

# A Brief Discussion on The Motives of Collection of Tablet Tablets By Literati in Qing Dynasty

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## Abstract

In ancient China, the collection of stele is of great significance. It is one of the important ways for the transmission of ancient Chinese literature and the spread of civilization. It is also a kind of hobby and entertainment favored by ancient Chinese literati. The Qing Dynasty was a period when Chinese literati stele collection culture was very prosperous. In order to clarify the motives of Qing Dynasty literati inscription collection, this paper summarized the motives of Qing Dynasty literati inscription collection by combing and summarizing materials on the basis of mastering historical materials and documents.

## Keywords

Qing Dynasty; Collection; Motivation; Culture; Art.

## 1. Introduction

Tablet inscription is a very important form of literature in ancient China, which has multiple values of literature, history and art. The history of the tablet is long, rich in content and huge in quantity. Together with the characters on silk and on paper, it is one of the three sources of Chinese historical documents. The Qing Dynasty was the peak period of the collection of steles. During this period, there were many collectors with outstanding achievements, and a profound theory of the collection of Steles was formed. So why did the literati, scholars, businessmen and officials of the Qing Dynasty spend a lot of money to collect these inscriptions? The collectors in this period had various motives for collecting stele inscriptions. This paper summarizes these motivations into the following types by combing the historical documents.

## 2. Collection Motivations

### 2.1. Conducive to Academic Research

Famous scholar Gu Tinglong said: "The study of inscriptions can be used to verify history and learn art. It can not be regarded as a plaything. The beauty of Chinese writing and calligraphy has different forms. Everyone can recognize and write, but not everyone can easily. When you look at the ink of famous masters in the past dynasties, some are dignified, some are vertical and horizontal, some are simple, some are charming, and there are endless changes. When you open the inscriptions and watch them, the beauty is suddenly born. Few scholars in later generations can surpass their scope. This is why the inscriptions are liked and treasured by people." [1] There are many advantages in collecting stele inscriptions. Scholars engaged in textual research on gold and stone can study the classics and history, and those who like calligraphy can learn the art of calligraphy. Therefore, the collection of Steles will not only not play with things but also be beneficial to academic research.

In ancient China, scholars believed in the Confucian creed of "learning and being an excellent official" and took reading and being an official as the basis for settling down. However, if you want to take the road of official advancement, it means that you must study calligraphy well. As far as the study of calligraphy is concerned, inscriptions are undoubtedly necessary for the study, especially the rare inscriptions, which are extremely important for the study of calligraphy.

When Wang Shu, a calligrapher in the early Qing Dynasty, saw the replica of <Meng mage tablet> collected by sun Chengze and Liang Qingbiao, he scorned the calligraphy of Chu suiliang and Yu Shinan, the calligraphers of the Tang Dynasty, and thought that "the calligraphy of Chu suiliang and Yu Shinan is nothing more than this, and there is nothing beyond it". Later, Wang Shu saw the Tang Dynasty carved version of Chu suiliang's monument to <Meng mage tablet>, and then understood the delicacy of Chu suiliang's calligraphy. He lamented that Huang Tingjian's comment on Yu Shinan's monument to Confucius Temple that "Yu Shinan's calligraphy can't be bought with 1000 taels of gold" was not false. It can be seen that rare inscriptions are helpful for scholars to learn the art of calligraphy, and the importance of rare inscriptions is here. This is also one of the reasons why the literati want to collect rare steles.

## 2.2. Soothe the Soul

Many scholars collect paintings, calligraphy, steles, porcelain, jade, and antiques to soothe their hearts. Zhang Yanyuan, a famous scholar in the Tang Dynasty, liked to collect ancient calligraphy and paintings. His wife and servants laughed at him. Some people laughed at him: "what's the use of doing these things all day?" Zhang Yanyuan replied, "if I don't do these things, how can I spend my limited life happily?"

Wandering among the inscriptions, calligraphy and painting, and enjoying an elegant and leisurely life is probably the dream of every inscriptions collector. So, as an elegant hobby, what kind of spiritual pleasure can stele collection bring to people?

First of all, the happiness of collectors lies in the process of finding and discovering the inscriptions. Gu Yanwu, a famous scholar in the early Qing Dynasty, once said: "When I was young, I liked to visit ancient inscriptions,..... Over the past twenty years, I have traveled all over the world, searching for famous mountains, famous towns, famous temples, climbing dangerous peaks, exploring deep ravines, tracing fallen stones, walking on thorn-covered roads, searching for collapsed walls, and writing down everything I can read with my own hands. Every time I see an article that even ancient people have never seen, I am so happy that I can't sleep." [2] Every time collectors collect fine rubbings, a sense of accomplishment and fulfillment will arise spontaneously from the bottom of their hearts. On September 9, the 12th year of Daoguang, Zhang tingji of Xiushui said in his postscript to the Han Cao Quan tablet (Gu Lingmei's postscript): "this rubbings is very old and lovely. I wrote a postscript for it. After that, this rubbings will belong to me. It is connected with the ancient inscriptions. Every time it is connected with the collection, it will be pleasing to the eyes. It is a great pleasure of rural life." [3]

Secondly, the happiness of collectors lies in the process of enjoying. The ancient inscriptions contain the unique aesthetic interests of calligraphers. Every time collectors display rubbings, they are talking with the ancients. In the process of appreciation and elegant play, collectors will get a sense of aesthetic pleasure. After appreciating the rubbings, collectors would cover them with the seals used for collection. Through the seal such as "clear appreciation", "heart appreciation", "eye blessing", "secret play", "appreciation play" and other content, we can also feel their appreciation of the leisurely fun.

Thirdly, the pleasure of collectors lies in the process of researching and learning the inscriptions. Inscriptions are not only important historical documents, but also carry the exquisite calligraphy art of the past dynasties. In the process of collecting inscriptions,

collectors can not only verify history and classic articles, but also study and learn calligraphy. Therefore, for the vast majority of collectors who are obsessed with the collection of inscriptions, there is just endless happiness in the process of researching and learning the inscriptions.

### 2.3. Special Hobby

Zhang Dai, a great scholar at the end of the Ming Dynasty, said in < A dream of tao'an>: "if a person has no hobbies, do not make friends with him because he has no deep feelings." Only when a person has a little hobby can he have a life. We will not have a sense of distance with him. Therefore, calligraphy, paintings and inscriptions, as the things most closely related to the life of literati, will naturally bear the brunt and be favored by literati. Mr. Yang Jiping said in the essay on ancient and modern calligraphy: "literati all have the habit of liking ancient things. This is not a prejudice, nor is it that they like to look back. In fact, many cultural achievements created by ancient Chinese can not be matched by later generations, and the most typical one is ancient calligraphy. "[4] In the Ming and Qing Dynasties, due to the development of Archaeology and calligraphy, stele inscriptions gradually became the "fashionable" collection pursued by scholars. Many scholars even went to the wild mountains to find the inscriptions. Every time they get a tablet, they personally clean it and carefully copy it. Some scholars even spent a lot of money to buy rubbings of Steles or inscriptions.

For example in the qing dynasty famous fell collectors MiaoQuanSun will often go out looking for stone inscription. Once, he went to the stone gate and Jade Basin area of Bao City to look for inscriptions. Because it was too late to return, he huddled under a rock for the night, among beggars. When he told his friends about it the next morning after sunrise, they all laughed. Noble birth MiaoQuanSun unexpectedly in search of stone inscription and beggars huddled together under the rock for the night, it's really incredible. Through this example, we can also see the Qing Dynasty collectors' love for looking for inscriptions in the field. They did not think it bitter, but took it for pleasure.

For example, in the late Qing Dynasty, there was a monk named "Liuzhou". He was very fond of collecting inscriptions. In the past few decades, he visited Yandang Mountain, Tiantai Mountain, Jiuhua Mountain and other places in order to search for the inscriptions there. In order to find the inscriptions, he even walked more than 500 kilometers. His good friend Guan Tingfen, a famous collector in the Qing Dynasty, once said that one day when he saw the " Liuzhou " monk unloading his luggage and opening his back basket, he saw many rubbings of steles. Some of these rubbings were presented by others, some were purchased by himself, and some were copied by himself. Guan Tingfen laughed and said, this is probably the hobby of the " Liuzhou " monk. Another collector even sold his clothes and even his ancestral property in order to get a rubbing. In the 26th year of Daoguang (1846), Yao Guangping, a collector of Huzhou nationality, said in the inscription and postscript of the song Tuo's "Cen Zhi de Zheng stele": "in the autumn of Bingwu, on September 8, he got 80000 yuan with a mink robe and bought this song Tuo's <Cen Jun de Zheng stele >. It can be seen that collectors' love for tablet rubbings can no longer be expressed in words, and their collection of tablet rubbings has become a lifestyle. The process of collecting inscriptions has become a process of psychological satisfaction for collectors. Therefore, this is also one of the motives for collectors to collect the tablets.

### 2.4. Different from the Mundane

Compared with gold, silver, gems and other wealth, celebrity calligraphy, celebrity painting is more elegant and refined. So in order to gain identity, the rich businessmen and dudes of the Qing Dynasty mostly competed to buy and collect antiques, calligraphy, paintings and tablets to pretend to be elegant. This is probably also an important reason for collectors in the Yangtze River Delta area to collect stele in the Qing Dynasty. In order to eliminate the inferiority complex of cultural deficiency, many merchants in the Qing Dynasty made great efforts to make friends

with cultural celebrities, cultivate calligraphy and painting hobbies, collect steles and cultural relics, and narrow the spiritual distance between them and the literati. Liang Qichao, a scholar in the late Qing Dynasty, said of the collection in the Qing Dynasty: "The salt merchants in Huainan, who were extravagant and kept up with fashion, liked to be arty and elegant. They competed to collect paintings, books and antiques, invited famous people to appraise them, cleaned their rooms, and prepared food for their arrival." [5]

The Ma brothers in Yangzhou are a good example. Ma Yueguan was originally a native of Qimen County, Huizhou Prefecture. He lived in Yangzhou with his grandfather since he was young and made a fortune by selling salt. He and his brother Ma Yuelu are representatives of Anhui businessmen in Yangzhou and are known as "Yangzhou two Ma". After making a fortune in business, Ma Yueguan did not hesitate to spend a lot of money to build private gardens, which were specially used to receive scholars from all over the world and exchange knowledge with them. A large number of famous scholars such as Jin Nong, Zheng Xie, Li e and Hang Shijun gathered in the friends of the Ma brothers. They not only have poetry meetings, literary meetings and other activities, but also collect a large number of rubbings, books, calligraphy and paintings. In the 38th year of Emperor Qianlong's reign (1773), the Siku Quanshu library extensively solicited rare ancient books from all over the world. Ma Yu, the son of Ma Yuelu, even presented 776 kinds of books to the court, ranking among the top collectors in the south of the Yangtze River. The small Linglong Mountain Museum of the Ma family also collects a large number of rubbings. There are not only famous rubbings such as the <Jiucheng Palace Liquan Inscription> and the <Duobao Pagoda Monument> of the Northern Song Dynasty, but also the fine rubbings of the <Xiyue Huashan Temple Monument>. The stele of Huashan Temple in Xiyue was published in the 8th year of Yanxi in the Eastern Han Dynasty (165). This stele is known as the highest artistic level in the official script of the Han Dynasty. The original stele was destroyed in the Ming Dynasty. There are very few rubbings in the world. Only four rubbings are known to have survived. Among them, the Ma family's <Xiyue Huashan Temple Monument> was included in the fifth batch of China's national precious ancient books list, which is very precious.

As a salt merchant, Anqi is also very keen on collecting calligraphy, paintings and inscriptions. He once collected the stone tablet of <Shen Cejun> copied from the Song Dynasty. This rubbing is considered to be an isolated piece of the Song Dynasty and can be called a national treasure. According to the records of <Yangzhou Huafang Lu> and <Qing Bai Lei Cao>, during the reign of Emperor Qianlong, ANQI also carved the <Shu Pu> of Sun Guoting of the Tang Dynasty on the stone, and spent a lot of money to ask Yuan Mei to write a postscript. The reward for the postscript alone was as high as 2000 taels of silver. From these cases, we can easily see that the reason why many merchants collected ancient inscriptions in Qing Dynasty was to show their uniqueness and arty style.

## 2.5. Flaunt

There are also many collectors who collect rubbings for the purpose of showing off in front of friends. Zhu Hegeng, a scholar from Wuxian County in the Qing Dynasty, talked about the collection of rubbings of inscriptions in his book *Linchi Xinjie*. He said: "people in the world collect complete inscriptions and give up incomplete inscriptions just to show off the wealth of the collection. How do they know the spirit of the ancients?" [6] Zhu Hegeng's remark shows that it was a common phenomenon for collectors to show off their collections in the Qing Dynasty.

In the 14th year of Daoguang, Monk "Liuzhou", the native monk of Haining, visited the <Chan Guoshan Stele> when he passed by Yangxian. He made many rubbings for the stone tablet. Therefore, the "Liuzhou" monk dug up the earth and found dozens of lines of words on the stele that went deep into the earth. After washing the stone tablets, the monk "Liuzhou"

found that these characters were five or six characters or two or three characters per line, and there was no correlation between these characters. "Liuzhou" monk suspected that these characters should be re engraved on the stele after the completion of the inscription. The "Liuzhou" monk then made rubbings of the characters he found, and found more than 90 characters in total. The "Liuzhou" monk was very excited about the discovery. He thought that the discovery could not only complement Wu Qian's "Examination of the Guoshan Stele", but also be boasted to his friends.

Not only are tablet collectors willing to show off their collections, but even some scholars of tablet inscriptions have done the same. Ye Changchi of the Qing Dynasty once said: "Recently, scholars who study inscriptions on tablets often use inscriptions from other places to show off the richness of their records when compiling their works. MiaoQuanSun ever get a stone carving of the liao, exposing it to yamen in jiangsu province. I joked with him that in future works on inscriptions should have a separate 'foreign ' section." [7]Although Ye's remark was meant as a joke, it is not hard to find that hoarding and flaunting their wealth have become a big motivation for tablet collectors and scholars to collect the tablets.

Collectors' hoarding and boasting of their collection will have a corresponding negative impact on the collection of inscriptions. In his book epigraphy, Zhu Jianxin, a modern scholar, said: "probably the Chinese people did not care much about ancient objects in the past. Rich and capable people always want to keep them for themselves, hoard them, show off in front of others, and will not make these collections public. In the end, these collections do not exist." [8]

### 3. Conclusions

The collection culture of inscriptions in the Qing Dynasty is a very interesting and meaningful cultural phenomenon in the history of Chinese culture. The influence of stele collection culture is extremely profound. Its appearance not only drives the development of Chinese archaeology, history, philology, art, aesthetics and other disciplines, but also affects the lifestyle, thinking habits and aesthetic value judgment of Chinese literati. Stele inscription culture is one of the unique social cultures in China. Today, we have the responsibility and obligation to inherit and develop it, and to carry it forward and spread it to all corners of the world. We also hope that more international scholars and experts can pay attention to and study this cultural phenomenon.

### Acknowledgments

The authors gratefully acknowledge the financial support from 2022 Philosophy and Social Science Planning Project of Zhejiang Province funds. The grant number is: 21NDQN265YB.

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