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REFLECTIONS ON THE TOWER OF THE CRIMSON CLOUDS AND THE HISTORY OF THE PRIVATE LIBRARY IN LATE-IMPERIAL CHINA

✍ *Duncan M. Campbell*

And collecting books may also serve to attract friends 藏書可以邀友
Cao Rong 曹溶 (1613–85)¹

The ancient library was simply a place to store books 古代圖書館不過是藏書的地方
Li Dazhao 李大釗 (1888–1927)²

In diverse ways and for readers and writers alike (as much as for painters and calligraphers as well), the late-imperial private library in China played a central role in intellectual, literary, and artistic developments. Quintessential embodiments of the cultural prestige of their owners, they served to attract to their doors scholars needing access to specific works or writings unavailable to them elsewhere, thus enabling various forms of intellectual work, and providing also the site for the sharing and discussion of ideas.³

In spite of the centrality of this role, however, the private library seems badly served by contemporary histories of the library in China. To the extent to which such histories give the private library any consideration at all, they tend, largely, either to restrict themselves to the consideration of only the bibliographical or antiquarian dimensions of the topic, or they consign the entire pre-modern history of the various types of Chinese library to a brief introductory section intended to illustrate the absolute rupture between the modern and the traditional library.⁴ In this context, the traditional private library, in Chinese usually now referred to as *cangshulou* 藏書樓, a term often understood merely to intend a “book repository”, and the habits of mind and practises of management associated over time with it, is characterised as inadequate from a number of perspectives.⁵ When broadly summarised, such inadequacies tend to revolve around, first, the issue of the use to which their books were put. Second, inadequacy is also said to characterise the issue of access to their collections. In other words, it is frequently argued that late-imperial Chinese reading habits were overly determined by the constrained intellectual needs of the imperial examination system and that

I am grateful for the comments made on this paper by its two anonymous readers.

1 Interlinear commentary to an item in Zhang Chao's (b. 1649) *Youmengying* [Quiet Dream Shadows], for which, see *Zhaodai congshu* [Collectanea for This Glorious Age] (1697–1849; reprint. Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1990), Vol.4, p.3209. The item to which this comment is attached reads: “Cultivating flowers may attract butterflies, arranging rocks may attract the clouds, growing pine trees may attract the wind, damming water may attract the duckweed, constructing a terrace may attract the moon, planting plantain may attract the rain, and the planting of willows may attract the cicadas”.

2 “Zai Beijing gaodeng shifan xuexiao tushuguan er zhounian jinianhui shang de yanshuoci” [Speech at the Commemorative Meeting Celebrating the 2nd Anniversary of the Establishment of the Library of the Beijing Tertiary Normal College], *Pingmin jiaoyu* 1919 (10).

3 My thinking about the various functions of the private library in late-imperial China has been influenced by Anthony Grafton, “Rare Book Collection in the Age of the Library Without Walls,” in *Collectors, Collections and Scholarly Culture*, eds Anthony Grafton, Deanna Marcum, and Jean Strouse. American Council of Learned Societies Occasional Paper No.48, pp.9–16. Speaking of the Vatican Library, Grafton says that for almost two centuries this library served as “... a repository of the rare and wonderful, an arsenal

of powerful knowledge, and a meeting place for the learned" (p.12).

4 Somewhat atypically, if still essentially teleological in approach, Gong Yitai and G.E. Gorman, *Libraries and Information Services in China* (Lanham and London: The Scarecrow Press, 2000) give grudging recognition of the traditional library. After a brief discussion of this 2000-year-long tradition, they conclude: "On the whole, libraries were restricted to the basic activities of collection, collation, and compilation. They were storage buildings, serving to preserve cultural heritage. For the most part, they were associated with the imperial court, palace, or temple, and controlled by the ruling class. Nevertheless, these embryonic libraries both contributed to the preservation of China's cultural heritage and laid the groundwork for the development of modern libraries and librarianship in China" (p.17). Wu Xi, whose work I discuss below, for instance, speaks of the history of the private library in China as having been "ruptured" (*zhongduan* 中斷) by the arrival of the modern period: "... the private library (*cangshulou*) became extinct, they were certainly not transformed into something else".

5 See, for example, Jinhong Tang, "Educational Reform and the Emergence of Modern Libraries in China with Special Reference to the Metropolitan Library of Beijing, 1909–1937" (PhD diss., University of Western Sydney, 2004). Patricia Herbert, "From Shuku to Tushuguan: An Historical Overview of the Organisation and Function of Libraries in China," *Papers on Far Eastern History* 22 (1980): 93–121) too, although never explicitly addressing the term, concludes that: "... the library in imperial China was primarily a repository of traditional learning and culture" (p.120). The term presently used for "library" (*tushuguan* 圖書館) was first employed in 1896; from 1903 onwards, this term replaced the older terms used previously in all official documents.

6 *Libraries & Culture* 39.2 (2004): 161–74, at p.164. Liao Jing strikes an even more extraordinary note in the conclusion to this article; "In many ways, the genesis of the modern library in China was singular. It was unique because it involved more conflict and struggle than in many other cultures. Ironically, the source of the trouble lay precisely in the existence of China's great cultural tradition and in the belief in Chinese cultural supremacy to which such a tradition gave rise. As a result, it was only through fortuitous circumstances (such as the fall of China to Western imperial powers and the subsequent collapse of traditional belief) that the modern Chinese library was born"

private book collections were closed to all but the family members or close associates of the collector.

On this second point, especially, contemporary Chinese historians have been particularly severe. Liao Jing, for instance, in "The Genesis of the Modern Academic Library in China: Western Influences and Chinese Response", argues that "... the long tradition of Chinese librarianship was an obstacle" to the library reform of the modern period; "For thousands of years, libraries in China functioned practically as book repositories. The majority of book collectors believed deeply that book collections were private property and hence should not be shared with the public. It is true that there were a few isolated historical periods when the imperial library and the libraries of private academies made their collections accessible to the concerned public. But serving the public was never a clearly articulated ideal or an established library practice in traditional China".⁶

In Chinese, this view of the history of the private library has been most forcibly asserted by Wu Xi 吳晞, particularly in his short but highly influential interpretive history, *Cong cangshulou dao tushuguan* 從藏書樓到圖書館, the title of which, in keeping with its own line of reasoning, can only be translated as *From Book Repository to Library*, and in the preliminaries of which he argues that these institutions represent "two entirely different things, the natures of which were entirely dissimilar". "The old-style Chinese book repository", he argues, "lacked entirely the facility that would allow it to develop and evolve into the modern library; this essential lack being the element of an openness to society, and thus it could not become the progenitor of the new-style library". Wu's particular concern seems to be that there should remain no misapprehension about the origins of the modern library in China: "China's libraries were the product of the introduction of Western thought and culture into China; the history of the Chinese library only begins with the acceptance of Western library science and management practices". To his mind, the recognition of the "imported" nature of the institution is critical, historiographically: "Only once we demarcate the Chinese library as having been born after the creation of modern society is research into the history of Chinese libraries lent a clarity and distinction of both scope and direction".⁷

Wu adduces, briefly, two case studies to support his case that the "essential feature" of the "book repositories" was their "inaccessibility" (*fengbixing* 封閉性): the first is Qi Chenghan's 祁承燦 (1568–1628) instructions to his sons and grandsons about the maintenance of the library that he has so painstakingly assembled during the late years of the Ming 明 dynasty; the other is the much-cited comment made by Ruan Yuan 阮元 (1764–1849) in his "Preface" to the catalogue of the holdings of the Pavilion of Heaven's Oneness (*Tianyi ge* 天一閣) in Ningbo about the onerous family regulations governing access to its stacks. I believe this evidence, found much repeated throughout the secondary literature, is both overstated and incomplete as a true insight into the actual workings of these libraries within their own late-imperial context.

A recent and somewhat more nuanced and sustained treatment of the relationship between books and collectors, libraries and scholarship, Cheng Huanwen's 程煥文 *The History of Library Science in China in the Late Qing Dynasty, 1840–1911* (*Wan Qing tushuguan xueshu sixiang shi* 晚清圖書館學術思想史), departs from this discourse of inadequacy only in its details; indeed, speaking of Wu's work, Cheng argues that it is "replete with unique and correct insight".⁸

To what extent does this general characterisation of the inadequacy of the traditional private library hold true when the actual workings of specific and individual libraries of the late-imperial period in China are examined in any detail? What can the “affective histories” of these institutions in all their intellectual and the emotional dimensions tell us about the scholarly world of late-imperial China, a world underpinned by a network, in the Jiangnan region alone, of over 500 private libraries.⁹ In an earlier treatment of some of the issues at play here, I traced in outline the progression of one particular late-imperial reader, the thinker Huang Zongxi 黃宗羲 (1610–95), through a number of libraries over the course of the cataclysmic period of dynastic transition between the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing 清 (1644–1911) dynasties.¹⁰ In this paper, I look more closely at the history of one of the Jiangnan libraries Huang Zongxi visited. Walter Benjamin, in his essay “Unpacking My Library: A Talk about Book Collecting”, speaks about offering “some insight into the relationship of a book collector to his possessions, into collecting rather than a collection”.¹¹ It is a relationship to objects, he goes on to say, “which does not emphasise their functional, utilitarian value—that is, their usefulness—but studies and loves them as the scene, the stage, of their fate” (p.60). In seventeenth-century China, that scene or stage where books, their collectors and their scholarly readers and writers most frequently and productively came together was the private library. Far from being the inert repositories where books were simply stored away, as implied by much of the secondary literature (and stated by the great modern librarian Li Dazhao in the epigraph to this paper), the private library, even one relatively more inaccessible than many, was a lively and productive space. This paper will attempt to illustrate the extent to which this was so by focusing its attention on the history of the Tower of the Crimson Clouds (*Jiangyun lou* 絳雲樓), the library built in Yushan 虞山 by the foremost literary and intellectual figure of his age, Qian Qianyi 錢謙益 (1582–1664).¹²

To anticipate the conclusions I suggest in this paper, the life of this particular library contradicts the prevailing characterisation of the failings of the traditional private library. Given the relatively small size of the scholarly elite in China in the seventeenth century, and the degree to which their interactions were largely constrained by a range of regional, organisational, and, particularly during the seventeenth century, factional considerations, as far as we can now reconstruct it, use of the holdings of Qian’s library actually seems quite high. Qian’s relationship with a local printer (Mao Jin 毛晉, 1599–1659)¹³ meant that on occasion both the holdings and the products of

on a language of darkness versus light, this imaginary division in library history pivots on a set of similar oppositions: closing versus opening, imprisoning versus liberating, and hoarding versus sharing. The library spaces of the past are paradigmatically places of dust and disorder; borrowing the moral valences that inflect the medieval/Renaissance divide, they are dark spaces awaiting illumination”, for which see, *Memory’s Library: Medieval Books in Early Modern England* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), p.234. As represented in contemporary scholarship, the modern Chinese library is, as Summit puts it in her book, made “an institutional symbol of both the nation’s self-conscious break from its past and its effort to rebuild a new national identity” (p.3). As is the case with Summit’s work, this paper is actuated by the belief that “... libraries demonstrate that reading and writing are embodied activities, whose particular meanings are shaped by the material and history-bound spaces and structures in which they take place” (p.6).

8 *Wan Qing tushuguan xueshu sixiang shi* (Beijing: Beijing tushuguan chubanshe, 2004).

9 I borrow this term from Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000), p.18.

10 Duncan M. Campbell, “The Moral Status of the Book: Huang Zongxi in the Private Libraries of Late-Imperial China,” *East Asian History* 32/33 (December 2006/June 2007): 1–24. A recent article in Chinese, too, traces something of his progression through the book collections of Jiangnan: Zhao Yonggang, “Huang Zongxi yu Qingdai cangshulou” [Huang Zongxi and the Private Libraries of the Qing Dynasty] 1 (2012): 79–82. For a short English-language biography of Huang Zongxi (by Tu Lien-che), see A.W. Hummel, ed., *Eminent Chinese of the Ch’ing Period (1644–1912)* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1943) (hereafter *ECCP*), pp.351–55.

11 Hannah Arendt, ed., Harry Zohn, trans., *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), p.60.

12 For a brief English-language biography of this remarkable if problematical figure, see *ECCP*, pp.148–50. For a recent discussion of Qian Qianyi and the issue of his posthumous reputation, see Kang-i Sun Chang, “Qian Qianyi and His Place in History,” in eds Wilt L. Idema, Wai-ye Li, and Ellen Widmer, *Trauma and Transcendence in Early Qing Literature* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006), pp.199–218.

(pp.171–72). In a subsequent article, “The Contributions of Nineteenth-Century Christian Missionaries to Chinese Library Reform,” *Libraries & the Cultural Record* 41.3 (2006): 360–71, at 360, Liao Jing restates this view: “Traditionally, book collections were highly valued by the Chinese, but the library was synonymous only with a book repository. Believing that books could bring them economic benefits and cultural capital if not direct political power, imperial rulers and literati spared no expense collecting books, but their collections were closed to the general reading public”. The word “public” in these quotations, otherwise undefined, seems particularly anachronistic in this context.

7 Wu Xi, *Cong cangshulou dao tushuguan* [From Book Repository to Library] (Beijing: Shumu wenxian chubanshe, 1996), pp.1–4. In her recent treatment of the history of libraries in England, Jennifer Summit addresses, in a different context, similar historiographical issues: “But in the burgeoning literature addressing the future of the library there has been a strikingly widespread tendency to misrepresent the library’s past, as if the promise of the new must be purchased at the cost of understanding the old, which is repeatedly archaized and disowned. In a gesture that is continually replayed, the new library is set against, and made to vanquish, the old, a gesture that borrows from the paradigmatic break with the past that divides ‘medieval’ from ‘Renaissance.’ Just as the medieval/Renaissance divide rests

13 On whom, see *ECCP*, pp.565–66. For an excellent discussion of this important publisher, see Miao Yonghe, *Mingdai chuban shigao* [A Draft History of Publishing During the Ming Dynasty] (Nanjing: Jiangsu renmin chubanshe), pp.111–32.

14 Joseph P. McDermott, *A Social History of the Chinese Book: Books and Literati Culture in Late Imperial China* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2006) presents a somewhat less forgiving view of Qian Qianyi as a library owner than the one given in this paper: “Despite the warm words he showered on others who shared their books (e.g. Li Ruyi [1557–1630], whose books he would borrow), he failed to return books borrowed from others; he also prevented all guests to his library from borrowing his books and leaving it with even a sheet of notes” (p.140).

15 On whom see *ECCP*, p.740. In a series of meticulously researched and beautifully written articles, Xie Zhengguang (Andrew C.K. Hsieh) discusses the network of relationships that this man established with scholars who chose, by contrast, to remain loyal to the memory of the Ming dynasty, for which see *Qingchu shiwen yu shiven jiaoyou kao* [Studies of Early Qing Prose and Poetry and of Scholarly Friendships] (Nanjing: Nanjing daxue chubanshe, 2001), especially pp.182–339.

16 For a brief biography of this extraordinary woman in English (by Fang Chaoying), see *ECCP*, pp.529–30; in Chinese, see the remarkable biography by Chen Yinke, *Liu Rusbi biezhuàn* [An Alternative Biography of Liu Rushi] (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2001). Chen Yinke discusses aspects of the history of the library (its site, its design, and its eventual fate) in *Liu Rusbi biezhuàn*, Vol.2, pp.820–32. The secondary literature on this particular biography and its author is now voluminous; for a recent English-language discussion, see Wen-hsin Yeh, “Historian and Courtesan: Chen Yinke and the Writing of *Liu Rusbi biezhuàn*,” *East Asian History* 27 (2004): 57–70.

17 For which see the biography written by Shen Qiu, “Hedongjun zhuan” [A Biography of Liu Rushi, Lord of the East of the River], in Gu Huizhi ed., *Liu Rusbi shiwen ji* [A Collection of the Poetry and Prose of Liu Rushi] (Beijing: Xinhua shudian, 1996), p.227.

18 For a characteristically insightful exegesis of a number of poems Qian addressed to Liu, see Wai-ye Li, “Heroic Transformations: Women and National Trauma in Early Qing Literature,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 59.2 (1999): 363–443.

19 On whom, see L. Carrington Goodrich and Chaoying Fang, eds, *Dictionary of Ming Biography, 1368–1644* (New York:

his library quickly (and exquisitely) became available to a wider public.¹⁴ Furthermore, of the users of the library that I discuss below, the scholarship of both Qian himself and Cao Rong was certainly not directed at examination success, both having long overcome that particular hurdle.¹⁵ As a woman, Liu Rushi 柳如是 (1618–64), for whom the library was built, was entirely excluded from the examination process by reason of her gender, whilst Huang Zongxi refused to participate in the examinations due to his opposition both to the ruling house and to the system itself.¹⁶

The story of this library is both a remarkable and a profoundly moving one. From both an historical and a personal perspective, one cannot imagine a less propitious moment for Qian Qianyi to have established his library. By the winter of 1643, when the building itself had been completed, rebel armies under the command of Li Zicheng 李自成 (1605–45) and Zhang Xianzhong 張獻忠 (1605–47) had occupied much of the north and the south of China respectively. The troops of the Manchu claimants to the throne loomed ominously in the far north. In the twelfth month, Qian Qianyi's closest friend, the poet and painter Cheng Jiasui 程嘉燧 (1565–1643) died at his home in Xin'an 新安. By the nineteenth day of the third month of the following year, the Northern Capital had fallen to Li Zicheng and the Chongzhen 崇禎 emperor had hung himself from a tree on Longevity Mountain 萬壽山. By the next month, the Qing troops had broken through Shanhai Pass 山海關, and in the fifth month they, in their turn, occupied Beijing. By the fifth month of the following year, when the Qing authorities occupied the Southern Capital, Qian Qianyi, then serving as Minister in the Ministry of Rites (*Libu shangshu* 禮部尚書) and dressed in his court robes, surrendered. Despite such circumstances, however, the book collection assembled in the Tower of the Crimson Clouds proved to be the finest and most carefully chosen private collection assembled during the course of the Ming and Qing dynasties.

The life (and subsequent tragic loss) of this library was inextricably associated with the consummation of Qian Qianyi's celebrated, if scandalous, love affair with Liu Rushi, a “singsong girl of Wujiang”, and the sale of a single book. Liu was in her 23rd year when, during the winter of 1640, she paid a call at Qian's Half Rustic Hall (*Banyetang* 半野堂), dressed as a man and travelling unaccompanied on a skiff; he was 58. “I will not marry anybody less talented than Scholar Qian of Mount Yu”, she is somewhat unreliably reported as having said. He for his part, having met her, is reported as saying: “I will not marry anyone less able to write poetry than Liu Shi”.¹⁷ By the sixth month of the succeeding year, the two had married, in the face of opposition from the clan of Qian's first wife.¹⁸

The book sold, in order to build the library, was a Song-dynasty 宋 imprint of the two histories of the Han dynasty 漢 that had once belonged to the eminent scholar and man-of-letters Wang Shizhen 王世貞 (1526–90), and which Qian had finally acquired after much effort some twenty years previously for 1200 *taels*.¹⁹ As Qian himself tells us in his “Note Appended to the Song Dynasty Imprint of the History of the Two Han Dynasties which I Once Owned” (*Shu jiu cang Song diao liang Han shu hou* 書舊藏宋雕兩漢書後), Wang Shizhen had obtained this book in exchange for an estate; Qian was to sell it at a loss of 200 *taels* to his student Xie Sanbin 謝三賓 in 1643 in order to build Crimson Clouds for Liu Rushi.²⁰

The lives (and posthumous reputations) of all those associated with this library were irrevocably altered by the collapse of the political order with the fall of the Ming dynasty in 1644 and its replacement by the Qing; by

serving in office on both sides of this cataclysmic divide, both Qian Qianyi himself and his friend and associate Cao Rong earned themselves both the contempt of their contemporaries and,²¹ later, the undying infamy of being included in the (*Imperially Ordered National History*) *Biographies of the Twice-Serving Officials* [Qinding guoshi] *erchen zhuan* 欽定國史貳臣傳), ordered by the Qianlong emperor (r. 1736–96).²² The section of this work that included the biography of Qian Qianyi (*Yi* 乙) was given over to those men considered “unmeritorious” because they had established no record of service, had committed offences or had otherwise collaborated with anti-Manchu remnants; Cao Rong, for his part, was included in the first section (*Jia* 甲) of the work, along with the other biographies of men considered in some way or another “meritorious”. Qianlong seems to have harboured a particular animus for Qian Qianyi in fact, repeatedly proscribing his writings, fortunately to no lasting effect.²³ On the other hand, the poet Liu Rushi (who, as a young woman, had briefly been intimate with Cao Rong, and who ended up married to Qian Qianyi, and who tried to persuade him to preserve his reputation by committing suicide at the fall of the dynasty) has become a paragon of both the talented courtesan and the Ming loyalist. Her suicide shortly after Qian’s death in 1664, although apparently unrelated directly to issues of loyalty and reputation, serves to lend this sad story an additional layer of tragedy. Huang Zongxi, whose father, Huang Zunsu 黃尊素 (1584–1626) had died at the hands of the eunuch faction at court, nonetheless loyally served the various Southern Ming courts in various capacities until the life of his mother was threatened by his activities, whereupon, in 1649, he retired home to devote himself to scholarship and refusing any engagement with the new dynastic rulers.

“Not all book collections are created equal,” Qian Qianyi’s great-great-nephew Qian Zeng 錢曾 (1629–ca. 1699), himself an important book collector and inheritor of those books that remained of the Crimson Clouds collection, was later to say, “there are readers’ book collections and then there are collectors’ book collections”.²⁴ In these terms, his great-great-uncle’s collection was most emphatically that of a reader (*dushuzhe zhi jushu* 讀書者之聚書). Qian Qianyi’s library was based on the acquisition of the core holdings of four earlier great Ming private collections and was a comparatively small one, totalling only around 3000 titles. It was highly selective, however, and comprised almost exclusively rare Song- and Yuan-dynasty 元 imprints.²⁵

What can we now discover about the actual workings of this extraordinary library? Fortunately, we have the accounts of a number of the people who made use of its holdings. For his part, for instance, in his “Inscription to the Catalogue of the Crimson Clouds Collection”, written some years after Qian’s death, Cao Rong had this to say about the Master of the Tower of the Crimson Clouds:

During the *dingbai* [1647] and the *wuzi* [1648] years, when we both happened to be living back in the Wu region, he would often visit me. Whenever we discussed a book, he was able to speak in detail about both the old and new editions of the work, and the various differences between them; when we looked out the books themselves to test the veracity of what he had said, we would invariably find that he had been correct to the smallest particular. There was not a book that he seemed not to have read; how very different he was to those who claim to love books but who leave them sitting on the highest shelves! And yet he was prone also to his own extreme prejudices, two of which are illustrative of the extent to which he was not entirely in the thrall of the ancients. First, he himself collected only Song and Yuan dynasty editions and would not touch either imprints or

Columbia University Press, 1970) (hereafter *DMB*), Vol.2, pp.1399–405.

20 Qian Zhonglian, ed., *Qian Muzhai quanji* [Complete Works of Qian Qianyi] (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2003), Vol.6, pp.1529–530. This book had previously been owned by the eminent Yuan-dynasty painter and calligrapher Zhao Mengfu 趙孟頫 (1254–1322). In an earlier note on the book, dated 1643, Qian had written: “To find oneself with no money left in one’s purse is the most dispiriting thing in life. The day on which that book left my hands was a day that was extremely hard for me to endure, this desolate scene perhaps approximating that witnessed when, having lost his kingdom, Li Yu 李煜 [937–78], the last Emperor of the Southern Tang Dynasty, heard the line: ‘Facing the imperial concubines I wipe away my tears’ drifting in the air towards him from the Music Office”, for which see “Ba Qian Hou Han shu” [Colophon on the Histories of the Former and the Latter Han Dynasty], Qian Zhonglian, ed., *Qian Muzhai quanji*, Vol.3, p.1781. In a note later added to this colophon, Qian continued: “Master Li Weizhen’s 李維楨 [1547–1626] brother Li Weizhu 李維柱, whose calligraphy was modeled on that of Yan Zhenqing 顏真卿 [709–85], once told me that: ‘Were I ever to get hold of that copy of the *History of the Han Dynasty* formerly owned by Zhao Mengfu I would burn incense and pray in front of it every day, insisting that it be buried with me when I die’. His words made me deeply ashamed of what I had done” (p.1781).

21 Both men were listed by Shen Binghu 沈冰壺 as being amongst the “five unworthy men of Jiangsu and Zhejiang, all of whom proved both shameless and totally without scruple” (*Jiang Zhe wu bu xiao jie mengmianguanjiang ren* 江浙五不肖皆蒙面灌漿人), for which, see Xie Zhengguang, *Qingchu shiwen yu shiren jiaoyou kao*, pp.222–23.

22 On this work in particular, and the historiographical issues associated with this dynastic transition more generally, see Lynn A. Struve, *The Ming-Qing Conflict, 1619–1683: A Historiography and Source Guide* (Ann Arbor: Association of Asian Studies, 1998). For these biographies, see *Qing shi liezhuan* [Biographies from the History of the Qing Dynasty] (Taipei: Zhonghua shuju, 1983), *juan* 78: 51b–53b (Cao) and *juan* 79: 33b–35a (Qian). Neither biography mentions the book collecting activities of these two men.

23 “Qian Qianyi is a man of some talent but no virtue” (*Qian Qianyi ben yi you cai wu xing zhi ren* 錢謙益本一有才無行之人), the emperor declared in 1769. Edicts ban-

ning Qian's writings were issued in 1770, 1775, 1776, 1777, 1778 and twice in 1781. For a treatment of this issue, see Luther Carrington Goodrich, *The Literary Inquisition of Ch'ien-lung* (Reprint. New York: Paragon Books, 1966). On the transmission of Qian's writings nonetheless, see Hellmut Wilhelm, "Bibliographical Notes on Ch'ien Ch'ien-i," *Monumenta Serica* 7(1942): 196–207. Of the impact of the inquisition, Wilhelm writes: "One would think that a nation-wide persecution such as this might have resulted in a serious loss of literary material, but actually Qianlong's inquisition was a failure. All the more important writings of Qian have outlived this persecution, and those which have been lost succumbed not to political but to natural calamities; the accidental burning of Qian's library, for example" (pp.196–98; romanisation altered).

24 For a short English-language biography of this man, see *ECPP*, pp.157–58.

25 Cheuk-woon Taam, *The Development of Chinese Libraries under the Ch'ing Dynasty, 1644–1911* (Shanghai, 1935; reprint. San Francisco: Chinese Materials Center, 1997) has the following to say about Qian's collection: "In reviewing the most important private collections of the period, it is interesting to find that in a period of three hundred years during which as many as five hundred book collectors carried on their work, the chain of possession of a celebrated library was unbroken. At one time, the rare editions were scattered and at another they came together again in the possession of one individual. The beginning of this long line of libraries can be traced back to the collection gathered by Qian Qianyi, who lived in the transitional period between the Ming and Qing dynasties. He obtained practically all the volumes of four great Ming collections; namely, the Qigui shanfang 七檜山房 of the Yang family, the Xuanqing shi 懸罄室 of the Qian family, the Feizai ge 匪載閣 of the Liu family and the Mowang guan 脈望館 of the Zhao family. Qian's specialties were Song and Yuan editions, and before his collection was destroyed by fire, he had accumulated more than 3000 titles. What remained at the time of his death—mostly fine editions of the Mowangguan—he gave to his kinsman, Qian Zeng" (62–63; romanisation altered). Remarkably, Taam's book remains the best general treatment in English of the histories of the libraries of the Qing dynasty. The Chinese translation of Cheuk-woon Taam's monograph, by Xu Yan and Tan Huajun and published by Liaoning People's Publishing House in 1988, is a reflection of

manuscript copies of anything written by men of recent ages. Even in the case of collections of the writings of men of the Song such as Su Shunqin 蘇舜欽, Ye Mengde 葉夢得 or the Three Shens (Shen Gou 沈遘, Shen Liao 沈遼, and Shen Gua 沈括) and so on, he would only list old imprints in his catalogue. Second, he was boastful of his own stinginess, arrogant about the superiority of his own collection to any other and unwilling to lend out to others a single item from it.²⁶

If Qian Qianyi appears reluctant to allow any of the books that formed his collection to leave the library tower he eventually built to house them, by the account above we can see that his collection was indeed that of a reader rather than simply that of a collector.

This impression of Qian Qianyi's use of his library is confirmed by the account of it given by Huang Zongxi, for whom a visit to Qian Qianyi's library represented something of (an eventually frustrated) emotional climax to his lifelong pursuit of books:

In the third month of the *gengyin* year [1650], I paid a visit upon Qian Qianyi and took up residence downstairs in his Tower of the Crimson Clouds. In this way I was able to leaf (*fan* 繙) my way through his books, discovering that it contained all those books that I most wanted to see. Qian Qianyi agreed for me to become his reading companion (*dushu banlü* 讀書伴侶) so that we could shut ourselves away (*biguan* 閉關) for three years together. My delight at this prospect exceeded all my fondest expectations but just when I was about to take him up on his offer, Crimson Clouds caught fire and almost his entire collection reverted to the Eastern Wall Constellation.²⁷

In his subsequent entry on Qian Qianyi in his "Records of Friends of Old" (*Sijiu lu* 思舊錄), Huang Zongxi adds some further details to this account of his relationship with Qian:

I visited Changshu on a number of occasions, staying initially in the Mountain Hut that Brushes the Water (Fushui shanfang 拂水山房) and later on downstairs in the Tower of the Crimson Clouds of the Half Rustic Hall (Banyetang 半野堂). Later on still, once the Master and his son Sunyi 孫貽²⁸ had begun to live together, I took up residence again in his home in Brushing the Water. At that time, the Master argued that the writings of Han Yu 韓愈 and Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 constituted the Six Canons (*liujing* 六經) of writing. Taking a look at his shelves, I observed that the Master had categorized (*fenlei* 分類) the writings of the Eight Masters of the Tang and Song Dynasties (*bajia* 八家) in terms of their technique (*zuofa* 作法), such as "Direct Narrative" (*zhibixu* 直敘), "Argument" (*yilun* 議論), "Exclusive Narration of a Single Event" (*dan xu yishi* 單序一事) and "Digest" (*tiwang* 提綱) and that his categorization in this manner extended to more than ten different categories. The collection of the Tower of the Crimson Clouds included

a welcome renewed interest in the topic. In his "Translator's Note," Xu Yan emphasises the importance of Taam's conclusion to his Introduction: "It is clear then, that in the history of Chinese scholarship during the last three hundred years, the Qing scholars made a very distinct contribution and in that contribution the library had a role. So as we try in the following pages to trace the history of the development of libraries under the Qing dynasty, we must keep clearly in mind the scholarly activity of which it was a factor. Only in its historical setting can we see that the library as an institution does not merely exist but really lives" (p.19; romanisation altered). For an overview of recent developments in the field in China, see Xu Yan, "80 niandai yilai Zhongguo lishi cangshu yantao chengguo zongshu" [A Survey of Developments in Research into Historical Chinese Book Collecting from the Eighties Onwards], in Huang Jianguo, and Gao Yuexin, eds., *Zhongguo gudai cangshulou yanjiu* [Research into Ancient Chinese Private Libraries] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1999), pp.402–26.

all those books that I most wanted to see and the Master agreed for me to become the reading companion of his old age, undertaking to look after the care of my mother in order that I not be distracted from this task. Late one evening, just as I was about to fall asleep, the Master appeared at my bedside with a lamp in hand. Taking seven *taels* of silver from his sleeve he presented me with them, saying: 'This is my wife's idea'. In the tenth month of that year, however, Crimson Clouds burnt to the ground—another proof that I am not destined to be a reader (*wu dushu yuan* 無讀書緣).²⁹

For a somewhat more intimate picture of the workings of this library, however, we have this passage from a biography of Liu Shi written by Niu Xiu 鈕琇 (d. 1704), a close friend of the important Qing-dynasty poet Chen Weisong 陳維崧 (1626–82):³⁰

Once Liu Rushi had reverted (*gui* 歸) to Qian Qianyi of Yushan, he viewed her as if she was an immortal fairy descended from the crimson clouds. Fairies, of course, prefer to dwell in towers and so, pillowed by the hill and nestled up again the wall, Qian built her a five-bay tower behind his Half Rustic Hall, exquisite in its reds and greens, and this he named "Crimson Clouds". No book collector south of the great river possessed a richer collection than did Qian, and now he re-doubled his efforts to acquire rare books (*shanben* 善本), along with new editions from the woodblocks of his friend Mao Jin's Pavilion for Drawing from the Ancients (*Jigu ge* 汲古閣),³¹ and this collection he now had transported by cart to his tower and installed upstairs. Ivory bookmarks and precious scrolls were piled hicklty-picklty everywhere. Once he had retired from the world of embroidered curtains and jasper chambers he would spend day and night closeted here in close conversation with Liu Shi In old age, Qian's obsession with reading and with books became even more pronounced and as he went about his editing and his checking of textual variants (*jiaochou* 較讎) it was only Liu Shi that he would ever consult. Whenever the slightest furrow crossed his brow or his brush paused as it plied its way down the page, Liu Shi would immediately leap to her feet and proceed upstairs to consult some book or other and although the volumes were stacked as high as the rafters she would soon return with a particular volume of a specific book and would open it up to point with her slender fingers to precisely the right passage, never once making a mistake. On other occasions, when Qian's use of an allusion proved wrong or infelicitous, she would correct what he had written. Qian Qianyi took great delight in her divine intelligence and grew ever more fond of her. When our dynasty sought to employ the former officials of the previous dynasty, Qian answered the summons. Soon, however, he became implicated in a plot and was dismissed, after which time he devoted himself exclusively to his writing and his editing. Liu Shi waited upon him hand and foot, her love for reading serving to encourage the two of them in the recklessness of their behaviour.³²

The major work that the two of them completed during the period, a compilation conceived of some considerable time earlier but that they embarked upon when Liu Shi started to bring the required materials with her on her visits to Qian whilst he was imprisoned in Nanjing in 1648 under suspicion of Ming loyalist activities, was a massive collection of the poetry of the Ming dynasty entitled *A Collection of the Poetry of the Various Reigns* (*Liechao shiji* 列朝詩集), completed in 1649 and published by Mao Jin, shortly before the site of their collaboration disappeared in flames.³³

Cao Rong's "Inscription" (cited earlier) offers further detail to our understanding of the loss of the library:

Not long after he had travelled north to take up office he returned home on the pretext of ill health, taking up residence in Red Bean Mountain

26 "Jiangyun lou cangshu mu tici" [Inscription to the Catalogue of the Crimson Clouds Collection], *Xuxiu Siku quanshu* (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2002), Vol.920, p.322.

27 "Tianyi ge cangshu ji" [Record of the Book Collection of the Pavilion of Heaven's Oneness], in Shen Shanhong and Wu Guang, ed., *Huang Zongxi quanji* [Compete Works of Huang Zongxi] (Hangzhou: Zhejiang guji chubanshe, 2005), Vol.10, pp.117–20. The two stars that comprise the Eastern Wall Constellation control the destinies of all writing and constitute thereby a secret vault (*mifu* 祕府) for all the books to be found under Heaven, for which see the "Tianwen zhi" [Astronomy Treatise] of the *Jin shu* [History of the Jin] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), Vol.2, p.301.

28 Chen Yinke notes that here (and elsewhere) Huang Zongxi makes a mistake with the name of Qian Qianyi's son which should read either Sunai 孫愛 or Ruyi 孺貽, for which see *Liu Rushi biezhu*, Vol.2, p.826.

29 For which see *Huang Zongxi quanji*, Vol.1, p.378. Jin Hechong's chronological biography of Qian Qianyi (dated 1932) suggests that Huang's visit to see Qian was occasioned by the attempt to enlist his help for various Ming loyalist activities that Huang was then engaged in, for which see "Qian Muzhai xiansheng nianpu" [A Chronological Biography of Qian Qianyi], in *Qian Muzhai quanji*, Vol.8, pp.942–43. We know from Huang's own chronological biography, compiled by Huang Binghou 黃炳厘 (dated 1873), that at the time of this visit, Huang Zongxi's younger brother Huang Zongyan 黃宗炎 (1616–86) (on whom, see *ECCP*, pp.354–55), was under arrest and had been sentenced to death for his anti-Manchu activities, for which see "Huang Lizhou xiansheng nianpu" [A Chronological Biography of Huang Zongxi], *Huang Zongxi quanji*, Vol.12, pp.34–35. In the same record of Huang's visit to the Pavilion of Heaven's Oneness cited above, written in 1679, Huang speaks about Cao Rong's own library: "On numerous occasions I have arranged to take a look at the books collected in Cao Rong's Garden for the Weary (*Juan pu* 倦圃) but have yet to do so, although according to Cao Rong's own calculations his library does not appear to contain anything out of the ordinary" (*Huang Zongxi quanji*, Vol.10, p.1120). Huang appears never to have had the opportunity to examine this library although if the two men had not in fact met earlier, they certainly did so in 1685, as can be seen from a letter that

Huang wrote to another important collector, Xu Qianxue 徐乾學 (1631–94): “When we parted a month ago, Cao Rong looked all very hale and hearty; now, suddenly, he is dead! Life really is not something to be trifled with. I hear that his book collection has reverted in its entirety to you. If this is indeed the case then this is cause for some considerable celebration. I’m old and sick but I really must hasten over to see you so that I can have a good read of the books” (“Yu Xu Qianxue shu” [To Xu Qianxue], *Huang Zongxi quanji* Vol.11, p.69)

30 On whom, see *ECCP*, p.103.

31 *ECCP*, pp.565–66.

32 Niu Xiu, *Gusheng* [Goblet Dregs] (Shanghai: Guji chubanshe, 1986), pp.48–49.

33 For a discussion of the compilation of this work, see Sun Zhimei, *Qian Qianyi yu Ming mo Qing chu wenxue* [Qian Qianyi and Late-Ming Early-Qing Literature] (Jinan: Qilu shushe, 1996), pp.342–58. For a discussion of it from the perspective of poetry anthology-as-history (*sbi sbi* 詩史), see Chi-hung Yim, “The Poetics of Historical Memory in the Ming-Qing Transition: A Study of Qian Qianyi’s Later Poetry” (PhD diss., Yale University, 1998); and Tobie Meyer-Fong, “Packaging the Men of Our Times: Literary Anthologies, Friendship Networks, and Political Accommodation in the Early Qing,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 64.1 (2004): 5–56.

34 Liu Rushi’s daughter (her only child) had been born in 1649. In the “Preservation” (*Shoucang* 收藏) section of his *Cangshu shiyue* 藏書十約, Ye Dehui 葉德輝 (1864–1927), the late-Qing scholar of books and book collecting, notes: “Lamps and candles, wastepaper baskets, and other containers of combustibles should not be put too near a book-room. The burning of the [Tower of the Crimson Clouds] and the conflagration in the Wuying dian [in Peking] [in 1869] are the most lamentable events that could possibly have happened in time of peace”, for which see Achilles Fang, trans., “Bookman’s Decalogue (*Ts’ang-shu shibiyue*)”, *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 13(1950): 155. As Joseph McDermott notes, however, other scholars have suggested that the destruction of the library was in fact due to the depredations of the troops of the new dynasty, for which see his *A Social History of the Chinese Book: Books and Literati Culture in Late Imperial China*, p.245.

35 Cao Rong, “Jiangyun lou shumu tici”, *Xuxiu Siku quanshu*, Vol.920, p.321.

36 *Muzhai yishi* [Anecdotes Concerning Qian Qianyi] (17th century), as cited

Estate (Hongdou shanzhuang 紅豆山莊). Turning to his book collection, he began again to bring order to it (*shanzhi* 膳治), mending those books that needed repair, making copies of those that needed copying, at the same time sorting the collection into various categories (*qufen leiju* 區分類聚). He then had the whole collection housed upstairs in the Tower of the Crimson Clouds, in seventy-three large bookcases. With evident joy, he would survey his collection, exclaiming: “I may well have been reduced to poverty in my old age but I’m certainly rich in terms of my books!” Ten or so days later his young daughter was playing upstairs in the tower with her wet-nurse in the middle of the night when, as the wick of the lamp was being trimmed, it fell amidst a pile of papers which immediately burst into flames.³⁴ Downstairs, Qian Qianyi arose with a start, but by that time the flames already lit up the sky and the tower was beyond saving. He fled outside. Before long, both the tower itself and the books that it had once housed had been reduced to ashes.

Shocked by the news, I visited him to offer my condolences. “All my ancient books are lost”, he told me, “but several hundred biographical records of officials of the Ming dynasty that I cobbled together (*gecheng* 割成) from other sources remain intact, however, a pile of papers more than four *cun* thick; this pile happened to be away from my library on the night of the fire so has fortunately survived. Some time ago, when I intended to work on a history of the dynasty, I was going to base myself on this collection of material. I’ve lost all desire to undertake this task now, so why don’t you take this bundle away with you?” I was dazzled by the prospect but at the same time felt it inappropriate that I haggle over the price of the material with an elder, so all I did was mumble in reply: “Yes, yes”. Immediately I had taken my leave of him, however, I rushed off to see Ye Xiang 葉襄 to prevail upon him to negotiate the purchase of the material on my behalf. To my lifelong regret, Ye delayed doing so and ten days later the material was acquired by Master Pan Chengzhang 潘樸章 [1625–63] of Songling. This year I acquired from a friend a copy of the catalogue of his collection. In turn, I made a copy of this catalogue, noticing in the process of doing so that whereas Qian had not listed the collected works of men of the Ming dynasty, he had however manifested a distinct predilection for fragmentary and miscellaneous anecdotes, all of which he recorded in this catalogue without exception. Only then did I realise that when he had spoken to me about the four *cun* thick pile of material that he had cobbled together from various literary collections he had not been exaggerating at all.³⁵

If the life of this library produced one of the most interesting and important anthologies of poetry produced during the late imperial period in China, the death of the library, then, had prevented the completion of what in all likelihood would have been one of the most interesting and important histories of the period.

One early source on the history of the library claims that the book catalogue to which Cao Rong’s inscription, as quoted above, was attached was compiled by Qian Qianyi from memory, only once his library had been lost:

When Qian Qianyi’s Tower of the Crimson Clouds was destroyed by fire, all his exquisitely printed Song and Yuan dynasty editions were reduced to ashes. The *Catalogue of the Tower of the Crimson Clouds Book Collection* that presently circulates under his name was in fact compiled after that event, as one-by-one he lovingly recalled to memory the books he had once possessed. In it, he fails to list at least three out of every ten titles his library had contained, however. Fortunately, the books housed in his former residence in East Town all survived intact.³⁶

Other sources suggest that the name itself given the library, Crimson Clouds, presaged the colour the sky was to turn as the flames consumed the books housed in the tower.

Many years later, on the occasion when he came across again the very book that he had sold in order to build his library, now in the collection of one Zhao Wuxing 趙吳興 in Hangzhou 杭州, Qian was drawn to reflect on the loss of his library:

Alas! If the chaos of the Ming-Qing dynastic transition of the year 1644 can be regarded as a major catastrophe for books, ancient and modern, then the fire of the year 1650 should be regarded as a minor catastrophe for the books of the lower Yangtze River delta. The impoverished collections of the one or two book collectors now to be found in the Wu Region do not add up to the merest fraction of my former collection Not only has this book reverted to its proper owner, but this circumstance is enough to bring a wry smile to the lips of the Old Man of Crimson Clouds. After the catastrophic fire, I reverted to my belief in the Buddha.³⁷

By way of contrast, how did Qian's contemporaries understand and respond to the loss of such an exceptional library? Again, we have the testimony of Cao Rong to guide us here:

After his library had been reduced to ashes all the rare volumes (*danxing zhi ben* 單行之本) it had once contained were lost forever. This circumstance I regarded as a profound warning and together with some like-minded associates I developed a covenant for the mutual borrowing of books whereby although it was agreed that the books in question would never leave their respective libraries, however pairs of men could each list those items that they desired to get hold of and where both the dating and the size of these items were comparable, they would each engage a scribe to make copies which would then be exchanged. The Xus of Kunshan 崑山徐氏, the Fans of Siming 四明范氏 and the Huangs of Jinling 金陵黃氏 all declared this to be the most convenient manner in which books could be circulated without fear that they would disappear into someone else's collection, never to be returned.

The quality of Cao Rong's regret at the loss of this library is lent a poignant intensity by a note that he later added to his inscription to its catalogue, which reads, in part:

Some time ago when I was touring Chang'an, I had my library of some six to seven thousand volumes assembled in the hall where I was staying. Qian Qianyi would inevitably turn up every second day or so and whenever he did so, he insisted upon browsing through my collection. Whenever he happened upon a volume on my shelves that he did not himself own a copy of he would borrow it in order that he make a copy of it. This happened repeatedly but I was secretly delighted by this circumstance as I thought that as a consequence it would mean that I would be able to borrow books from him at some future date. On one occasion I said to him: "Master, you must have copies of both Lu Zhen's 路振 [957–1014] *Records of the Nine Kingdoms* (*Jiu guo zhi* 九國志) and Liu Shu's 劉恕 [1032–78] *Chronological Records of the Ten Kingdoms* (*Shi guo jinian* 十國紀年). Once we have both returned to the south, I would be most grateful if I could borrow them?" To this request, Qian Qianyi readily agreed. During the *Dinghai* year [1647] I took my family to live for a while in Suzhou, Qian Qianyi having earlier himself moved into the Garden of the Humble Administrator (Zhuzheng yuan 拙政園) in the same town. When we met our conversation turned first of all to these two books, at which point he hastened to say to me: "I don't own either of these works. When I told you

in Jian Xiujuan, *Qian Qianyi cangshu yanjiu* [Research into Qian Qianyi's Book Collections] (Taipei, New York and Los Angeles: Hanmei tushu, 1991), p.263.

37 Qian Zhonglian, ed., *Qian Muzhai quanji*, Vol.6, p.1530. In his "Shugu tang Song ke shu ba xu" [Preface to My Colophons on the Song Dynasty Imprints of the Hall for Transmitting the Past], Qian Qianyi writes: "Late in the spring of the *Xinchou* year [1661] I paid a visit on Qian Zeng in his Hall for Transmitting the Past (述古堂), with the intention taking a look at the Song imprints in his library. With their blue-green covers and vermilion borders, their exquisite bindings, his holdings of such imprints amounted to about a third of that of my Tower of the Crimson Clouds of old, and as I let my eyes roam over his books it was as if I once again had my own collection of treasured objects at hand. To my very great delight, he permitted me to rummage through his library to my heart's desire and without any need for me to recompense him with the proverbial 'Jug of wine to the owner when one borrows a book, another jug when returned'. I remember once a young fellow from Suzhou who, in his desire to exhaust the sights of this world, visited Mao Jin's Pavilion for Drawing from the Ancients and was reduced to speechlessness in his amazement at what he saw, as if he had entered a jasper palace—I wonder what his reaction would be were he to be given sight of the holdings of Qian's Hall for Transmitting the Past! Qian Zeng asked that I write some colophons for his books, and I have obliged him in this respect with a word or two about those books that I happened to light upon, as follows: 'Colophon to the *Classic of Wine* 跋酒經: The *Classic of Wine*, in a single fascicle, this being a book that escaped the conflagration of my Tower of the Crimson Clouds. When the goblins descended and took away my five cartloads of books in four categories, it was this classic alone that they left behind, as if Heaven itself had decided that I would be permitted to see out my days in drunkenness. Thus has the book made its way into Qian Zeng's collection. No need, then, to go off afar searching beneath Iron Bridge upon Luofu Mountain for I have already mastered Asura's art of picking flowers and brewing the Immortal's Candlelit Night Wine, and this art I will also pass on to Qian Zeng. In actual fact, this classic is somewhat akin to the vulgar recipe books to be found in the oilskin bags of the old women of Hangzhou. Inscribed, with playful brush, in the early summer of the *Xinchou* year by the Simple-minded Old Man", for

which, see Qian Zhonglian, ed., *Qian Muzhai quanji*, Vol.6: pp.1512, 1525.

38 Although this text is usually dated to the reign of the Chongzhen Emperor (1628–44), the earliest extant version of it appears to be that included in Bao Tingbo's (1728–1874) *Zhibuzuzhai congsbu* [Collection from the Studio of Never Knowing Enough] (on which see *ECCP*, pp.612–13), published between 1776–1823. This translation is of the text found in Li Ximi and Zhang Jiaohua, eds., *Zhongguo gudai cangshu yu jindai tusbuguan shiliao (Chunqiu zhi Wusi qianhou)* [Historical Materials on Ancient Chinese Book Collecting and Modern Libraries (Spring and Autumn Period to Around the May Fourth Movement)] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1982), pp.31–32.

that I did have them I was just lying". Reluctant to disbelieve the words of an elder, I believed what he had told me on this occasion and never dared raise the subject with him again. Later on, however, when I visited him to offer my condolences on the loss of his library in the fire, he sat there for a long while before bursting out with a sigh, saying: "I was afflicted with Book Miserliness (*xishupi* 惜書癖) and lived in fear that if I ever lent books out, in one way or another they would be lost and never returned to me. Those two books that you had wanted to get hold of—*Records of the Nine Kingdoms* and *Chronological Records of the Ten Kingdoms*, I'm afraid that I actually owned both of them but didn't want to lend them to you. Both are now lost. If you had been permitted to make copies of my copies of these works, then I would now, in turn, be able to restore them by making copies of your copies". I took my leave of him feeling most aggrieved.

Fortunately, a copy of the covenant that Cao Rong mentions above became attached over the years to an important Ming-dynasty discussion of bookmanship and was later published. It is a document of some considerable interest when trying to recover something of the history of late-imperial Chinese private libraries:³⁸

More than ten book catalogues dating from the Song dynasty [960–1279] remain extant to this day, all of them most resplendent to behold. Whenever one tries to find a book listed in these catalogues, however, one discovers all too soon that four or five out of every ten books listed no longer exist, not all of which were lost in the far distant past. The second-rate book collector takes inordinate pride in the rarity of the volumes that he acquires and regards making such works available publicly to contemporaries as a mistake. For this reason, whereas we may still hope to read a book that happens to fall into the clutches of an ordinary man, once a book has reverted to a collector it will be wrapped in silk and brocade and housed within a sandalwood room the doors to which will remain, usually, securely locked. Whenever someone happens to enquire about the availability or otherwise of the book in question, the collector will reply in the negative and go on to say that although he has searched the world for precisely that book he has never been able to so much as lay his eyes upon it; little wonder it is then that people think that such books have indeed been lost.

Printing has so flourished in recent years that the coal-smoke from the ink manufacturing fires stings the eyes. If you enter the marketplaces with some capital in hand you can immediately acquire a book collection of several tens of thousands of fascicles, but to search through this collection in the hope of finding a copy of a book that you have never seen before is somewhat akin to searching for jade along a distant precipice—one labours long with little hope of reward. One needs to reflect on the fact that the lifetime's painful effort required on the part of the ancients to produce a book in the first place was in itself no simple matter. Then, during the passage of a thousand or so years, fortunate too is a book to have survived intact the various perils it faced; being transported along rough roads, the chaos of times of warfare, the depredations of robbers and so on. Fortunate again is such a book that, having thus survived, then encounters someone who appreciates its sound and who understands how to both store the book and to treasure it and who then declares that the book in question should be published and circulated, or, if not, at the very least be made available to all who love books. If but for a scheme such as the one proposed below, then rare volumes will remain tightly sealed within their trunks under circumstances in which a moment's carelessness could result in their permanent loss without trace, apart that is from that empty name they leave hanging in the various catalogues? Would not such an occurrence earn us the eternal hatred of the ancient? And yet such instances cannot be blamed entirely on miserliness.

If contemporary worthies understand well enough the borrowing of books they certainly do not understand the returning of them to their owners once borrowed and in this respect, as can be seen in the records of the past, the old saying that once governed the exchange of books, “A jug (*chi* 甌) of wine to the lender as you borrow a book, another jug when you return it” seems to have been transformed into “You’re a mug (*chi* 癡) if you lend a book, an even bigger one if you return it”! It is not that the world is without honest and upright men who remain true to their word once given, only that, as soon as a book has left one’s shelves, quite unpredictable is its fate as it is carried by rocking boat or creaking cart, falls into the hands of one’s amanuensis or serving boy, or otherwise faces the miseries of flood or fire. The refusal to lend books, therefore, is not invariably to be condemned, but if you refuse to lend books to others, then others will certainly refuse to lend books to you. The true collector, then, sees no advantage to be had in sealing up his own library and sitting beside the stump in the hope that his collection will increase of its own accord.

Thus have I today developed a simple and convenient method to ensure the circulation of books, as follows: Each book collector should examine the book catalogues of other collectors and make note of those books listed therein that they do not themselves possess, listing first works from the Canon and its commentarial tradition, then works of history and lost records, then literary collections, and finally miscellaneous anecdotes. In cases where the books required happen to belong to the same categories, are of similar temporal provenance and are of roughly equivalent size, an agreement can be struck whereby the owners of the respective volumes will order the works in question carefully copied and proofread before, with the period of a month or so, the copies will be exchanged between the two libraries. This method promises a number of distinct advantages: First, good books are never required to leave the libraries to which they belong. Second, we perform a meritorious deed in relation to the ancients. Third, one’s own collection grows daily richer. Fourth, books from the north and the south intermingle and circulate freely. Respectfully, therefore, I call upon my fellow scholars to heed my counsel and to agree to such a procedure.

Some will object that such a procedure is that of a poor man and that anyone of means will certainly not abide by such precepts. But if we seek to restrict our expenditure on banquets and journeys and other baubles, then we will be able to fulfill our obligations towards the ancients and further their command by taking books that have never before been published and give them the permanence of jujube and pear. If we start with small and individual volumes, then progress to large collections, scholars at all quarters of the empire will hear tell of our efforts and will join us, taking upon themselves the responsibility of bring back into view books that have long been lost to us. Thus will books buried beneath the mountains or secreted within mounds appear again within the world of man, including perhaps even works not listed in those ten catalogues. All scholars habituated to the unusual should bring their utmost efforts to bear on the issue, shouldering up the challenge, and with head upturned and on tiptoes, I await such an auspicious outcome to my text above.

Ian Willison, in a paper entitled: “On the History of Libraries and Scholarship”, argues that “... research into the history of libraries and research into the history of scholarship in the West, never since the eighteenth century particularly close to each other, are now being conceived as parts of a common enterprise”.³⁹ For this productive relationship to be restored in the case of Chinese intellectual history, the history of the library needs first to be

39 Ian Willison, *On the History of Libraries and Scholarship* (Washington: Library of Congress, 1980), p.5.

40 *On the History of Libraries and Scholarship*, p.9.

41 Li Ximi and Zhang Jiaohua, eds., *Zhongguo gudai cangshu yu jindai tushuguan shiliao* (*Chunqiu zhi Wusi qianhou*), p.32.

42 Wei Li, “*Yuanqi*” [“Introduction”], *Shulou xunzong* [Lingering Traces: A Search for China’s Old Libraries] (Shijiazhuang: Hebei jiaoyu chubanshe, 2004), p.1. For a full translation of this “Introduction”, along with a number of entries from the book, see *China Heritage Quarterly* No.18 (June 2009).

freed from the constraints of a historiography that sacrifices the traditional library on the pyre of the project of modernisation. Later in his essay, when discussing the Museum and Library of Alexandria, Willison speaks about the “... four techniques of control of the natural anarchy of the book world that have since become fundamental for research library administration: catholic acquisition ... ; rationalization of the format, and even the content, of books; systematic author and subject cataloging, linked with more finely edited bibliography ... ; and a continuing conservation program, largely in the form of recopying”.⁴⁰ Remarkably, Cao Rong’s covenant seems to promise the beginnings, at least, of all four of these desiderata. Circumstances in the late eighteenth century in China, however, were such that the reformers of that age, in their haste to build a modern system of education and its institutions, tended to look elsewhere for their models.

There is a note appended to the text of Cao Rong’s Covenant written by Miao Quansun 繆荃孫 (1844–1919), founding Director (1909–11) of the Metropolitan Library of Peking (Jingshi tushuguan 京師圖書館) in the years leading up to its opening in August 1912:

When I was serving in the Metropolitan Library I came to know an eminent man who had in his possession a treasured autograph manuscript of his father’s writings that he kept stored away in his book trunks. Whenever anybody happened to enquire about it he would always reply that he still had the MS and that he had long intended to have it printed. Whenever anybody asked to be allowed to borrow it in order to have it copied, he would always reply that, once he had had it printed, he would be sure to give a copy to his interlocutor, thus saving them the trouble of having it copied. Whenever anybody offered to have it printed for him, however, he would inevitably reply to the effect that he could not abrogate his own responsibility in this respect and entrust the task to others. Sadly, after he died the MS disappeared. It wasn’t that he did not understand the need to treasure and preserve the MS, but simply the case that he did not have a scheme whereby he could have ensured its preservation and circulation—precisely what Cao Rong here warns us about. As I recount this story, I heave a deep sigh of regret.⁴¹

Miao Quansun’s sigh captures something of the essential melancholy of the history of the late-imperial Chinese private libraries of Jiangnan. As working institutions they have disappeared completely, of course, and although the books they once housed now stock the rare books rooms of the major public and university libraries, in the words of a contemporary Chinese book collector although: “We all admire the splendid holdings of these libraries; few give even a passing thought to the generations of book collector whose painstaking efforts have made these books available to us, to those bibliophiles of old who have passed on to us the torch of learning”.⁴²

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