iconoclastic scholars in hopes of achieving a more balanced perspective, historians of the period should take their concerns seriously; after all, when it comes to the advantages and disadvantages of traditional fields, they were in a good position to know. Otherwise, one risks resembling Rey Chow’s sketch of “the great Orientalist, [who] blames the living Third World natives for the loss of the ancient non-Western civilization.” And despite its innovations, late-Qing jinsbi included many practices that are uninformed or mistaken from the perspective of present-day historiography and archaeology. Nonetheless, we need not adopt the opinions of early twentieth-century intellectuals reflexively. There were reasons to find fault with jinsbi in the modern era, but, as we will see, not all of these reasons were related to the actual practices of jinsbi.

In this vein, Foucault cautioned against overestimating the significance of any previously unappreciated narrative in intellectual history when he mused, “Is it perhaps not the case that these fragments of genealogies are no sooner brought to light…than they run the risk of recodification, re-colonization?” Heeding his warning, my goal is not to overcompensate for the disdain of modernists by elevating antiquarianism over all other forms of historical knowledge. Still, though, we must appreciate that jinsbi remained relevant decades after one might predict its obsolescence. Its influence includes persistent attitudes towards the uses of history, the meaning of pictorial images and the value of material artifacts, and the complex relationship between public institutions and private scholars. That these issues touch on the experience of modern life more broadly simply suggests that in China as well as in many parts of the world nothing was so modern as antiquity.
Introduction

Antiquity and Modern History

To appreciate why the ancient past so fascinated late nineteenth-century scholars, we should bear in mind the temper of that era as a whole. History was crucial for a generation of Chinese intellectuals who were desperate to comprehend their country’s weaknesses—military, economic, discursive—relative to the imperialist powers. Indeed, if the experience of modernity is, as Marx described it, the disorienting sense that “all that is solid melts into air,” then late-Qing intellectuals were walking on ether. Well aware of the empire’s waning prestige and affluence and eager to reverse its decline, they tried to find lessons in the experiences of more powerful nations, particularly Western countries then at the zenith of their imperial reach.

The didactic authority of history was certainly not new. The annals, chronological tables, and biographies included in the Shiji (Records of the historian) by Sima Qian (145–c. 86 BC) were meant to give scholar-officials easy access to the political and ethical lessons of the past. But by the late nineteenth century, Chinese historians were restless with Sima Qian’s “case history” approach.36 In 1902, Liang Qichao argued that national (as opposed to dynastic) histories, with their narratives of social transformation, helped the West and Japan to modernize by encouraging readers to identify with the state and their fellow citizens. Indeed, Liang’s vision of history as a “mirror reflecting the nation” and a “source of patriotism” was an important prelude to anti-Qing revolutionary discourse.37 Historical writing that lacked these qualities was disparaged as tacitly promoting political stasis.

During the often politically chaotic Republican Period (1911–1937), the nature of good historical writing and the status of ancient history remained vital. Many scholars hoped to establish ethnic, linguistic, and religious linkages with foreign nations, creating a sense of global interconnectedness. Others stressed the indigeneity of their own traditions. A third group argued that literary sources were so tainted by mythologizing that the ancient period could scarcely be researched, at least based on available accounts. The solution was to turn to artifacts and inscriptions, and jinshi scholars could demonstrate how to use these sources. But they did not promote age-old methodologies: instead, they recommended approaches that were propelled by artifact studies and other late-Qing innovations, and reflected the dynamism of jinshi overall.

To understand the persistent vitality of jinshi, we begin by con-
considering the roots of the pastime in the Song, Yuan (1271–1368), and Ming (1368–1644); its Qing revival; and its ongoing concerns with language, ritual, and visual representation. During the late Qing, groups of elite scholars reengaged with antiquity, using *jinshi* as the starting point for an art movement as well as a vehicle for reform. As we see in the example of Wu Dacheng, late-Qing collecting practices and technologies of visual representation helped create a new form of artifact studies and provided the necessary preconditions for the discovery of the oracle bone inscriptions in 1899. Turn-of-the-century pioneers in oracle bone studies like Sun Yirang and Luo Zhenyu found these methodologies particularly useful as they looked for analogies between ancient history and modern politics. But after the 1911 Revolution, Luo’s views became increasingly conservative. Despite his success as an independent publisher and art dealer, he was marginalized in historical circles. It was left for his protégé Wang Guowei in the 1920s to harmonize *jinshi* with emerging scholarly discourse, and to persuade young historians that ancient artifacts were still critical to their research.

Indigenous fields like *jinshi* survived into the twentieth century because their practices were resilient despite changing values in other areas of culture and society. And rather than obviating the usefulness of antiquarianism, foreign learning brought its advantages into sharper relief. Of course, those advantages were multifaceted, as was *jinshi* itself. Its persistence in the twentieth century illustrates the importance of hybrid discourses, which combine traditional and iconoclastic elements, scientific and humanist approaches, textual and visual modalities. By integrating art and antiquarianism into historical studies, Chinese scholars forged precisely this kind of modern amalgam.