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Some thoughts on provenance

Presentation made at the Forty-fifth EASL Conference, London, 10-12 September 2025.

Before preparing this short contribution, I didn't know exactly what we were expected to say on the subject of provenance, so I started by looking up the term in the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*. There we read:

- 1 the origin or earliest known history of something.
- 2 a record of ownership of a work of art or an antique.

For what the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* calls an antique, we would understand an old, or pre-modern book. And for most of us, this usually means establishing the date that a book came into our library, and the immediate source of it.

My interest in the Bodleian Library's holdings of pre-modern Chinese books goes back to my appointment as Curator of Chinese Collections in 1976 until my dismissal on the grounds of age in 2017. If you add to that the work on the collections that I've continued to do in retirement right up to the present, my involvement amounts to almost half a century. Clearly, fifteen minutes is not quite enough time to tell you all that I've discovered on the provenance of the Bodleian collections during those years, so I'd simply like to point to three quite different documents that I've produced which shed light on it.

The first is the preface to my *Catalogue of the pre-1912 books in the Bodleian Library* which was published by Zhonghua Shuju earlier this year.¹ There I've shown how Chinese book collecting in each of the four centuries since our founding has its distinctive flavour: the Dutch and later the English East India companies in the 17th century, not much in the 18th, the Protestant missionaries in the 19th, and in the 20th the aristocratic Backhouse Collection and what for the first time was informed collecting led by Professor Homer Hasenplug Dubs.

The second is my [*Survey of Chinese special collections in the Bodleian Library*](#). I was required to produce this for the National Library of China in 2012, and since then have updated it from time to time. The survey begins by defining what I mean by a pre-modern Chinese book or even a later book that might reasonably be put into a special collection. It then systematically, and for the most part chronologically, points

1 英國牛津大學博德利圖書館中文古籍目錄 / [英]何大偉(David Helliwell)編. - 北京 : 中華書局, 2024. - 精裝 2 冊(773 頁). - (海外中文古籍總目). - ISBN 978-7-101-16988-1

to the provenance of every Chinese book in the Bodleian Library currently known to me. Sometimes it's only possible to generalise, but often it's possible to be quite specific, and where defined collections are mentioned, some examples are provided to illustrate their nature:

Sinica 1061-1082

Books presented by Bunyu Nanjio in 1884. These are Japanese editions of Chinese works (*kanseki wakokuhon* 漢籍和刻本), mostly Buddhist.

Examples

翻譯名義集：二十卷 / (宋釋)法雲撰
日本寬文九年[1669]京都八尾甚四郎友春等覆刊嘉興方冊藏經本
線裝 10 冊；28 公分
Sinica 1066

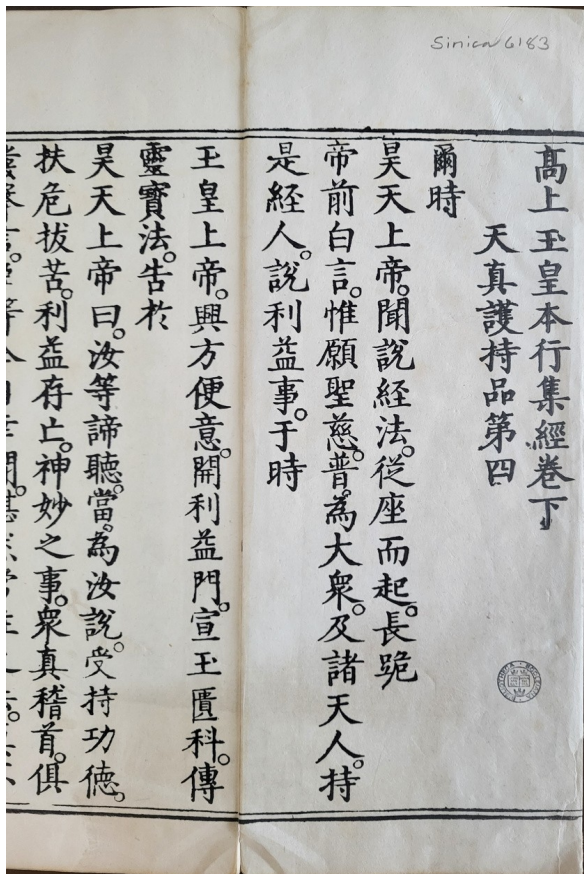
大明高僧傳：八卷 / (明釋)如惺撰
日本慶安辛卯[1651]京都西村又左衛門刊本
線裝 2 冊：像；29 公分
Sinica 1071

The Library has removed my survey from its website, but I continue to make it available on my own site along with other tools for "resource discovery" (we simply called it "finding stuff" when I first joined the Library).

The provenance described in the first two of my documents, that is, where we got our books from and when, can usually be derived from sources in the Library itself: library records, date stamps, and shelfmarks or other indications written on the books. However, this only tells half of the story. A book had a provenance before it ever left China, and the older the book, the longer its history.

We know for example that Alexander Wylie sold us his books in 1881 and 1882, and that Edmund Backhouse gave us his collection between 1913 and 1922, but how exactly did they and others acquire their books in China? We seldom know, and discovering the provenance of a book before its acquisition by the Library is rather difficult. An obvious indication might be a note written on the book, but in my experience such notes are very rare indeed.

But one very good example springs to mind, as it's a book that I bought in March 2005 (Sinica 6183). It's an incomplete copy of a very important Daoist text often known as the *Jade Emperor sutra*. This text was written in the Tang or Song, and tells how the Jade Emperor cultivated and attained immortality. It's the most fundamental Jade Emperor text, is frequently recited during Daoist rituals, and had a great influence on popular folk beliefs.



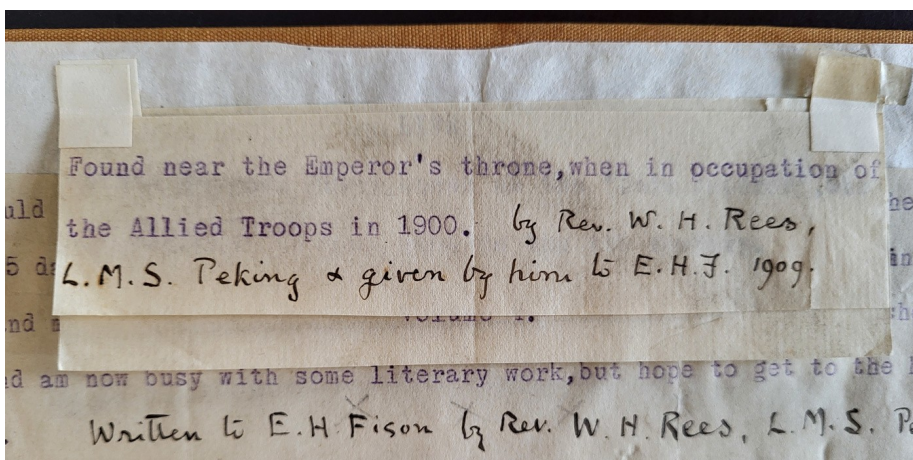
I didn't buy this book for its textual value, nor for the fact that it's a Ming *neifu* 內府 (or "palace") edition, as we already had a complete copy of it which I'd bought from Probsthain's in London in June 1989 (Sinica 2897).

高上玉皇本行集經：三卷
明內府刊本
折裝3冊：圖；32公分
Sinica 2897 書影

又一部
殘卷上
Sinica 2651

又一部
殘卷下
Sinica 6183 書影

I bought it solely because it has an exact Chinese provenance, described in a type-written cutting pasted on to one of the boards, which I found rather surprising and very interesting: "Found near the Emperor's throne, when in occupation of the Allied Troops in 1900." Clearly, the book was stolen, but I'll leave that problem for others to worry about.



The obvious, and indeed in most cases the only way to establish the ownership history of Chinese books is through collectors' seals. From the late 1990s, when I first got a desk scanner, until right now, when my mobile phone does the job, I've been reproducing these seals and putting them on the internet. I think I've covered the entire collection, although I may have missed a few, so that there are currently 975 seal images on my page, which is [my third document](#):



This brings me back to a short talk that I gave when we met in Ghent on the value of putting lists on the internet as a means of finding things. The contents of the list are picked up by browsers, and that results in a two-way flow of information.

Scholars search for a seal on the internet, and if we have it, it will lead to my page. Sometimes it only leads to my page. There, scholars will find more seals, and if I've been unable to transcribe

them, which is often the case as I find reading seal script rather difficult, they will sometimes email me the transcription and occasionally much more information, too. And so the accumulation of knowledge escalates.

A few years ago, as a result of searching for a seal on some of his own books, a Chinese gentleman from Hong Kong and now living in Washington (Laiping Fung) found a work in our collection bearing the same seal along with several more. By means of these seals he was able to trace the provenance of the book right back to its printing, although this example is admittedly not very old. The book was published in Shanghai in 1917, and is a work on oracle bone script by Ji Fotuo, with an appendix by Wang Guowei:

戩壽堂所藏殷虛文字 / (民國)姬佛陀類次
 附 戩壽堂所藏殷虛文字考釋 / (清)王國維撰
 民國丁巳[1917]序上海倉聖明智大學石印本
 線裝2冊 ; 35公分
 本書為《藝術叢編》之一
 有「趵步齋印」、「肇鑫藏書」、「印瓠居士」、「秀水嚴一萍藏」、「好古」、「枕經齋史」印記
 Sinica 6031 書影

Its most recent owner was Ou Zhaoxin, a Hong Kong book lover who for a short time had a bookshop in Mong Kok:



肇鑫藏書

According to Laiping Fung, Ou had collected books that were once owned by Li Pengzhu (1933-2014), a noted Macau literary figure. This was among them, and bears his library seal:



陸步齋印

Before that, the book was owned by the notable oracle bone scholar Yan Yiping (1912-1987), who was also the founder of Yiwen Chubanshe in Taiwan:



秀水嚴一萍藏

Laiping Fung discovered all these facts from online sources. And from online sources, including sales catalogues, he also established that the earliest seal on the book was that of a late Qing calligrapher and book collector called Zhang Yinchun (1869?-1922):



印瓠居士

This leads us directly to the publishers of the book, as Zhang was working for them at exactly the time when the book was published; his job, as a calligrapher, was writing out the copy for the production of lithographic editions.