

Period Context in the Appearance of the *Catalog Xiqing gujian*

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Abstract

In 1749, the fourteenth year of the Qianlong reign (1735-1795), the emperor ordered high officials to compile a catalog of the finest ancient bronzes in the collection of the Forbidden City. Entitled *Xiqing gujian*, it was completed two years later in forty *juan* and featured 1,529 bronzes along with an addendum in sixteen *juan* for “Catalog of Coins.” The *Wuying* Palace printed the compilation in 1755, representing the largest catalog of ancient bronzes up to that time and also an important event in Chinese cultural history.

In the past, most research on the subject of “*Xiqing sijian*” took the form of general studies discussing the publication itself, the collection of bronzes, and the political implications thereof. However, many questions remain, such as...Why was the Qianlong emperor so interested in ancient bronzes? Where did his particular interests lie? What was the specific context behind the compilation of this first Qing dynasty catalogue of bronzes? These questions and the different roles of the Qianlong emperor, his court officials, and workshops in the Imperial Household Department in organizing and using ancient bronzes have been less studied, leaving many background facets unexplored. For this reason, the present study takes as its focus the usage and appreciation of ancient bronzes, the background of participants involved in the project, and the cooperation between different workshops of the Imperial Household Department. In doing so, the period context behind the appearance of the *Xiqing gujian* catalog can be fleshed out and better understood.

The present study points to the compilation of *Xiqing gujian* as a catalogue providing a foundation for the Qianlong emperor and his scholar-officials in appreciating antiquities, Confucian studies, and historical criticism. Studying the activities of those involved in the project and seeing how they took part in the cultural enterprise of the Qianlong emperor demonstrates how the compilation of *Xiqing gujian* was an effort culminating in the coordinated efforts of the Qianlong emperor, scholar-officials, workshops of the Imperial Household Department and even those recommended from outside the palace. Of special

note is how artists in the Painting Academy and enamelware painters worked together in understanding how to depict antiquities, showing craftsmen from different backgrounds coming together and providing a better understanding of the relationship between various workshops and their management system.

Keywords: Qianlong emperor, *Xiqing gujian*, ancient bronzes, workshops of the Imperial Household Department

(Translated by Donald E. Brix)