Introduction to the History, Use and Function of Chinese Book Collectors’ Seals*

Max Jakob Fölster | Hamburg

Many old Chinese books (both printed ones and manuscripts) bear red stamps on them (see figs. 1 and 2, for example). These are imprints of what is conventionally called ‘seals’ (yinzhang 印章). Book collectors’ seals (cangshuyin 藏書印) – one special kind of seal in China – are often compared to European bookplates or *ex libris*. In fact, some Western scholars even use the term ‘*ex libris* seals’ for them. The two have a number of common features: they are not merely marks of ownership, but have developed into a form of art in their own right, which could be used by collectors to express their personality. Despite these similarities, however, there are also a number of important differences: bookplates are a product of the age of printing in Europe, while Chinese book collectors’ seals are not exclusively confined to printed books. Bookplates only came into use around 1470 and were essentially printed for the most part.

China, on the other hand, has a very long tradition of using seals to mark books and other collectibles, especially paintings and pieces of calligraphy. This dates back to at least the sixth century. What further distinguishes Chinese book collectors’ seals from European *ex libris* is the common practice among collectors of adding their seal imprint to those of previous owners. This sometimes resulted in large numbers of imprints being made in a single book. Not only can such imprints be used to identify the various owners of a book, but they are also an important source of information in the difficult task of authentication and open up the possibility of revealing which books once belonged to a specific collector if the person did not happen to draw up or bequeath a catalogue of the works in his collection.

This article is intended to provide a general introduction to Chinese book collectors’ seals since these have not been the subject of much attention in Western scholarship so far. To this end, I have drawn on the rich Chinese secondary literature on this topic and have tried to include as many direct references to primary sources as possible. Needless to say, this paper is still a mere outline and is by no means exhaustive. The article book is much older, of course. In Western Europe, such inscriptions are attested since the twelfth century (at least). On ownership statements in the Islamic world, including the use of seals, see Gacek 1987 and Liebrenz 2011.

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1 *Cangshuyin* is the designation used most commonly today; other terms are cangshuzhang 藏書章 or cangshu yinzhang 藏書印章. Historically used terms include *tushui* 圖書記 (‘bookmark’) as well as terms that may also be used for seals in general such as *tuji* 圖記, *tuzhang* 圖章, *tushu* 圖書 and *yinji* 印記. See also Lai Fushun 1991, 137.


4 Regarding the origin of Western bookplates, it has been argued that since ‘printed books had lost their unique character, it was now necessary to provide a designation of individual possession to protect them from theft or even only confusion’ (Wolf 1993, 14). Chinese seals have also been identified as technical precursors of printing technology (Tsien 1985, 136–139).

5 Pearson 1994, 12–96. The common habit of inscribing one’s name in a
consists of five parts. As book collectors’ seals are just one specific way in which seals were used in China in bygone days, the first part provides a brief overview of Chinese seals in general. Part two, which is divided into two sections, provides a chronological presentation of the history of Chinese book collectors’ seals. Section one covers the beginnings up to the eleventh century, a period in which there seems to be no clearly defined boundary between seals used exclusively for books and those used on other objects. It is only in the eleventh century that we find more concrete evidence of seals being used exclusively in books. This is the subject of section two, which traces developments up to the present day. Part three is concerned with the places where seals were applied in books and includes a description of certain rules for affixing such imprints. Part four discusses the rich variety of seal legends one encounters. Finally, part five discusses the purpose of books collectors’ seals beyond being mere marks of ownership.

1. Chinese seals

The use of seals in China has a long history and book collectors’ seals are just one specific area of application. In terms of their size and shape, book collectors’ seals are no different than any other seals, therefore it will be helpful to give a brief overview of Chinese seals in general to begin with. Although the origins are still disputed among scholars, judging by the many archaeological finds dating back to the fifth to third century BCE, it is safe to assume that seals were already in wide use at this time. They were employed in official and private settings from early on. Institutional seals served to authenticate official
documents such as deeds and were also a symbol of authority. No official was deemed to be in possession of executive power before he had adopted the seals of office used by his predecessor.\textsuperscript{11} Private or personal seals could be used in business contracts as a way of providing a degree of security for both parties. In the eleventh century, private seals started to be used as signatures.\textsuperscript{12} Besides the more utilitarian purpose of seals as tokens of proof and trust, painters now started to sign their artwork this way.\textsuperscript{13} Later, in the fifteenth and sixteenth century, private seals even developed into specimens of fine art. Seal cutting (\textit{zhuanke}), or the art of the ‘iron brush’ (\textit{tiebi}), was referred to as ‘the sister of calligraphy’.\textsuperscript{14} It has remained a vibrant form of art to this day and has many admirers in East Asia.\textsuperscript{15}

Nowadays, the common word for ‘seal’ in Chinese, \textit{yin\textsuperscript{16}zhang}, is often used to designate a seal as an object, i.e. as a tool, as well as meaning the imprint it makes.\textsuperscript{17} A variety of materials were used to make such a tool. For a long period in Chinese history, bronze was the standard material employed in official and private seals. Precious metals like gold and silver were reserved for high-ranking officials and generals, while jade was only allowed to be used by the Emperor.\textsuperscript{18} As of the fifteenth century, the use of relatively soft stones also became popular. This material made it possible for the literati, i.e. members of the educated elite, not only to design seals, but to produce them themselves. Before this became possible, the production of seals was limited to specialised craftsmen who cast or engraved bronze seals and carved hard materials like jade with the aid of special implements. Soft stones, on the other hand, could be cut easily with a seal knife (a kind of sharpened chisel, actually).\textsuperscript{19}

The area for carving the seal – the seal face – is essential for the seal imprint. This is what is used to imprint the seal legend (\textit{yinwen}) on different bases. Early seals were impressed on clay. These ‘sealing clays’ (\textit{fengni}), as they are known, were used to seal letters and documents. Since it is impossible to attach clay directly to bamboo or wood, which were writing supports that were commonly used at the time, they were usually affixed with the help of a cord.\textsuperscript{20} With the gradual shift to paper as writing support in the third or fourth century CE,\textsuperscript{21} however, seals were able to be impressed directly on the material after having been inked with a red pigment. In the beginning, water-based ink was used for this purpose. Honey was added later to attain a thick, plastic substance that allowed an exact impression to be made and prevented any smearing from occurring. From the early twelfth century onwards, further improved oil-based ink pastes were used.\textsuperscript{22} Red was probably the preferred colour because the seal could be impressed over writing in black ink without obliterating it. Other colours like black were only used during periods of mourning, while blue was only to be used in the event of an emperor’s death.\textsuperscript{23}

Seal legends generally have either Chinese characters or a pictorial design on them – or a combination of both. Legends only containing characters make up the vast majority of imprints as most seals are actually name seals (names of individual people, offices or institutions). The number of characters ranges from one to over a hundred in rare cases, though four characters are particularly common. This has to do with the nature of Chinese personal names, the vast majority of which consist of two or three characters.\textsuperscript{24} Frequently the character for the word ‘seal’ (\textit{yin}) has been added. In a two-character name, a further character (the genitive particle \textit{zhi}) is added in between, thus making up to four characters in all (see fig. 3). The order of the characters commonly follows the customary writing direction in China, i.e. vertically from right to left. However, so-called reversed seals (\textit{huiwen yin} 回文印) are also not uncommon, especially for seals bearing a personal name.
because this allows the family name and the given name to be depicted in separate columns (see fig. 4).

There is no rule about what script to apply for seal legends, but the zhuanshu 篆書 is by far the most common, which is also the reason why it is generally translated as ‘seal script’. This script goes back to what was allegedly the commonly used script up to the third century BCE when it was gradually replaced by the more convenient clerical script (lishu 书隷). Subsequently it was mainly reserved for inscriptions on stelae (mostly just the headings) and on mirrors, bronze objects, roof tiles and seals. Other scripts employed include the ‘nine-folded style’ (jiudie wen 九叠文) for official seals and the standard script (kaishu 楷書). Seals using other writing systems such as the Mongolian or the Manchu script are also prevalent.

The legend could either be cut in intaglio, the characters appearing in white on a red background (baiwen 白文), or in relief with the characters in red on a white background (zhuwen 朱文). A combination of both styles in one legend was also possible. There is a wide range of forms – round, oval, heart-shaped, angular, etc. – but rectangular and square forms are by far the most prominent, both for private and official seals. The size of seals can vary from less than 2.5 cm across to around 10 cm. There were strict regulations for official seals, which changed substantially over time. The normal size for official seals of the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) was one cun 寸 (approx. 2.3–2.5 cm), but they were generally larger from the seventh century onwards. Again, there were no rules regarding private seals, but even so, very large private seals are rather uncommon.

2.1. The history of book collectors’ seals – from the beginning to the eleventh century

When exactly book collectors’ seals first came into use is difficult to say. The oldest extant seal imprint on paper is found on a manuscript from Dunhuang 敦煌, an incomplete scroll with a copy of the Samyuktābhidharma-hṛdaya-śāstra (Za’apitanxin lun 雜阿毗曇心論), a Buddhist text translated into Chinese by Samghavarman 僧伽跋摩 sometime after 478. The imprint stems from a seal cut in a relief with a size of 5.4 x 5.4 cm. It is found on the back and at the end of the scroll and reads ‘Seal of Yongxing Prefecture (永興郡印)’ (see figs. 5 and 6).

Luo Fuyi 羅福頤 (1905-1981), who first mentioned it, dated it to the Southern Qi dynasty (479–502) since the dynastic history notes that a Yongxing prefecture 之安 was established in Ningzhou 宁州 (modern Yunnan) in the year 494. However, this dating has been challenged by several scholars, who all place it in the sixth century. They remark that the style and size of the seal correspond to the larger official seals that came into use during the Sui dynasty (581–618). Most importantly, they have pointed to the fact that the majority of manuscripts from Dunhuang originated from manuscript cultures...
from the surrounding area and that it is rather unlikely that a manuscript from a place as far away as Yunnan in the south-west found its way to Dunhuang in the north-west. Furthermore, they found textual evidence that Dunhuang belonged to a Yongxing prefecture in the period from 561 to 583. However, this evidently is an official seal whose use was probably not confined to books alone.

It is quite obvious that the emergence of collectors’ seals is closely related to the shift to paper as a writing support. Although specimens of paper have been discovered from as early as the Western Han (206 BCE–9 CE), it was not until the fourth or fifth century CE that paper became the dominant writing material. Nonetheless, some scholars have dated the emergence of collectors’ seals to the Western Han. The evidence presented by them is not very convincing, though. One scholar’s argumentation is solely based on an anecdote that cannot be attested in any historical sources. According to this, Liu Xiang 劉向 (77–8 BCE) once lent a rare book to his friend Ji Xiangru 贛相如 who took great pleasure in the book and therefore had a seal cut for it bearing the legend ‘The addiction to books and the love of money are one and the same kind of greed; scholars store books like merchants store money (嗜書好貨, 同為一貪, 賈藏貨貝, 儒為此耳)’. Another scholar mentions two examples of excavated seals dated to the Western Han, which are said to have shown traces of red ink on the seal’s face. This,

31 Nonetheless, there are minor discrepancies in the exact dating: Yuan Shi 1994 and Zhang Xiying 2000 both date the seal to the years 581 to 583 since it clearly resembles other known seals of the Sui dynasty (581–618). Li Zhitan 2010, on the other hand, dates it to the years 561 to 574 by drawing attention to the persecution of Buddhism under Emperor Wu of the Northern Zhou (557–581) as of 574. Shen Leping 2012, 96 suggests the years 578 to 581, i.e. after the death of Emperor Wu and before the establishment of the Sui.


33 Wang Aixi 2002, 48; Xiong Yan 2003, 60; Wang Dongming 1987, 44. Other scholars, however, duly admit that there is no evidence of this: Liu Ning et al. 2007, 77; Yang Yanyan 2011, 57.

34 Wang Dongming 1987, 44. The anecdote states that although Liu Xiang repeatedly tried to reclaim his book, Ji refused to return it. In the end, Liu Xiang appealed to Emperor Cheng 汉成帝 (r. 33–7 BCE) with the result that the book was ultimately incorporated into the imperial collection. Liu Xiang and Emperor Cheng are well-known and well-attested historical figures, but I was unable to identify any person named Ji Xiangru. What’s more, the allegedly lent-out ancient book entitled Dengqian suilu 灯前随錄 is not attested anywhere. With a minor exception, the alleged legend of the seal is a combination of expressions found in Xu Fei’s 許棐 (c. 1129–1192) Meiwu shumu xu 梅屋書目序 (in: Xianchou ji 献醜集) and Fei Gun’s 费衮 Liangxi manzhi 漢興名志 3:29. At best, the anecdote is a much later fictive story, if not entirely the product of Wang Dongming’s imagination, as he fails to provide any references. It has nonetheless found its way into a recent popular work on the history of books: Cai Jiayuan 2012, 46.

35 Zhang Xiying 2000, 158–159. Cao Jinyan 2002, 21–23 gives a more cautious interpretation. Drawing on additional textual and archeological evidence, he argues that seals were already being applied on silk during the Han period. Among the manuscripts from Dunhuang there is indeed an example of a silk fragment with a seal imprint (British Library Or.8211/539a; Chavannes 1913, No. 539, p. 118), but this should not be taken as an example of a book collector’s seal.

36 Wagner 1994, 287.

37 Hua Jifen 2004, 105. Clay seals were predominantly used to seal books off and were not directly stamped onto writing material (Wagner 1994, 282–283).


40 Jia Zhigang 2011, 86. There is yet another excavated seal, which probably
Chinese scholars generally agree that collectors’ seals had become widely used by the beginning of the seventh century. Again, this is based on Zhang Yanyuan’s findings – he clearly states that official collectors’ seals were not in use until the early seventh century:

前代御府，自晉宋至周隋，收聚圖畫，皆未行印記[…]。

In the Imperial Storehouse of former dynasties – from Jin and Song times down to the (later) Zhou and Sui (c. middle third century to early seventh) – it was not yet the practice to affix seals to the paintings assembled in them […] .

However, according to Zhang, the early Tang emperors used seals not only for paintings (tuhua 圖畫), but also for books (shu 書) in their collection. As the word shu, stemming from the meaning ‘to write’, can be used to denote anything written, a clear distinction between manuscript books and calligraphies as pieces of art is not possible. Zhang further mentions the Emperor’s private seals as well as official seals of different imperial institutions:

太宗皇帝自書貞觀二小字作二小印，貞觀。玄宗皇帝自書開元二小字成一印，開元。又有集賢印、秘閣印、翰林印。{各以判司所収掌圖書定印。}

Emperor Taizong (598–649) had the two small characters zhēn (true) and guān (contemplation) written in his own hand made into two small seals, zhēngguān. Emperor Xuanzong (685–762) had the two small characters kāi (to open) and yuán (origin) made into a seal written in his own hand: kāiyuán. Also there are the seals of the [Hall of the] Assembled Worthies, of the Secret Pavilion, and of the Academy of the Forest of Writing Brushes. {[Gloss:] In each case the pictures and books received and cared for by the authorities [of these institutions] were stamped with these seals.} […] . There are also seals [with the characters] hongwen (standing for Hongwen guān, i.e. College for the Development of Literature). I suppose that these were old seals from the Eastern Tower. Those used for stamping books are very small. 44

The general practice of applying seals to pictures and books at the Tang court is also attested in a poem by Wang Jian 王建 (767–830):

集賢殿內圖書滿 / 點勘頭邊御印同 / 真跡進來依數字 / 別收鎻在玉函中

The Hall of the Assembled Worthies is full of pictures and books / Carefully examining their front, the imperial seal is identical / Authentic works enter according to the amount of characters / They are separately gathered and locked in jade caskets.

However, evidence from administrative sources suggests that the practice of affixing seals to books in the imperial collection of the Tang was discontinued at some point, probably due to the disruptive An Lushan 安祿山 rebellion (755–763). At least, this is suggested by two memorials from the early ninth century, in which the casting of new seals for this purpose is requested:

長慶三年四月，祕書少監李隨奏。當省請置祕書閣圖書印一面，伏以當省御書正本。開元天寶以前，並有小印印縫。自兵難以來，書印失墜。今所寫經史，都無記驗。伏請鑄造，勅旨依奏。

In the fourth month of the third year of the Changqing era (823), Li Sui, Vice-Director of the Palace Library, memorialised the Emperor: ‘This department (i.e. bishu sheng 秘書省, Palace Library) requests to set up a Palace Library book seal to imprint the originals of the imperial books in this department. Before the eras of Kaiyuan (713–
According to Zhang Yanyuan, private collectors also embraced this practice. He lists a number of private seals, eight of which have the character shu 書 in their legend. This probably indicates their use as book collectors’ seals. The term tushu 圖書 is often employed in the legends, as in the case of the excavated seal belonging to Li Cun, which has been mentioned above. Also a generic term for books in general, this has frequently been interpreted as an alternative colloquial term for private seals. Others believe the term is used to highlight the function of the seal, being used exclusively for pictures (tu) and books (shu). This reinforces the assumption that no collectors’ seals were used exclusively for books initially. However, an absolute distinction between picture (tu) and writing (shu) seems doubtful anyway. Maggie Bickford, for instance, although working on slightly later material, has shown that what modern scholars classify as pictures are actually illustrated manuscripts. Furthermore, the term tu ‘might designate almost any form of graphic representation including charts, diagrams, maps and illustrations in general’. The locus classicus for the concept of tu in the Book of Changes (Yijing 易經) also mentions shu at the same time: ‘The [Yellow] River brought forth a chart (tu) and the Luo [River] brought forth a writing (shu), the sages took these as models (河出圖，洛出書，聖人則之)’. This shows the close connection between the two.

‘Sutra collecting seals’ (cangjingyin 藏經印) from Buddhist monasteries are yet another case. Imprints of these are found on some of the Dunhuang manuscripts. Seals of eight different monasteries have been identified and are said to have been in use from the seventh to the early eleventh century. They were probably reserved for marking scriptures once kept in the monastic libraries. Among the Dunhuang manuscripts there are also numerous imprints of the ‘Seal of the great sutras of Gua and Sha Prefectures (瓜沙州大壙印)’. This is only found on copies of sutras and is believed to have been the ownership mark of a private collector.

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47 Tang huiyao 64:1121.

48 Lidai minghua ji 3:42–46 (translation Acker 1954, 232–240). The eight seals are: Pengcheng hou shuhua ji 彭城候書花集, Li shuyin 劉氏書印, Shuyin 劉氏書印, Ye hou tushu kezhang 魏侯圖書刻章, Mashe tushu 马氏圖書, Xiao gong shuyin 蕭公書印, Chushi shuyin 褚氏書印 and Yuanhua 遠書. Zhang Yanyuan was unable to identify the collectors of the last three, while only Li Bi 李沛 (722–789), the owner of the second seal, is known to have collected works (see Fan Fengshu 2009, 39, 42). Further evidence of the use of book collectors’ seals by private collectors is found in a poem by Pi Rixiu 皮日休 (c. 834–883): ‘Lu Wang xiti shuyin nang fenghe ciyun 魯望戲題書印囊奉和次韻’ (Yading Quan Tang shi 615:5A, in: Siku quanshu 1429, 219).

49 Apart from the two excavated seals (Jia Zhigang 2011, 86), one also finds a seal imprint with the legend ‘Xiaoyushu tusha yin 宣譯四庫圖書印’ on some Dunhuang manuscripts. See Shen Leping 2013, 102–103.

50 Bai Shuchun 2011, 62. According to Wagner 1994, 133, 139, it originally only denoted book collectors’ seals. Later on, it also became a general term for seals. Sha Menghai thinks this usage of the term is inadequate (Sha Menghai 1987, 16, 73–74). A similar verdict is found in Yindian 印典 (5:24A, in: Siku quanshu 839, 926), where the origins of the term are traced back to Song times.

51 Cao Jinyan 2002, 139–140; Jia Zhigang 2011, 86.

52 Bickford 2006.


55 The statesman and philosopher Song Lian 宋濂 (1310–1381) states in his essay The Origins of Painting (Huayuan 花園) that ‘writing and painting are not different ways, but are as one in their origin’ (Clunas 1997, 109).

56 Shen Leping 2013, 101–102, 104–105 further specifies that the seals of the Baosen 碧森 and Longxing 龍興 monasteries were in use between the seventh and eleventh century, while those of the Kaiyuan 寶元, Jingtu 淨土, Sanjie 三界 and Liantai 連台 monasteries only came into use in the eighth century and those of the Xiande 玄德 and Qianming 乾明 monasteries only in the tenth century. He also observed that the imprints of legends in seal script are in red, while those in regular script (kaiti 隶體) are in black. According to Shen, this rule began to be observed from the 830s/840s onwards.

57 Rong 2013, 487–488 (transl. of Rong Xinjiang 2002, 344); Shen Leping 2013, 101–102, 104–105. Drège 1991, 216–217 remarks that inscriptions stating the name of a monastery are actually more common. For a list of these marks and seal imprints in the major collections, see Drège 1991, 238–245. On the St Petersburg collection, see Chuguevskii 1999, 145, 148. See also Ch’en 1960, 8, 11, 12.

Evidence on collectors’ seals from the period of disunity following the Tang still suggests that there is no clear distinction between collectors’ seals for books and those for pieces of art. Chen Shidao 陳師道 (1053–1102) mentioned an old catalogue with a seal imprint, which belonged to the collection kept by Li Bian 李昪 (888–943), the first emperor of the Southern Tang (937–976):

澄心堂，南唐烈祖節度金陵之宴居也，世以為元宗書殿，誤矣。趙內翰彥若家有《澄心堂書目》，才二千餘卷，有建業文房之印，後有主者，皆牙校也。

The Hall of Clarifying the Heart was the pleasure palace in the capital, Jinling (i.e. Nanjing), used by Emperor Liezu of the Southern Tang (i.e. Li Bian) when acting as Military Commissioner [before becoming Emperor]. Later generations believed it to be the library of Emperor Yuanzong (i.e. Li Jing 李璟, 916–961). This is wrong. The family of the Palace Writer Zhao Yannuo 趙延用 possessed the Book Catalogue of the Hall of Clarifying the Heart, [which records] a total of more than two thousand juan 60, with [an imprint of] the ‘Seal of the Jianye Study’. Later owners were all inferior military officers.61

The same seal is also mentioned by Shen Kuo 沈括 (1031–1095) in his Dream Pool Essays (Mengxi bitan 夢溪筆談). Shen mostly talks about this and two other seals being found on pieces of art (calligraphy and paintings) which once belonged to Li Yu 李煜 (937–978), the last emperor of the Southern Tang and known as a poet and lover of art.62 However, one of the other seals mentioned – the ‘Seal of the Library of the Assembled Worthies Academy (集賢殿書院印)’ – points to an educational institution already mentioned by Zhang Yanyuan. This institution was first established in 725 and served as an advisory college. Under the Tang, it is said to have had the largest collection of books (invariably manuscripts at that time) after the imperial library.63 It is safe to assume that this seal was predominantly used for books, although maybe not exclusively.

2.2. The history of book collectors’ seals – from the twelfth century to the present day

Book collectors’ seals became increasingly common in the eleventh century – their use specifically in books is slightly more evident than in earlier times.64 This period witnessed an upsurge in the availability of books that is probably related to the emergence of printed books.65 Nonetheless, the manuscript remained dominant. The proliferation of printed books does not seem to have reached every tier of society, but was restricted to the elite, who could afford to buy them.66 It also seems that the term tushu 圖書, sometimes at least, may now be understood to stand for books in general. A Chinese scholar has estimated that in the period roughly from the eleventh to the early twentieth century, there were more than 1,100 scholars who put their collectors’ seals on books.67 Mi Fu’s 米芾 (1051–1107) History of Calligraphy (Shushi 書史)
in accordance with the regulations, books belonging to the prefectural school of Jiaxing Prefecture are not allowed to be lend out. This was issued during the term of office of prefect He Sizheng, marked on day [], the seventh month in the year jiaxu of the Jiading era [1214].

Similar repeated bans on lending out books, which was a continuous threat to the integrity and survival of government collections, are known to have been issued in the capital (the first in 999). ‘[I]n 1228, book theft had become so common that some scholarly officials were said to be flogging off for a profit the books they had removed from court libraries and then impressed with their private seal.’

This reveals the increasing evidence of private book collectors’ seals. During the Song period (906–1279), bibliophilism grew among the elite. Thomas H. C. Lee identifies ‘the beginnings of serious book collecting’ in this period. This love of books not only derived from the increased emphasis on education as this was demanded by the imperial civil-service examinations, but also from a passion for books ‘simply for knowledge and self-cultivation’. It became a main characteristic of all literati, and ‘throughout the rest of the imperial period – that is, until 1911 – possession of, or at least access to, books was essential to respectability in Chinese society’.

The following anecdote on Fu Bi 富弼 (1004–1082) is clearly about a privately collected book, which was imprinted with a seal bearing the owner’s official title:

巋山書帖，富鄭公家書。甲子歲，洛陽大水，公第書無慮萬卷，率漂沒放失，市人得而鬻之，鎮海節度印章猶存。是書尚佚數卷，以鄭公物藏之。[…]

When the Jurchen conquered the capital of the Northern Song in 1127, they captured 38 ‘book seals of the Palace Treasury (內府圖書印)’. Apart from the Emperor’s seals and those used in the capital, there are also extant seal imprints of regional government institutions. The legend of one of these reads as follows:

嘉興府府學官書，依條不許借出，系知府何寺正任內發，嘉定甲戌七月 日記。“
his official residence were quickly washed away and lost. A merchant found and sold [parts of it]. The ‘Seal of the Military Commissioner of Zhenhai’ was still to be found [on it]. There are still some scattered [seals] of this book kept as objects belonging to the Duke of Zheng. [...] At the front there is the ‘Seal of the Military Commissioner of Zhenhai’ – an old copy from the home of Fu, Duke of Han [i.e. Fu Bi].

A seal that undoubtedly belonged to a private collector is mentioned in this Ming-period description of a precious edition of the Grand Scribe’s Records (Shiji 史記):

宋人小楷《史記》，松雪翁物。計十帙，紙高四寸，字類半黍。不惟筆精墨妙，中間絕無偽謬。每帙有舊學史氏及碧沚二印，宋通直郎史守之所用。

The Grand Scribe’s Records in small, regular script by a Song man belonged to the old man Pine Snow (i.e. Zhao Mengfu). It amounts to ten volumes, the paper [of each one] is four inches in size and the characters are the size of half a grain of millet. Not only is the calligraphy excellent, but there are absolutely no mistakes in it. Each volume has the two seals ‘Old Learning of the Shi Family’ and ‘Green Islet’, which were used by Shi Shouzhi (1166–1224), Court Gentleman for Comprehensive Duty of the Song.

The mentions and anecdotes involving book collectors’ seals are too numerous to all be cited here. The number of seals owned by a single collector also increased. One of the most famous book collectors of the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368), who was also a renowned painter and calligrapher of the time, was Zhao Mengfu (趙孟頫 1254–1322). He had at least 26 different seals. A significant number of them have identical legends, only cut in different styles: there are five different seals with ‘Mr Zhao Zi’ang (趙氏子昂)’, four with merely the character ‘Zha (趙)’ and three with ‘Zha Mengfu’s seal (趙孟頫印)’. He probably did not use all of the seals on books. However, whether there were seals reserved to be used on books and others just on paintings or calligraphy remains an open question and can only be answered by studying all his paintings and books in detail.

It has been rightly pointed out that many of the seals found on books could also be applied to other objects as their legends do not necessarily mark them as being exclusively intended for books. Furthermore, many book collectors were also collectors of art or even artists themselves, as in the case of Zhao Mengfu. An explicit comment on the clear distinction between seals used for books and those used for objects of art is only to be found in the Decalogue of Book Collecting (Cangshu shiyue 藏書十約), a manual for book collectors that was written by Ye Dehui (葉德輝 1864–1927) and published in 1911: ‘[Y]ou should have separate seals for your collection of bronzes and stone inscriptions, calligraphic masterpieces and paintings, Han dynasty tiles and bricks, ancient coins, etc. (金石、書畫、漢瓦、漢磚、古泉之類，皆別為一印).’

Fu Bi was bestowed both the honorific title Duke of Zheng and Duke of Han (Chang Bide 1974, 2785–2786). Regarding the translation of the title, see Hacker 1988, 772.

Both seal legends go back to imperial presents. Emperor Xiaozong (1162–1189) gave Shi Shouzhi’s grandfather, Shi Hao 史浩 (1106–1194), a calligraphy with the two characters ‘Classical Learning’, and Shi Shouzhi received the two characters ‘Green Islet’ written by Emperor Ningzong (1194–1224) (Pan Meiyue 1995). For more on Shi Shouzhi and his seals, see Cangshu jishi shi, 1:47–48. On Zhao Mengfu, see Lin Shenqing 1997, 2; Wang He 1991, 304–305. On the translation of the title, see Hacker 1988, 7473.


Lai Fushun 1991, 139–140.


The culture of private book collectors’ seals flourished in the late Ming period (in the sixteenth to early seventeenth century). The vast majority of the aforementioned 1,100 private collectors lived during this time and the ensuing Qing dynasty (1644–1911). The reasons for this increase are as follows. Firstly, the introduction of relatively soft stones used as material for seals made it possible for the literati to cut their own seals, which made private seals increasingly popular. Secondly, although there had been relatively large private collections in previous periods, these were few in number. It was only by the late Ming that various private collections came into existence that were much larger. Numerous factors such as a drop in the price of block-cutting and paper, a wider audience for books and an increase in the number of potential authors led to the proliferation of commercial publishing. The wider availability of books made it possible for more people to build up their own collections. It is believed that the number of imprints in large book collections surpassed those of manuscripts for the very first time in this period. This transition in China’s book culture needs to be seen against the backdrop of the general social and economic changes of the late Ming era. Increasing wealth due to the commercialisation of the economy and rapid urbanisation allowed more people to take an interest in books. Book collecting, once a hobby pursued by scholars and the imperial family, also became possible for wealthy merchants and landowners now. These collectors and bibliophiles produced annotated catalogues of their own collections and appended colophons or postscripts (tiba 题跋) to their books during the Qing period, in particular. The imprints of collectors’ seals are frequently mentioned in both catalogues and colophons. The eighth point in Ye Dehui’s Decalogue of Book Collecting is on colophons; here he mentions the catalogue of the Qianlong emperor’s private collection (r. 1735–1796) as the preferred model for recording seal inscriptions:

 [...]以及收藏前人之姓名、印記，並仿《欽定天禄琳琅》之例。

 [...] and in recording the names and seals of its former possessors, you should follow the model of the Gems of Heavenly Favour [library catalogue] compiled by order of the Emperor.

This catalogue – actually there are two, the first compiled in 1775 and the second in 1779 after the original collections had been lost in a fire – contains very detailed entries on every book in the collection, including their colophons, the names of former owners and elaborate descriptions of their seal imprints. It is, in fact, the first book catalogue with detailed and systematic information on seal imprints. In the introduction it is explained that the ‘recording of their [i.e. the former owners’] seal imprints then follows the example of The Clear Water Pleasure Boat of Painting and Calligraphy, inserting transcriptions of all [imprints by] using regular script to serve as a means of scholarly evidence (錄其印記則仿《清河書畫舫》之例，皆用真書摹入以資考據) . The detailed transcription of the imprints consists of

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84 Wang Jing 1979, 59. This is also evident in the special albums of book collectors’ seal imprints: Lin Shengqing 1989, 2000a. Unlike his other two publications, Lin Shengqing 1997 is not restricted to Ming and Qing seals, but nonetheless, the majority are imprints from that period. See also Shanhui cangshu yuzhuang yuanxue 1988; Zhang Jianlan 2004; Chen Xiaoxing and Shi Fei 2009, 102–292. The largest collection of book collectors’ seals to date, which has been catalogued by the National Library of China in Beijing, contains close to 6,000 seal imprints that are all from Ming and Qing times. Not only the imprints are reproduced here, but the whole page on which the imprint was made. The seal imprints are transcribed, but their owners are not identified: Sun Xuelei et al. 2004. Other useful works, although not exclusively assembling book collectors’ seals, are Zhong Yanlan 2008 and Zhongyao lidai jiancangjia yinjian shujuku 2011, which is a database hosted at Zhejiang Library assembling data on many of the albums listed here as well as other works.

85 Cao Zhi 1992, 491–492 further states a rising interest in epigraphy (jinshixue 金石學), especially in the Qing, as another factor shaping a generally growing interest in seals.


87 Brokaw 2007, 254, 256. Obviously there had been catalogues of private collections before, but they are far fewer in number and many of them are only known by title today. For a list of catalogues of private collections from the Tang (618–907) to the Qing period (1644–1911), see Yuan Qingshu 2003, 225–248.


the reproduction of the seal’s shape by drawing the outline into which the characters – following the original order of the legend – are copied in regular script (see fig. 7). This is supplemented with further information on their style (intaglio or relief), where they have been affixed in the book and what colour they are (which is only mentioned if it is not red). And the compilers furthermore endeavoured to identify the respective owners of the seal imprints. Many catalogues of private collections equally include descriptions of seal imprints generally consisting of the following features: their location, shape, style of legend and a transcription of the seal legend in regular script, but no exact copy of the seal. Van Gulik 1958, 439–440 writes about catalogues of paintings, but this also holds true for catalogues of books. In fact, as has been mentioned above, the former were the model for the Tiantu linlang shumu.

Both catalogues follow the same style in their entries. According to Lai Fushun, the transcriptions of the seal imprints were executed by hand in other versions than the printed edition from 1884. In the case of an extant manuscript edition of the earlier catalogue, seals with the transcribed legends written in standard script were cut to be impressed (Lai Fushun 1991, 209). Qinding Tianlu linlang shumu records 902 different seal imprints (with a total of 1,278 records), only a third of the owners of which were identified by the compilers. The second catalogue records 1,019 different seal imprints (with a total of 1,200 records), not even 20% of which were identified. See Lai Fushun 1991, 179, 205, 211. Lai Fushun has now identified most of the owners of the 1,922 different seals.

There are simply too many private catalogues to form a definitive judgement as to whether all of them include information on seal imprints. Yuan Qingshu 2003, 228–248 lists 105 for the Ming and 315 for the Qing period, but this list is probably not even complete. Quite a number of catalogues are actually said to have used the Qinding Tianlu linlang shumu as a model (Lai Fushun 1991, 2).

Sun Congtian 孫從添 (1692–1767), the compiler of another, earlier manual for book collecting, recommended only recording seal imprints in the catalogue reserved for rare Song and Yuan editions, which were considered the most precious ones of all. He is explicit about adding seal imprints, but does not go into any detail: ‘The seal which you may stamp in one corner of your books should be small (小用角圖章)’. Ye Dehui, who names Sun Congtian’s work as his model, devotes the entire final paragraph of his manual to the matter of seals and leaves no doubt about the necessity to affix seals: ‘Books in your collection must have seals on them (藏書必有印記)’.

Collectors’ and bibliophiles’ obsession with obtaining rare books, especially, albeit not exclusively, Song and Yuan editions, for which they were willing to pay high prices, made forgeries of these a very profitable business. Besides dying the paper, rebinding the book and ‘adding boastful notes in imitation calligraphy of famous scholars and collectors about the value and rarity’ of a particular book, adding forged seal imprints was an important way of fabricating a rare and precious book. According to a study by Wu Qinfang 吳芹芳, fabricated rare books and therefore also forged seals started to be produced in large quantity from the Jiajing 嘉靖 era (1521–1567) onwards. Apart from forged seals, which were mostly cut in wood, regardless of whether they were official seals or those of famous collectors and scholars, he also draws attention to the possibility for book dealers to add

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96 Cangshu jiyao, 44 (translation: Fang 1951, 244). On the rather incomplete biography of Sun Congtian, see Fang 1951, 215–218.

97 Cangshu jiyao, 45 (translation: Fang 1951, 242).

98 See the author’s preface in Cangshu shiyue, 3 (translation: Fang 1950, 133).


100 Edgren 2006, 199.
imprints with the original seal of a famous collector, because these were sometimes sold by his descendants.\textsuperscript{103} The case of the seals belonging to Li Shengduo 李盛鐸 (1859–1937) is a good example illustrating this. Li was a well-known private collector of genuine Dunhuang manuscripts. Most of these were sold to Japan in 1935. After Li’s death the remains of his rare book collection were sold to Beijing University Library. The Library did not buy his seals, however. Those subsequently came into the hands of booksellers who affixed Li’s original seals to old books with the aim of increasing their value as it was long known that Li’s collection included a large number of rare and unique works. Other dealers who were not in the possession of the original seals ‘copied several of them (maybe three or four) and used them to stamp both original and forged manuscripts’.\textsuperscript{102} ‘The disappearance of the original seals [thus] created an ideal condition for forgers who could affix the genuine seal onto a forged scroll, or make a fake seal and affix it onto an authentic but less valuable manuscript, using the reputation of the Li collection to increase its value.’\textsuperscript{103}

Wu Qinfang furthermore describes cases where seal imprints were cut out from one book and pasted onto another, or cases of copying imprints using a brush.\textsuperscript{104} Finally he elaborates on the delicate task of identifying forged imprints. The methods he describes range from (a) careful examination of the whole book in order to see whether the age of the imprint conforms to other features of the book, (b) comparison of the imprint with other attested imprints of the same seal, (c) close inspection of the legend’s style and colour of the ink as well as the position of the imprint on the book, to (d) the final option of consulting catalogues, if available, to check whether the book with the imprint in question was once in the possession of that particular collector.\textsuperscript{105}

The compilers of the above-mentioned catalogue of Qianlong’s collection already identified and described forged seal imprints. In one case, they clearly state that the alleged imprint of the Song emperor Huizong 徽宗 (reigned 1100–1126) is a ‘bookseller’s forgery (書賈偽作)’.\textsuperscript{106} While Sun Congtian only mentions the problem of forged seals briefly,\textsuperscript{107} Ye Dehui finds much more drastic words: he decries booksellers for adding forged seal imprints and puts this practice in the same light as the infamous biblioclasm of the first Chinese emperor in the second century BCE:

\begin{quote}
曾見宋元舊刻，有為書估僞造各家印記以希善價者，有學究、市賈強作解事，以惡刻闌印鈐滿通卷者。此豈白璧之微瑕，實為秦火之餘厄。
\end{quote}

I have seen some with forged seals of collectors that booksellers have affixed to ancient Song and Yuan prints with an eye to making them fetch high prices, some of them stamped all over with badly cut seals containing idle, pseudo-elegant phrases picked up by pedantic schoolmasters and vulgar tradesmen with a pretense to knowledge and taste. This assuredly is more than a trifling flaw on an immaculate jade ring; nay, it is nothing less than a continuation of the Qin burning of books.\textsuperscript{108}

How widespread forged seals were among booksellers well into the twentieth century can be seen from an anecdote cited by Wu Qinfang, according to which the National Museum of Chinese History (Zhongguo lishi bowuguan 中國歷史博物館) purchased over 1,000 forged seals from Liulichang

\textsuperscript{103} Wu Qinfang 2013, 114–118.
\textsuperscript{104} Rong 2002, 66–67 (Engl. version of Rong Xinjiang 1997). On Li’s seals, see also Chen Tao 2010. Li Shengduo is said to have used more than twenty different seals. For more on 12 of these, see Lin Shengqing 1997, 230–231; Zhong Yinlan 2008, 415; see also Zhongguo lidai jiancangjia yinjian zhonglu juan 2011. Chen Hongyan and Lin Shitian 2007a and 2007b provide an overview of seal imprints of private collectors found on Dunhuang manuscripts in Chinese and Japanese collections.
\textsuperscript{105} Wu Qinfang 2013, 118–120. Lai Fushun 1991, 145–146 also discusses how to identify forged seals. Liu Xiangchun 2013, 44–45 emphasises the importance of identifying the seal owners in order to tell whether a seal imprint is genuine or not. At the same time, he points to the problem of identical legends used by many different collectors. How difficult it is to identify the owners can be seen in fig. 1: six of the nine imprints have still not been assigned to their owners yet.
\textsuperscript{106} Qinding Tianlu linlang shumu, 6:17B. For further cases, see 8:12A, 8:33A. See also Wu Qinfang 2013, 115–116; Lai Fushun 1991, 178–179. For cases in the Qinding Tianlu linlang shumu subian, see Lai Fushun 1991, 204–205.
\textsuperscript{107} Cangshu jiyao, 38 (translation: Fang 1951, 229).
\textsuperscript{108} Cangshu shiyue, 14 (translation, modified: Fang 1950, 157). The use of forged seals in fabricating early editions is also mentioned in Shulin qinghua, 10:264.
sent to the court for the monumental Complete Library of the Four Treasuries (Siku quanshu 四庫全書) – the largest of all collections in the history of imperial China, for which books from all over the country were sent to the capital as of 1773 – were imprinted with the words ‘Hanlin Academy’s Seal (翰林院印)’ on their first page upon their arrival. This is a rectangular seal in relief with a bilingual legend in Manchu and Chinese (see fig. 8). Of course, the Qianlong emperor, who is known to have ‘plastered’ paintings and calligraphies in his collection with scores of seal imprints and notes, likewise had the books in his personal collection imprinted with seals. The catalogue states that each volume (ce 册) of a book should be imprinted with two different imperial seals at the front and back. In the same manner, modern libraries, which came into existence in China at the beginning of the twentieth century, continued the practice of affixing seal imprints to the works in their possession. Take the regulations for the Second Public Library of Zhili Province (直隸省), for example, which include the following clause: ‘All books provided by the Library have to be affixed with its seal to prevent any loss (凡館中所列圖書，均蓋本館圖記，以防遺失)’. In the largest work on book collectors’ seal imprints published so far, which was issued by the National Library of China (Zhongguo guojia tushuguan 中国國家圖書館), the seal imprint of the National Library is frequently found.

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114 See Guy 1987.
115 Liu Qiang 2006. See also Wu Qinfang 2013, 114–115.
116 Bronson and Ho 2004, 221.
117 Qinding Tianlu linlang shumu, Fanli: 2B. The two seals are ‘Treasure Personally Viewed by Emperor Qianlong (乾隆御覽之寶)’ and ‘Gems of Heavenly Favour (天祿琳琅)’. See Lin Shenqing 1997, 268. However, there is evidence of more than these two seals; see National Palace Museum 2007 and Lai Fushun 1991, 212–213.
119 Besides the seal of the National Library of China (e.g. Sun Xuelei et al. 2004, vol. 1: 86 and many more), there also are those of other libraries such as the Beijing Library or the Capital Library, the predecessor of the National Library (Sun Xuelei et al. 2004, passim). One also finds modern
Private collectors continued the tradition of affixing collectors’ seals to their books well into the middle of the twentieth century. The tradition of imprinting book collectors’ seals waned with the establishment of the People’s Republic in 1949, as the acquisition of private property was discouraged and private book collections were gradually transferred to state institutions. However, like many other traditional practices, book collecting and book collectors’ seals have recently witnessed a revival. There is a popular auction market for old books, in fact. In 2012, a set of 179 rare books from an old family collection was sold for a spectacular 216 million RMB. A modern manual on collecting books was also published recently, in which the author not only outlines the history of book collectors’ seals, but also gives detailed instructions on how to impress one’s own seal on a page.

3. Where a seal is placed

The decision about where to put a seal on a painting or piece of calligraphy is largely based on aesthetic considerations. It has ‘to harmonize with the spacing of the picture’. By the Ming period, certain rules had been made as to where to affix seals.

Library stamps sporadically (e.g. Sun Xuelei et al. 2004, vol. 2: 2, 214, 242). It should be noted that the imprints of all modern libraries, regardless of whether they are traditionally styled seal imprints or modern library stamps, are never transcribed by the compilers of the publication. For more on seals and stamps of modern libraries, see Dai Longji 2003 as well.

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Edgren 1997, 64.

Mei Jia and Wang Kaihao 2012. Qian Jun 1998, 157–163 provides an overview of prices obtained at auctions of old books, which range from 5,500 to 418,000 RMB.


Wei Li 2009; Zhou Xiaodong 2007. Cangshujia was first published in 1999 and ceased to be published in 2004 after only ten issues. Another six issues were published from 2006 until 2009, and publication was resumed again just recently in 2013. http://www.guxue.com/?p=15017 (accessed on 7 May 2014). Wei Li has also published a manual for collecting ancient books, which includes a chapter on collectors’ seals and a presentation of his own seals (Wei Li 2004, 109-122).

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155 Van Gulik 1958, 425.
defined rules, of course, but rather cultural conventions that left room for individual preferences. Zhou Shutao 周叔弢 (1891–1984), an entrepreneur and book collector, described his principles in the following way in 1926:

余所得善本書每鈐《曾在周叔弢處》六子朱文印，蓋收書只以示範，本無世藏之心，非好為曠達之語以欺人。今此印剝損，不堪復用，遂改鈐《周遜》二字白文小印， [...]。132

On each of the rare books I obtained, I affixed the six-character relief seal ‘once in Zhou Shutao’s place’, since I [started] gathering books just as an alibi and originally had no intention of collecting them my whole life and I don’t like to bother people with broad-minded sayings. Now this seal is worn out and I can’t bear to use it any longer, so I have switched to affixing the small two-character intaglio seal ‘Zhou Xian’ instead (i.e. Zhou Shutao’s personal name), [...].

This also means that it is possible to reconstruct the chronological sequence of Zhou’s acquisition of books by the use of his seals.133 In fact, collectors might use certain seals just to mark their most precious pieces. Some even had seals cut just to be affixed to one specific book.134

In his collectors’ guide, Ye Dehui unambiguously writes: ’wherever there is text, relief and intaglio seals are out of place (凡書有字處，朱文白文俱不相宜).’135 However, that does not hold true for official seal imprints; these had to be impressed in the upper centre of the first page above the text (see fig. 8).136 Naturally, emperors had the privilege of being able to affix their seals in very prominent places.137

In general, books in the imperial collections of the Ming and Qing period would be impressed with a seal on the first and last page of each volume, after the imperial preface (yuzhi xuwen 御製序文), if present, and the flyleaves at the front and back of the book.138 Many book catalogues not only give transcriptions of the seals’ legends, but also add information on their position within the book. The most detailed work in this respect is the catalogue of Qianlong’s private book collection. The transcription of each imprint is followed by information on where it is found in the book: along with the preface (xu) or table of contents (mulu 目錄), in exactly which chapter (juan) or volume (ce) it appears, at the end or beginning of a chapter (juan zhong 卷終 or juan shou 卷首),139 in each chapter (ge juan 各卷) or volume (ge ce 各冊), on a flyleaf (juve 副葉), after a colophon or postscript (ba mo 萬末) and so on. If the seal imprint is found in multiple places, they are all listed in detail.140

Ye Dehui, however, is not only concerned about locating the correct place to imprint one’s seal, but equally with the composition of the different imprints:

凡書流傳愈久者，其藏書印愈多。朱紫縱横，幾無隙紙。是宜移於書眉卷尾，以免齟齬。亦或視各印之大小朱白，間別用之。小印朱文重迭，尚無不可。若白文與大印聚於一行，則令閱者生厭矣。

The longer a book has been transmitted, the more will be the seals of its possessors. Red and purple will run crisscross to such an extent that you may have hardly any blank space. Therefore the best thing to do would be to have seals stamped on the upper margin and at the very end of each volume, so that disharmony may be avoided. Also you must make allowance for the different sizes of the seals as well as the

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133 Liu Xiangchun 2013, 48. Zhou Shutao actually had more than just these two seals; see Lin Shengqing 1997, 258. There are at least two different seals with Zhou Xian as a legenda; see Zhong Yinchuan 2008, 559. Chen Tao 2010, 78–81 has done a chronological reconstruction for the seals used in Li Shengduo’s collection of Dunhuang manuscripts.

134 Liu Xiangchun 2013, 49–50.

135 Cangshu shiyue, 14 (translation: Fang 1950, 158).

136 This was the case for the Hanlin Academy Seal (翰林院印) (Wu Qinfang 2013, 114; Liu Qiang 2006, 60). It is also very obvious for the ‘Book Seal of the Ministry of Education (學部圖書之印)’ (i.e. Sun Xuelei et al. 2004, vol. 1: 9, 90, 100, 101, 111, 130, 193, 199).

137 As in the case of paintings and calligraphies (van Gulik 1958, 425, 438).


139 This also has the very specific meaning of caption title (the title as it appears in the first column of the first page of text) or the caption area (including the first few columns of the first page of text, often containing authorship and/or publishing information) (Edgren 1993, 136).

140 Qinding tianlu linlang shumu, passim. However, Qianlong’s own seal imprints are never recorded.
difference between relief and intaglio engravings; you must discriminate when using them. It is permissible to have small seals or relief-script seals stamped one after another, but the reader of your book will be disgusted to see intaglio-script seals or larger seals crowding the same column.\footnote{141}

The aesthetic devaluation caused by too many seals being used was lamented very clearly by Jiang Shaozhu 姜紹書 (died c. 1680) in his criticism of the collector Xiang Yuanbian 章元汴 (1525–1590)\footnote{142;}


There are some books with countless imprints, especially very rare and old editions that were considered extremely precious and had been in the possession of many different collectors. Take, for example, the Song print of the \textit{Collected Poems of the Tang Maiden Yu Xuanji} (\textit{Tang nülang Yu Xuanji shi}) 唐女郎魚玄機詩集, which has over 100 seal imprints on it and once belonged to such well-known collectors as Zhu Chengjie 朱承爵 (1480–1527), the above-mentioned Xiang Yuanbian, Huang Pili 黃丕烈 (1763–1825), Yuan Kewen 袁克文 (1890–1931) and numerous others.\footnote{146} Another impressive example is the fragmentary print from 1213 of the \textit{Annotated Poems of Mr Dongpo} (\textit{Zhu Dongpo xiansheng shi} 註東坡先生詩), which contains at least 30 imprints.\footnote{147} Nonetheless, judging from the largest publications on collectors’ seals imprints to date, which have been produced by the National Library of China and cover seal imprints found in over 1,800 books from Ming and Qing times (both printed works and manuscripts), the vast majority of books only have two or three imprints on them.\footnote{148}

4. Legends

A bewildering variety of legends are to be found on book collectors’ seals. Most research undertaken by Chinese scholars actually concentrates on categorising the different types of legends based on their content. Although all scholars

\footnote{141} \textit{Cangshu shiyue}, 14 (translation, modified: Fang 1950, 158).

\footnote{142} On Xiang Yuanbian, see Wang He 1991, 308. Lin Shengjing 1997, 36–38 reproduces as many as 41 seal imprints made by this collector. His seals are also very prominent in the \textit{Tianlu linlang shumu} with 26 different imprints (Lai Fushun 1991, 240–241). See also van Gulik 1958, 438. There are over ten of his seal imprints on a Song print of the \textit{Tang nülang Yu Xuanji shi} 唐女郎魚玄機詩集 (Zhang Xiuyu 2012, 26). For more on this book, see below.

\footnote{143} \textit{Yunshizhai bitan} 雲石齋筆談 cited from \textit{Cangshu jishi shi}, 3:247.

\footnote{144} This is a loose term without a clear definition and points to different cities in the lower Yangzi region (\textit{Zhongguo lishi diming dacidian} 1995, 19–20).

\footnote{145} I was unable to identify the source of the story of the tattooed women.

\footnote{146} Zhang Lijuan and Cheng Youqing 2002, 95–97. Zhang Xiuyu 2012 provides a detailed description of all the owners. \textit{Tang nülang Yu Xuanji shi} 2003 is a reproduction of the original kept at the National Library of China in Beijing. The work merely consists of 25 folios, only 12 of which bear the actual text; the rest of them are the title page, forewords and colophons by various collectors. The main text alone bears 66 seal imprints on the first and last folios.

\footnote{147} Gueo tushuguan tecangzu 2011, 136. Today, this print is kept by the National Central Library in Taipei. Another fragment of the same work, currently kept at the National Library of China in Beijing, probably belongs to the same book since some of the fragmentary seal imprints are complementary to each other (Zhang Lijuan and Cheng Youqing 2002, 96–98. See also Edgren 1997, 58–60). Fan Jingzhong 2001, 142 mentions another book with over 70 imprints. Li Xuemei 2009, 20–22 mentions further examples of Song editions with many seal imprints.

\footnote{148} In my analysis of the two first volumes, which span a total of 536 pages, each reproducing one original page with seal imprints on it, I found that 66% of the pages contain two or three imprints, 15% have only one, 11% have four and the rest contain anything between five and ten imprints. However, the 110 or so cases where more than one page of a book has been reproduced (mostly two pages, in fact) were not taken into consideration here. Sun Xuelei et al. 2004, vol. 1 and 2.
seem to have devised their own typology, they all agree that the majority of the legends bear names, as is the case with Chinese seals in general. These might be names of individual people in all their variations – ranging from the family name (xing 姓) and personal name (ming 名) to the style name (zi 字) or literary name (hao 号) – or the name of a collector’s studio (zhai 齋), study (shi 室), two-storey building (lou 樓), pavilion (ge 閣) or hall (tang 堂) where his collection was stored. These are by far the most common options. Furthermore, the name on a legend might also be a place name (often that of the collector’s home), an official rank (guanzhi 官職), an academic qualification obtained by passing civil-service examinations, or in case of official seals, the name of a government agency or imperial library. In many cases, instead of the character for ‘seal’ (yin 印), the name is followed by a character standing for ‘collecting’ (cang 藏). Like the meaning of ex libris, it must be understood as ‘collected by …’ or ‘from the collection of …’. Other than names, one finds dates (including a collector’s date of birth or the date a particular book was acquired, for example), poems, maxims, idioms and the like. Seal legends which many scholars subsume under the category of connoisseurship (jiangang 鉴賞) are not uncommon. These might bear information on who has evaluated (jiangbie 鉴別), collated (jiaodu 校讀) or simply enjoyed looking at the book (guanshang 觀賞 or guoyan 過眼). Needless to say, all kinds of combinations are common, especially those involving different types of names.

Another quite common type of legend is one that contains exhortations to later generations to safeguard the owner’s book. This practice goes back to a famous dictum of Du Xian’s 杜暹 (died in 740), who declared: ‘loaning or selling off [a book] is an unfilial act (鬻及借人為不孝)’. Here are a few typical legends of this kind: ‘May [my] children and grandchildren protect it [this book] (子孫保之), ‘May [my] children and grandchildren protect [this book] forever (子孫永保)’ and the rather more elaborate ‘Buying this book was not easy. I bequeath it to my children and grandchildren – don’t discard it lightly (購此書甚不易, 遺子孫弗輕棄)’. One also finds more sophisticated examples: ‘Grandfather’s and father’s books are for the education of children and grandchildren. Selling and loaning them to others is a highly unfilial act. Received family rule of the Chu family from Yunjian (祖父書籍, 子孫是教。鬻及借人, 大為不孝。雲間褚氏, 世家垂訓)’. Other collectors even threaten their descendants with ‘execution by the gods’, ‘expulsion from the ancestral hall’ or a whipping.

It is generally assumed that legends became more complex over time. This has already been remarked by Li Kang 李康, a Qing-time author:

古印只有姓名與字, 唐宋稍蕃齋室名, 元時尚未闌入成語, 當明代則某科進士某官職, 無不羼入。在 antiquity, seals only bore the family, personal or style name. In Tang (618–907) and Song (960–1279) times, there were some using the name of their studios or study-rooms.


151 This is not restricted to the collector and owner of the book; the person in question might be someone other than the actual owner (Peng Wenjing 2002, 79). Lai Fushun objects to calling these book collectors’ seals in a narrow sense for this reason (Lai Fushun 1991, 137).
In Yuan times (1279–1368), sayings were not included yet, while in the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), all kinds of academic degrees and official ranks were invariably added as well.

A similar observation is shared by Ye Dehui, who at the same time condemns the trend of using ever-longer legends:

> 现今收藏印, 多有以姓字齋堂, 一切器物累累至數十字者, 此亦何異於作小傳哉! 余見宋元人收藏書籍、碑帖、字畫, 多止於姓名或二字別號, 三字齋名, 此正法也。明季生人墨客始用閒章, 浸淫於士大夫, 相習而不知其俗, 此最刺目之事。

Today’s men, however, are prone to affix to their books seals consisting of the names of their studios and halls as well as of all the archaeological objects in their collections, altogether amounting to tens of characters. Is this practice any different from writing a short autobiography? Most of the books, rubbings of steles, calligraphic masterpieces and paintings which were once in the collections of the Song and Yuan, I have noticed, bear no more than a seal consisting of the given name and family names, two-character literary names or a three-character name of a studio. This is the proper usage. It was at the end of the Ming dynasty that scholars without official employment and men of letters began to use seals inscribed with idle words. This practice then gradually spread among the literati, who became so accustomed to it as to be unaware of its being bad taste. It is a most disgusting practice.\(^{158}\)

Apart from the need to ‘look for some empty space’, Ye Dehui’s second guiding principle in the use of seals is actually to ‘remove idle words (去閒文)’. He advocates the use of short legends bearing only names:

> 姓名表字, 樓閣堂齋, 於是二三印, 一印四五字足矣。

You may cut two or three seals containing your given and family names, your style name, the name of your two-storey building, pavilion, hall, or studio, each of the seals containing no more than four or five characters.\(^{159}\)

On the other hand, there are seal legends that contain whole pieces of prose. The most extreme example of this is probably that of Yang Jizhen 楊繼振 (1832–1893) and his rectangular relief seal with a legend consisting of 252 characters written in standard script – the imprint fills almost a whole page (see fig. 9) in which he admonishes his descendants to protect his (or rather, their) collection, including a quotation of Zhao Mengfu’s well-known directive on how to handle books:\(^{160}\)

> 聚書藏書, 良非易事。善觀書者, 澄神端慮, 凈几焚香。勿卷腦, 勿折角, 勿以爪侵字, 勿以唾揭幅, 勿以作枕, 勿以夾刺。

Assembling and collecting books is really not an easy task. To enjoy books properly, clear your mind and let go of your worries, clean your desk and burn incense. Do not roll them up, do not make them dog-eared, do not approach the writing with [sharp] fingernails, do not use saliva to turn the pages, do not use them as a pillow and do not put bookmarks in them.


\(^{159}\) Cangshu shiyue, 14 (translation, modified: Fang 1950, 157).

\(^{160}\) Cangshu jishi shi, 6:374; Fan Jingzhong 2001, 149–150; Ren Jiyu 2001, 270–271; McDermott 2006, 88. Lai Fushun (1991, 141, footnote 9, 10) lists two further examples of legends with over 100 characters. See also Qu Mianliang 1988, 95–97.
Yang himself further adds: ‘do not sell them for money, do not lend them to others and do not bequeath them to unfilial sons and grandsons (勿以鬻錢，勿以借人，勿以貽不肖子孫)’. Another, less excessive, example is that of Qi Chenghan (祁承熯) (1563–1628) (see fig. 10):

澹生堂中儲經籍。主人手校無朝夕。讀之欣然忘飲食。典衣市書恒不給。後人但念阿翁癖。子孫益之守弗失。曠翁銘。

[Many] books are stored in the Dansheng hall. I, their owner, collated them by hand day and night. When reading them, I forgot to eat and drink out of sheer pleasure. Even pawning my clothes to buy [more] books didn’t help, as I could never get enough of them; [I am afraid] my descendants will only remember their old man’s craving. May [my] children and grandchildren get even more of them and guard them well so none of them get lost. Engraved by Old Man Kuang [i.e. Qi Chenghan].

The same high regard for books could also be expressed in fewer words: ‘A single canonical work is worth more than a chestful of gold (黃金籯滿不如一經).’ Many more examples, both long and short, could be cited here to attest collectors’ love of reading and studying as well as their concern about the future of their books, often combined with the wish for their descendants to preserve them.

5. Function

From the examples presented above, it will now have become quite clear that book collectors’ seals not only served as marks of ownership, but were also used by their owners to express their views and attitudes and even to address their descendants. At the same time, the continuous addition of new imprints created a link between the different owners. Lothar Ledderose has put forward a hypothesis on the social function of calligraphy as a means of fostering social coherence among the literati in China, which also touches on the use of seals. According to him, the consecutive addition of collectors’ seals on a piece of calligraphy established a ‘quasi-physical relationship’ among the different collectors and thus helped to stimulate a sense of belonging among members of the elite. Like calligraphy, which was produced, collected and appreciated by the literati, books and book collecting were also part of their particular culture – not to speak of the difficult distinction between calligraphy and books. And just like in the realm of painting and calligraphy, seal imprints on books were considered to have an aesthetic value, adding beauty to the object. They became an integral part of a piece of art or a book. This is most obvious in Ye Dehui’s treatment of the topic. As has been shown above, he clearly focuses on the aesthetic dimension of book collectors’ seals. Aside from the right place for the imprint and its proper legend, he also draws attention to the style of the seal carving, which should comply to certain standards:

故不得工於仿漢及善松雪、文、何體，不如不印，免至名跡受污。

Therefore, unless your seals skillfully imitate the Han style or closely follow the style of Songxue (i.e. Zhao Mengfu), Wen [Peng], or He [Zhen], it is better to have no seals at all; your books, priceless as they are, will at least be spared defilement.

165 Ledderose 1986.
166 Cangshu shiyue, 14 (translation, modified: Fang 1950, 158). Wen Peng 文彭 (1498–1573) was the eldest son of the famous painter and calligrapher Wen Zhengming 文徵明 (1470–1559). He Zhen 何震 (c. 1530–1604) was
The many examples of seal legends exhorting the owner’s descendants to safeguard books might seem contradictory to the idea of a ‘quasi-physical relationship’ among the different collectors, but this is actually just a reflection of how unlikely it was to preserve a large book collection over many generations. In fact, there are very few prominent examples of families who were able to keep large collections across generations. However, there are also examples of seal legends in which the owners acknowledge that their book is most likely to end up in the hands of a different collector one day. This was articulated most clearly by Xu Zeng 許增 (1824–1903):

得之不易失之易, 物無盡藏亦此理。但願得者如我輩,即非我有亦可喜。\(^{168}\)

It was not easy to obtain it, [but] it will be easy to lose it; the inexhaustible treasury [of the Creator] of Things also [follows] this principle.\(^{169}\) I only wish that whoever obtains it is like me; even if I do not possess it, that is also gratifying.

This wish may also be expressed more plainly than this, as in the words of Sun Congtian: ‘Treasure it, whoever obtained it (得之寶之)’,\(^{170}\) or ‘Hope it will be circulated and passed on; do not defile or destroy it (願流傳勿污損)’, as the seal legend of Wu Chao 吳焯 (1676–1733) and his son, Wu Yuchi 吳玉墀, declares.\(^{171}\) The use of the phrase ‘once in … (曾在)’ or ‘once collected by … (曾藏)’ reflects a collector’s recognition of the fact that his book will sooner or later become part of another person’s collection.\(^{172}\) Affixing one’s seal to a work was also a way of immortalising oneself, of course. This point is aptly expressed by Huang Pili (1763–1825) in one of his many colophons on the books in his collection:

可知書不可無目, 本書不可無圖記、題識, 俾后之讀者一覽而知為誰之書。雖書不必仍為我有, 而我與書俱存也。\(^{173}\)

Evidently, books should not be without a table of contents, and a book should [also] not be without a seal and colophon if it is to allow later readers to know whose book this is at a glance. Even if the book does not belong to me any more, I will be preserved together with the book [this way].

\(^{167}\) McDermott 2006, 85–88. Cao Zhi and Cao Xinhe 2012, 95–98 have found numerous cases of collections that were sold by a collector’s descendants, but only mention a few contrasting examples of collections preserved over many generations.


\(^{169}\) This alludes to a passage in the Red Cliff Rhapsody (Chibi fu 赤壁賦) by Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037-1101), see Su Shi Wenji 1:15 (transl. Mair 1994, 441): “Moreover, each thing within heaven and earth has its master. If I did not possess it, then I would not take even a hair of it. However, the pure wind over the river becomes sound when our ears capture it, and the bright moon between the mountains takes on form when our eyes encounter it. There is no prohibition against our acquiring them, and we can use them without ever consuming them. They are from the inexhaustible treasury of the Creator of Things, which you and I can enjoy together. (且夫天地之間，物各有主。苟非吾之所有，雖一毫而莫取。惟江上之清風，與山閣之明月，耳得之而為聲，目遇之而成色。取之無禁，用之不竭。是造物者之無盡藏也，而吾與子之所共適。)”.\(^{170}\) Fang 1951, 217, 246. Achilles Fang remarks that this stands in opposition to the usual ‘may children and grandchildren protect it’ (Fang 1951, 260).


\(^{172}\) From a colophon to a manuscript copy of the Zaizhe ji 在野集, a selection of poems by Yuan Kai 袁凱 (?1316 – ?). Cited from Peng Wenjing 2003, 15.


Fig. 3: ‘Seal of An Guo’ (An Guo zhi yin 安國之印). Personal seal of An Guo (1481–1534), intaglio seal (image taken from Zhong Yinlan 中印藍 2008, 197).

Fig. 4: ‘Cha Shenxing’s Seal’ (Cha Shenxing yin 查慎行印). Personal seal of Cha Shenxing (1650–1727) with a legend in reverse style, intaglio seal (image taken from Zhong Yinlan 中印藍 2008, 197).

Fig. 5: Imprints of the ‘Seal of Yongxing Prefecture’ (Yongxing jun yin 永興郡印) on the back of Zui apitaxin lun 蘇阿毗曇心論 (Held by National Library of China in Beijing: BD 14711) [Image taken from http://www.nlc.gov.cn/newzqwqhg/dhtz/wjbe/gedhysjc/nbc/, seen at 30 May 2014].

Fig. 6: ‘Seal of Yongxing Prefecture’ (Yongxing jun yin 永興郡印), relief seal (image taken from http://www.mebag.com/paper/paper31.htm, accessed on 30 May 2014).

Fig. 7: Qinding Tianlu linlan shumu 欽定天祿琳瑯書目, 6:31B/32A.

Fig. 8: Manuscript with imprint of ‘Hanlin Academy’s Seal’ (Hanlin yuan yin 翰林院印). ‘Poems by Tang Yushi’ (Tang Yushi shi 唐愚士詩) (Held by National Palace Museum in Taipei: 平圖013602).

Fig. 9: Seal of Yang Jizhen 楊繼振 (1832–1893), relief seal in standard script with 252 characters. (Found in print [Daoguang, 1820–1850, Airixuan kanben 愛日軒刊本] of the ‘Extremely Marvellous Words’ (Juemiao hao ci 絕妙好詞) edited by Zhou Mi 周密 (1232–1298) auctioned in 2009 (http://pmgs.kongfz.com/detail/16_84189/, accessed on 30 October 2014).

Fig. 10: Seal of Qi Chenghan 祁承瀚 (1563–1628), relief seal. (Image taken from Lin Shengqing 林升慶 2000a, 44.)

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數種藏書印所書記載的年代大都早於藏印圖譜的出版年代，因而在這些圖譜中所記載的藏書印也往往因為時代的原因而有所不同。例如，圖譜中的藏書印圖案往往不完整，缺乏細節，這可能是因為當時的印刷技術限制了圖案的清晰度。此外，圖譜中的藏書印往往缺乏時代背景的描述，這可能是因為在那個時代，藏書印的使用沒有得到廣泛的認可，因而沒有必要對其進行詳細的介紹。筆者在此基礎上，結合其他圖書的記載，對圖譜中的藏書印進行了詳細的介紹，力求全面、準確地反映藏書印的歷史和文化價值。
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