

The Qianlong Emperor's Skill in the Connoisseurship of Chinese Painting

Kohara Hironobu

Many scholars of Chinese painting have faulted the Qianlong Emperor for misjudgments on paintings and calligraphies in his collection, belittling his skills in connoisseurship.¹ In particular, his flawed evaluation of the two versions of *Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains* by Huang Gongwang (1269-1354) has been most often cited.² In recent times, Xu Bangda has charged him for having mis-attributed four versions of the same master's *River and Hills before Rain*.³ Both of these mistakes, however, were made during the early years of his reign, around 1745, before he had had sufficient experience with collecting ancient paintings. The emperor was just beginning to learn the art of connoisseurship at that time.

Furthermore, responsibility for the flawed evaluation of the *Fuchun* scroll was not the emperor's alone, but should be shared with his staff. Describing the occasion on which he first saw the Wuyong version – considered by most art historians today to be genuine, as opposed to the Ziming copy, also in the imperial collection – the emperor wrote:

Looking at it briefly by candlelight, I was quite astonished to find that it was the *Fuchun* scroll.... The next day, I requested Liang Shizheng and others to investigate the authenticity of the two scrolls. All of them replied unanimously that the earlier acquisition [the Ziming version] was genuine and that the new one [the Wuyong] was a forgery. I examined both paintings very carefully over and over again and was convinced that my initial astonishment, under candlelight, over having acquired yet another *Fuchun* was a mistake.⁴

His remark here, expressing surprise, suggests that this was the first time he was faced with two versions of the same painting. Although the preface to *Bidian Zhulin • Shiqu Baoji*, the first catalogs of the imperial collection, contains a discussion on how to distinguish genuine paintings from forgeries, the emperor himself seemed at first unable to square this conceptual understanding with actual circumstances.⁵

To what extent did Qianlong develop his skills in connoisseurship? As mentioned above, scholars have seriously criticized the faulty eyes of his youth, but no one has taken the trouble to observe his skills later in life. It is the intent of this paper to trace his development as a connoisseur, utilizing the poems and inscriptions he wrote on the paintings in order to document his progress.

I

The Qianlong emperor began collecting paintings and calligraphies when he was still a prince. By the time he was twenty years of age, he owned 46 pieces, including a painting by Li Sixun (651-716), two by Huizong (1082-1135), three by Zhao Mengfu (1254-1322) and one by Shen Zhou (1427-1509).⁶ When the first catalogs of the imperial collection appeared, however, half of these paintings were entered into the second class, a ranking which indicated that they were either uninteresting originals or good copies. The rest were neither recorded in this nor in any of the later catalogs of the imperial collection. The emperor seems thus to have repudiated many of the decisions of his youth.

In December of 1743, the eighth year of the emperor's reign, began the compilation of *Bidian Zhulin*, the catalog of religious figure paintings in the collection. Admitting to difficulties, the staff wrote, 'if we could not decide whether or not a painting was genuine, but if the brush and ink were of surpassing quality, we tentatively entered it into the first class and waited to find further proof; and 'if we had several versions of the same painting and, after examination, found them to be genuine, we would enter them all into the first class.'⁷ In the next year, after having worked with paintings for eleven months, the staff seemed to have gained confidence. One passage in *Shiqu Baoji* reads: 'The paintings and calligraphies in this catalog are all masterpieces. No matter how faithful a copy is, it has been entered into the second class.'⁸

Although the principle of this classification is very simple – genuine works being assigned to the first class and copies to the second class, the paintings did not easily lend themselves to this scheme. As a result, problems did arise. For example, *Autumn Colors on Rivers and Mountains*, a fine painting by Zhao Boju (d. c. 1160) now in the Palace Museum, Beijing, was entered into the second class because it did not have the signature of the artist.⁹ Only in 1757, the 22nd year of his reign, did the emperor finally begin to realize that paintings assigned to Zhao Boju did not usually bear his signature, and those in the imperial collection were

but attributions made by famous collectors in the past.¹⁰ However, the catalog entry for *Autumn Colors on Rivers and Mountains* was never revised, even though revisions were made in other instances.¹¹

II

The second two-part catalog of the imperial collection, *Bidian Zhulin • Shiqu Baoji Xubian*, was compiled in the period between 1791 and 1793. Compared to all the previous catalogs, it evidences the highest standard of scholarship – with the emperor himself fully in charge. In the edict decreeing its compilation, he wrote with great feeling: ‘Zhang Zhao, Liang Shizheng and others . . .’; that is, the compilers of the *Chubian*, ‘now have all passed away. This is truly sorrowful.’¹² Indeed, after 1793, none of the original compilers of the first catalogs was alive. In nearly 80 percent of the items in the second series, it was the emperor himself who decided whether the painting in question was a genuine work, a forgery or a copy, and personally added poem(s), inscription(s), label or frontispiece to it.

When the *Chubian* was being compiled, everyone on the staff, including the emperor himself, started out as an amateur. Forty-eight years later, only the emperor was an authority. In one note, the compilers of *Shiqu Baoji Xubian* wrote:

At the completion of each chapter, we respectfully requested that [His Majesty] should check it. Concerning this particular work, His Majesty found the techniques of painting and the substance of the poetic inscriptions contained therein to be alien to its [purported] period. He therefore ordered an investigation.¹³

In short, the emperor had become the leader and instructor of his staff, and he did so through having evolved a distinct approach to the art of connoisseurship.

Looking back, the emperor in those early years between 1747 and 1755 wrote many poems on the works in his collection. As prolific as he was, these writings showed little originality. He followed in the footsteps of Ming or early Qing connoisseurs, especially Dong Qichang (1555-1636). In 1746, for example, he composed poems and inscriptions on Wang Wei’s *Snow Landscape*,¹⁴ but these were little more than praises. In 1748, he called for Zhao Mengfu’s *Autumn Colors on the Qiao and Hua Mountains* to be brought before him and the resultant inscription merely conveyed his satisfaction with its resemblance to the actual scenery in Shandong.¹⁵

In 1749, he revised the old attribution of *Nymph of the Luo River* from Gu Kaizhi (c. 344-406) to an anonymous painter of the Song. He commented:

In an inscription of 1747, I had supposed this painting to be an original work of Changkang [Gu Kaizhi]. In 1749, when I reexamined it, and compared it to his *Admonition to the Court Ladies* in the Inner Palace . . . , [I found] the brush flavor to be entirely different.¹⁶

Between the years 1755 and 1765, the second and third decade of his reign, no significant development in his connoisseurship can be detected. What was noticeable was that by then he had become familiar with the sleight of a forger's hand, such as the replacement of an original signature with that of a famous painter, or the exchange of colophons between a genuine painting and a forged one. In his evaluation, usage of such expressions as 'no doubt genuine' and 'without doubt a Tang painting' declined considerably, indicating that he had become more thoughtful in forming his decisions. He also began to compare old possessions with new acquisitions. Re-examining paintings he had studied before, he often wrote new inscriptions on them, sometimes reversing an earlier opinion or adding new thoughts.

In 1772, a remarkable transformation occurred. In a long colophon on an anonymous Song painting of the Wangchuan Villa, he noted:

I have compared this painting with Wang Wei's *Snow Landscape* and found that, in technique, these two paintings are quite different. . . . On checking *Xuanhe Huapu*, which records 126 paintings by Wang Wei, it does not mention a painting of *Wangchuan Villa*. . . Neither the biography of Wang Wei in the *Old Tang History* nor that in the *New Tang History*. . . mention that he personally painted such a picture. In addition, *Lidai Minghua Ji* merely records that Wang Wei painted a scene of the Wangchuan Villa on the wall at Qingyuan Temple, and not a complete set of scenes. . . [I believe] someone conceived the idea of making a handscroll composition after Wang Wei's wall painting at the temple. This could have happened roughly in [Wang Wei's] own time, or during the Song period. . . Therefore, while I can accept all those *Wangchuan* scrolls we come to know as copies, I cannot accept their original prototype to be from Wang Wei's own hand.¹⁷

This colophon calls attention to Qianlong's distinct turn of mind and his method of connoisseurship. It was based on a rational analysis of the texts associated with a given painting, from which to evolve what sometimes may now appear to be far-fetched and skeptical ideas.¹⁸ Previously

he had made many such comments on painters' biographies and on subjects related to painting, but this was the first case in which he applied this approach in a consistent manner. In this inscription, Qianlong insisted, in an irritated tone, that 'no one before has ever completely understood the nature of painting (*huali*),'¹⁹ implying that only he himself had total mastery of it. He declared with confidence that he was the most authoritative connoisseur of all time.

Indeed, at the age of 63, when Qianlong wrote the colophon cited above, he had bypassed traditional connoisseurship as practiced by Ming or early Qing scholars and collectors, whose judgments were made primarily on stylistic bases. If, in the two previous decades, the emperor had pointed to the composition or motifs when discussing a given work,²⁰ he ceased to do so with any consistency after 1772. This was in spite of his insistence, in records ranging between 1746 and 1784, that in order to distinguish genuine paintings from forgeries, connoisseurs should analyze the quality of brush and ink. Those who rely upon signatures, colophons, seals or similar documentation were, he said, 'only vulgar dealers.'²¹ In fact, before 1746, he had been suspicious of relying upon texts alone in the investigation of a painting: 'We cannot trust all the documents in books.'²² He himself however did not always maintain this principle, and eventually turned away from it.²³ On the whole, the emperor and his staff came to consider the painters of the past as signs or ciphers only.²⁴ They valued the subject of a painting more than the painting itself. Similarly, they considered the colophons on a painting to be more informative than the painting itself.

In 1787 for example Qianlong wrote about a version of *Elegant Gathering in the Western Garden* attributed to Li Gonglin (c. 1106-1106):

Although the composition looks old and it appears to be painted in Li Gonglin's manner, the method of painting is very different from that in other [Li Gonglin] attributions. I requested my staff to correct the inscriptions and labels on the scroll by referring to Mi Fu's version of the same...²⁵

From an initial perception of stylistic dissimilarities, the emperor went on, in a characteristic way, to enumerate the errors in the painting, such as the altered sequence of scenes as well as the mistaken identity of some of the participants.

By nature, the emperor was deeply rational. He could not tolerate mistakes, particularly with regard to written records.²⁶ All through the imperial catalogs may be found the numerous corrections he made of old

inscriptions where he indicated the nature of the faults or discrepancies involved. In investigating painting, he relied heavily upon the written word as carrier of truth.²⁷

Herein also lies the weakness of his method: his increasing reliance upon textual evidence over stylistic criteria. This is due not to limited experience, but rather to personal disinclination – even inability – to make stylistic judgments in a studied manner.

If the painting in question was without identifying signatures, seals, colophons or labels, the emperor and his staff were at a loss.²⁸ The emperor often imputed that much of the confusion of connoisseurs in the past stemmed from the disappearance of the author's signature from the painting. Under such circumstances, it was deemed best to abandon the attempt to determine authorship.²⁹

Thus, in 1773, the emperor found himself hesitating when it came to the authorship of an unsigned handscroll, *The Fishing Village*. Wang Shimin (1592-1680), the early Qing painter and connoisseur, had sought to attribute it to Zhou Chen (active c. 1500-1535) rather than to Tang Yin (1470-1523):

Tang Yin painted too freely and spontaneously, while Zhou Chen never deviated even a hair's width from the regular method of painting. This painting... cannot but be painted by Zhou Chen.³⁰

Qianlong, however, was skeptical. He himself was unable to come to a firm decision. In spite of the plentitude of comparative materials in the imperial collection, he desisted from approaching the painting visually.

Similarly, when the emperor and his staff were unable to locate reference to a given painting in old texts, they concluded that it was either a late work or, alternatively, a forgery.

It may be pertinent to cite two more instances of imperial connoisseurship. The first pertains to a boneless landscape formerly attributed to Zhang Sengyou, active in the sixth century, and which is in the collection of the National Palace Museum, Taipei (Figure 1). Concerning this painting, the emperor wrote:

When we checked [such Tang texts] as [*Lidai Minghua Ji*, *Huapin* and *Huaduan*], they all contained references to Zhang Sengyou's life and art. None however mentioned that he was skilled in landscape. In this scroll, there is an



Figure 1. Anonymous, *Landscape after Zhang Sengyou*. Collection of the National Palace Museum. Taiwan, Republic of China.

inscription by Xuanhe [Emperor Huizong] as well as his imperial seal. But the painting was not listed under the category of landscape in *Xuanhe Huapu*. We do not know who painted it. For the time being, we will leave the matter at that.³¹

Subsequently, the attribution was changed to 'an anonymous painter of the Song Dynasty':

The second example also concerns a hanging scroll, entitled *The Great Yu Controlling the Water*, attributed to an anonymous Tang master.³² Regarding this, the emperor suggested that so long as the signature was lacking, one might select a name from those masters who were recorded to have painted the subjects, such as Gu Kaizhi, Zhan Zhiqian (active sixth century), Zhou Wenju (active tenth century), Zhu Jiangzhang (active tenth century) or Zhao Boju. To the extent that the works of Gu and Zhan were judged to be more archaic in temperament than the painting in question, and the works of the last-named, Zhao Boju, display a weaker hand – as evidenced in *The Red Cliff* in the imperial collection – a compromise attribution, the emperor suggested, might well be to Zhou Wenju. As is evident, he was neither inclined to study the style of a painting, nor did he care to speculate, in these two instances, on Zhang's style or that of Tang painting in general. Whenever the emperor found a problem with a painting, he would turn to textual sources rather than related paintings.

Imperial colophons written after 1772 tended to be knowledgeable and erudite, giving a complex evaluation of paintings in question.³³ In a colophon dated 1775 on *The Luoyang Pavilion* (Figure 2) by Li Zhaodao (active c. 670-730), first he decried the weakness of Dong Qichang's calligraphy in the colophon mounted above the painting, 'bearing little resemblance to his known works.'³⁴ And second, he attacked the content of Dong's colophon itself. The Ming master had stated that he saw this painting once before as a handscroll and not as a hanging scroll, as it had become. He also had noticed many more colophons as well as seals of Jia Sidao (d. 1275), Mi Fu (1051-1107) and Wu Kuan (1435-1504) in the prior state. But upon seeing it again when it was in the collection of Xiang Yuanbian (1525-1596), he saw none. This, the emperor countered by pointing to Jia Sidao's seal in one of the corners of the painting, even though others were lost. He further deduced that Dong's colophon was probably the work of a forger who not only imitated the Ming master's calligraphic style but also added a forged signature of Li Zhaodao to the painting itself.

How far the imperial skill in connoisseurship had progressed is made clear when this colophon is compared with the far simpler remark appended by his staff compilers before 1745 to a painting by Liu Songnian (c. 1150 – after 1225). Perhaps with the concurrence of the emperor, they wrote:

All the colophons on this painting seem to have been written by the same hand. Probably there was a painting by the same title of *Nine Elders [of Xiangshan]*, which received the comments and inscriptions of noted person-ages. It was these that were gathered and then recorded by the [former] collector of this painting.³⁵

III

It is easy to see that Qianlong's method required an able staff for support, to collect written materials and examine texts. Indeed, in 1771, the year before his major change in critical attitude was to take place, the old staff was being replaced with a new one for the compilation of the second series, or *Xubian*. Both staffs consisted of nine or ten men, but there was a major difference between the two. The members of the former group had varied in age, career and social status. Those of the new staff were much closer to each other in those respects. In fact, the older half of the new staff had entered the Nanshufang (Imperial Study) together in 1767 after having passed the same *jinshi* examination and had shared careers as officials.³⁶

The staff of the Nanshufang was selected from the members of the Hanlin academy and these men were treated by the emperor much as classmates. They wrote the drafts of the imperial catalogs in the Maoqin Hall, which provided an excellent library for research in painting and calligraphy.³⁷ In these drafts, they usually inserted small sheets of paper, without signatures, to mark those passages requiring the emperor's attention.³⁸ Their gatherings have been described by Ruan Yuan (1764-1849):

In days when the weather was fine and calm and after the morning court session ended, we would open the windows and, with thousands of works scattered about on desks or couches, we had more than our share of famous works from the Tang and Song periods, not to mention those of Yuan and Ming. The eunuchs would hang the paintings, and papers were laid in front of us. Together we sipped tea and savored the dishes granted by imperial grace. We [set about] to determine the genuine from the spurious, study the colophons and inscriptions. . . . Toward the end of our task, roughly around the hour of *wei*, we listened for the ringing of the great bell in the Qianqing Palace and then departed.³⁹

It should be mentioned that the staff worked on the catalogs only when they were freed from regular, governmental duties.⁴⁰ It is through their devotion and diligence that they succeeded in compiling the finest catalogs ever to appear in China.

We should not, however, overestimate the staff's abilities in connoisseurship. Although they were the elite of elites in their own time and were well versed in the Classics and literature, their knowledge and experience in art were practically nil. One of them confessed he had never laid eyes on old paintings before he entered the imperial palace.⁴¹ For these reasons, the staff was not able to surpass, or improve upon the emperor's connoisseurship.

An idea of how the catalogs were compiled can be gathered from the records kept by the compilers. Ruan Yuan, who was associated with the compilation of the *Xubian* at the time when Qianlong was still alive, wrote on 200 pieces taken from each of the Palace storage quarters.⁴² In contrast, Hu Jing (1769-1845), who was on the staff of the third and last two-part catalog, the *Sanbian*, compiled after Qianlong's death, was assigned works from only a limited number of such storage areas. Hu Jing's diary, in particular, provides details of the actual process of compilation.⁴³ He worked on the catalog from the first day of the fourth month to that of the tenth month in 1815. Granted only 17 days of vacation, he worked 166 days in the palace and spent ten days intensively checking the names and seals of the painters. He was assigned 200 works: 30 pieces of calligraphy and 170 paintings. He studied two to three pieces per day from 8 a.m. until 4 p.m. These two hundred pieces constituted only one tenth of the total number of the works included in the *Sanbian*. After he had finished his assignment, Hu Jing and his colleagues made a copy of their draft manuscripts, checking them for duplications and adding new material. This took eight months, after which they presented their completed work to the Jiaqing emperor.

It is interesting to compare the length of time required to complete each of the three catalogs:⁴⁴

Catalog	Works Included	Time Required	Date Completed
<i>Bidian Zhulin</i>	271	6 months	1744
<i>Shiqu Baoji</i>	1,774	20 months	1745
<i>Bidian Zhulin Xubian</i>	238		
<i>Shiqu Xubian</i>	1,575	25 months	1793
<i>Bidian Zhulin Sanbian</i>	66		
<i>Shiqu Baoji Sanbian</i>	1,704	16 months	1816

From the chart, one may observe that the total number of paintings included in the *Xubian* is close to that in the *Chubian*, that is, *Bidian Zhulin* and *Shiqu Baoji* combined. They also took about the same amount of time to complete, roughly between 25 and 26 months. However, a telling point is that, in the *Chubian* of both the *Bidian Zhulin* and *Shiqu Baoji*, the colophons and seals of 1,316 second-class pieces are not transcribed; whereas the *Xubian* presents all such materials without fail. It may also be of interest to note that, while the number of entries in the *Sanbian* is only 43 pieces short when compared to its predecessor, the *Xubian*, the staff spent nine months less in completing the task. In part, the compilation of the *Sanbian* required less time because Qianlong was not around to interfere with the working of the staff. Back in 1784, for example, the emperor noted at the end of a painting by Wu Daozi (active 710-760) that 'we spent three years in identifying this scroll.'⁴⁵ Such comments are commonly found in the *Xubian*, testifying to the extended time frame.

IV

We can trace the final development of Qianlong's skills in connoisseurship through the last decade of his reign. From 1785 to 1793, about ten handscrolls were thoroughly examined by the staff.⁴⁶ The long colophons added to these paintings indicate that the staff worked together under the supervision of the emperor, that their reports were the result of teamwork, and that the method of investigation was based upon intensive textual research. In a number of cases, the investigation took several months to complete. In all ten, attributions were altered and titles changed.

Among the ten handscrolls examined between 1785 and 1793, five can be identified today. The first is a handscroll by Yan Liben (d. 674) in the Fujii Yurinkan in Kyoto.⁴⁷ The earliest in a succession of titles for this work was *Generals and Ministers of Successive Dynasties*. Jiang Pu (1708-1761), who had acquired this piece, decided to change it to *Sages in Ancient Times* after having identified the costumes and caps as those of pre-Han vintage. Then the staff re-examined the costumes, concluded that they were of the Zhou Dynasty and changed the label to *Disciples of Confucius*. They also declared that this work might be a draft for a wall painting in the imperial palace of the seventh century.

It is difficult enough to accept this identification. But it is even more difficult to understand why the staff never considered the question of

whether this painting was executed during the Tang period. Without a concrete idea or standard for Tang painting in general, they were eager to accept such attributions.

The second example is in the Liaoning Museum. The former label for this work attributed to Gu Kaizhi was *A Parade in the Yin Dynasty*.⁴⁸ The new identity the staff gave to it was *The Emperor's Procession* by painters of the Southern Song academy.⁴⁹ In this example, too, the staff was unable to perceive the painting's weakness in execution, nor did they understand the Song Academy style.

The third example is *Zhao Yu's Pacification of the Barbarians South of Luzhou* in the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City (Figure 3). The colophon, which the staff dedicated to the emperor, is a fine piece of research, as carefully and thoroughly composed as essays in philological and textual exegesis written by contemporary Qing scholars. But in the emperor's own inscription concerning the fifth scene, which depicts Zhao Yu chasing his enemies by using wild monkeys with torches tied to their backs, he states:

[Zhao Yu's tactic] was derived from Tian Dan, who used flaming oxen [to attack his enemy]. Here it is entirely inappropriate... The oxen are among the six varieties of domestic animals... but wild animals [such as the monkeys] are beyond man's control... This story about flaming monkeys verges upon the ludicrous.⁵⁰

Here again we see the emperor's point of view and his peculiar logic, even though his retainers were truly convinced by His Majesty's wisdom. He viewed painting as a form of historical documentation, rather than as an object of art. His approach was quite scholarly in nature, but he remained an amateur at heart. Herein lies the limitation of the Qianlong emperor's connoisseurship.

The fourth example is Zhao Kui's (1186-1266) handscroll in the Shanghai Museum. The title was changed from *Summering in a Bamboo Forest* to *Scenes After Du Fu's Poem* (Figure 4). The emperor wrote on this scroll that its brushwork was 'between that of Li and Dong.'⁵¹ 'Dong' must have been Dong Yuan (active 937-975), but one wonders whom he meant by 'Li.' Was it Li Cheng (919-967), Li Tang (c. 1050 - after 1130) or Li Song (active 1190-1230)? Even if we could identify this 'Li,' it is not possible to imagine a style of brushwork 'between that of Dong Yuan and Li,' that is, between an artist of the Southern School and one of the Northern School. Such confusion or mistakes occurred often in his inscriptions.



Figure 3. Anonymous, *Zhao Yu's Pacification of the Barbarians South of Luzhou*, detail. The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri (Nelson Fund).

Another example of the Qianlong emperor's flawed perception in connoisseurship is found in his comments on Zhao Mengfu's *Lezhi Lun* ('*Essay on the Enjoyment of Life*'): *Painting and Calligraphy*. He wrote:

Upon examining the brush and ink, one finds that, while detailed, it reveals a state of elegance and sophistication. I suspect that it is done in the style of Zhao Boju and Zhao Lingrang. No other painter could paint in this way.⁵²

The inability to distinguish the styles of Zhao Mengfu, Zhao Boju and Zhao Lingrang (active 1070-1100) reflects a serious gap in the emperor's knowledge of the history of Chinese painting.

A final example is a lost handscroll by Zhao Gan (active second half of tenth century) entitled *Literary Gathering in a Mountain Hall*, which is the



Figure 4. Zhao Kui, *Scenes after Du Fu's Poem*, detail. Shanghai Museum of Art.

last piece among the ten scrolls examined by the staff in 1793, towards the end of the Qianlong reign. Six staff members presented their reports on this scroll:

[In this painting], one person sits there, looking from the mountain dwelling. In contrast to the theme of the literary gathering, there are neither reception halls nor visitors. Instead, this painting resembles the work of Wang Fu. Those who composed poems [on the painting] are monks. At the end of the scroll, however, a signature of Ning is coupled with the seal, *Yongchunhou zhang* ['Seal of Marquise of Yongchun']. Lian Bu's colophon states that he was a relative by marriage of Li Yu [emperor of Southern Tang]. We therefore attempted to verify this by checking [various sources]...and found that Li Yu did not have an in-law with that title. On checking the biographies of princesses in the *Mingshi* ['Ming History'], it was found that Princess Huaiqing, daughter of Emperor Taizu, however, was married to Wang Ning...who was given the title of Marquis of Yongchun...The painting therefore is a genuine

work of the early Ming period. His Majesty at a glance was able to perceive these problems intuitively, whereas we spent several months working together to trace the sources and follow the leads before we could determine its authenticity. While admiring His perspicacity, we are ashamed of ourselves.⁵³

The officials on the staff were pleased to perform their duties and answer the emperor's questions. Although they believed that they had attained a perfect understanding of the paintings in the imperial collection, many problems remain unsolved.⁵⁴

The five paintings referred to above, in which the old labels were replaced with new ones, are all handscrolls.⁵⁵ More than the hanging scroll or album, this format easily lends itself for the addition and preservation of long colophons, valued so highly by the emperor and his staff. In their research on a painting, the staff relied upon written documentation, particularly the attached colophons. Just as they valued the subject of a painting more than the form, they also regarded the colophons on a painting as more informative than the painting itself.

V

This leaves the question of why the emperor adopted his particular approach: why did he shift his connoisseurship from style into the literary and scholastic arena? Indeed, after he ascended the throne, Qianlong's life was full of rituals in which literary composition assumed a significant part. Imperial birthdays, ceremonies marking the change of the seasons,⁵⁶ celebrations for victory in battles⁵⁷ and banquets all became occasions for the composition of poems and eulogies, a part of which are still easily noticed nowadays in numerous calligraphies on the tablets in the Palace of Beijing. His reign too was characterized by encyclopedic publications such as the *Siku Quanshu* and the building of libraries.⁵⁸ Such projects certainly encouraged his belief in the importance of literary and historical documentation.⁵⁹ Indeed, they date from about the same time that the emperor established his own style of scholarly connoisseurship.

There were several other reasons, but none as paramount as his position as an emperor. He had wondered often whether or not he had neglected government for the love of art. At least, he had to pretend to be troubled with such thoughts. In the Preface to the *Xubian*, he confessed that it was

perhaps less than desirable for a ruler to spend time in collecting calligraphy and painting, and that the purpose of the catalogs was but to 'record my errors and to give warning to my descendants.'⁶⁰

This represents the final assessment given by its owner to the largest collection of Chinese painting ever to appear in the world.⁶¹ These regrets were often expressed in his colophons.⁶² The scholarly investigation of texts was perhaps helpful in saving him from such troubling thoughts.

Later in life, on the occasion of his birthdays, ceremonies, banquets and celebrations, he began to distribute his collection to his children and his retainers in order to keep the number of paintings in his second catalog from surpassing those in the previous compilations.⁶³ Thus it comes to pass that the number of paintings in each of the catalogs is roughly the same, between 1,500 and 1,800 items.

The Qianlong emperor's weakness in connoisseurship arose not only from his over-reliance on texts and documents; he was also deficient in his taste. Once he fell in love with a painting, he filled its empty spaces with numerous inscriptions, such as in the Ziming version of the *Fuchun Scroll*, and he was fond of such grotesque pieces as Dong Qichang's *The Thatched Cottage of Wanluan*.⁶⁴ He thought extremely highly of *Tribute*, a so-called Tang painting,⁶⁵ and was so fond of Gong Kai's (1222-1307) *Wretched Horse*⁶⁶ that he took it with him on his trips. He copied Liang Kai's (active early thirteenth century) *Immortal* and gave the copy to a retainer.⁶⁷

The emperor thought most highly of figure paintings whose subjects came from old texts. On the *Eight Noble Officials* by Chen Hong (active eighth century) in the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, his staff wrote:

...The Ancients esteemed portraiture because such works were closely integrated with historical events. Both in turn are related to politics and knowledge.⁶⁸

But the emperor had very little interest in orthodox painting subjects. For example, in one instance he stated, 'it is not that the Four Great Masters of the Yuan were lacking in the rules of painting, but in the end their works are only landscapes.'⁶⁹

Here lies the essential reason why Qianlong did not become a great connoisseur. He was unable to view orthodox and important paintings with an unbiased attitude and his taste was too partisan for him to judge more than a narrow range of paintings.

VI

The *Sanbian* was compiled under the direction of the Emperor Jiaqing (r. 1796-1820) after Qianlong had died. He was so dedicated to preserving his father's inheritance that he forbade the staff from returning to their original jobs until they had finished the catalog.⁷⁰ So it came to be that all of the edicts relating to the *Sanbian* were recorded in Jiaqing's formal daily record (*Shilu*). By contrast, of all the Qianlong's edicts for his catalogs, only two were recorded: the appointment of his five younger staff members,⁷¹ and the order to make copies of *Shiqu Baoji Xubian* and how they were to be distributed. In actuality there had to be at least six more edicts for the three Qianlong catalogs, one each for the beginning as well as the end. However, even though these edicts were announced, they were not formally recorded as they were in the case of the *Sanbian*. This suggests that Qianlong did not intend to further publicize his collection, and that he wished to avoid being criticized for having spent too much time and effort on it.

After the emperor retired at the age of 86, the staff members of the *Xubian* soon collected the 50,000 poems and 7,000 essays he had written during the course of his long reign. Three years later, soon after they finished it, the emperor died. The staff officials supervised the funeral ceremony and began the compilation of his *Shilu*. Before it could be completed, however, they too passed away.

The history of the compilation of the imperial catalogs reveals an impressive depth of human relationships. The emperor and his staff worked together for thirty years, with the staff devoting their lives to the imperial service and the emperor trusting and admiring the scholarship of the members of his staff in their research of his collection. Together they produced some of the finest scholarship in this imperial age.