I’m writing a book that traces the movement of one class of object (the inkstone) and two groups of people (artisans¹ and scholars) through four locales (Zhaoqing 肇慶, on the southern edge of the empire; Fuzhou, on the southeastern seaboard; Suzhou, at the cultural and economic core; Beijing, the political center) in the eighteenth century. Specifically, I map three trajectories: the flow of knowledge between court and local society; the exchange of skills between scholars and artisans; the circulation of inkstones as functional object, gift and commodity. Thereby I seek to understand the forces behind the formation of a market in inkstones and other objects of art beyond the traditional collectibles of paintings and calligraphy since the late Ming, a development symptomatic of the increasingly commercial environment in which Confucian scholars and artisans alike operated.

At the center of these circuits is Gu Erniang 顧二娘 (fl. 1700-22), an inkstone-carver who learned the craft from her father-in-law upon the untimely death of her husband. Her apprentice and adopted heir served in the imperial household agency of

¹ Artisan/artisanship is an imperfect translation for a host of Chinese terms: gong 工, jiang 匠, yi 藝, the exact meanings of which is the very subject of my investigation. Recent scholarship in the history of science and technology has construed the knowledge of scholars and that of artisans as antagonistic to each other. Dagmar Schaefer, for example, argues that Song Yingxing colonized the craftsmen’s knowledge; in committing the latter to writing he also subsumed it under the superior moralistic theoretical framework of the scholar. Building on this pioneering work, I want to clarify and modify the relationship between the knowledge system of scholars and artisans. My artisans—inkstone carvers, block carvers, copyists—are closer to the scholar’s world and thus suggestive of a more accommodating scenario. Using the rubric of “craft,” I hope to delineate the spectrum of its meanings that make the distinction between scholar and artisan less stark and more artificial, although no less real as a result.
Kangxi’s court. Erniang’s name, more famous than those of her male relatives, became a brand and a commodity—signature marks appeared on inkstones attributed to her; forgeries proliferated in the market during her lifetime.

Gu Erniang—her life, extant body of work, social networks, fame, and posthumous reception—is our portal to a host of concerns that occupy recent scholars: the social marginality of artisans (Barbieri-Low, Eyferth); transmission of knowledge and skills between court and society (Palace Museum & Max Planck); the status of handwork in an age of economic prosperity and large-scale manufacturing (Roberts et al.); the vexing relationship between technical knowledge and “abstract” theoretical knowledge or moral philosophy (Smith, Bray, Schaefer, Hang); the shifting nature of objects and texts in the shadow of a commercialized art market (Howell). I believe that these issues of gender, skills, knowledge, and power are as central to a new understanding of the eighteenth century as they are to the burgeoning art market in post-socialist China today.

Theory and Method:
My study is inspired by works in three fields: gender studies, sociology of science and technology, as well as art history/material cultures studies. Building on the concerns of social history that has reshaped Sinology since the 1980s, especially its focus on local society and concrete forces that shaped people’s lives, this project also revises its rigid, bifurcated framework of state-versus-society. Focusing on the networks of things, people, and ideas across the empire, I hope to formulate an alternative framework that explains the coherence of the empire as a result of its communications technology (including but not limited to writing) as well as the circulation of objects and knowledge systems.
Toward this end, the book adopts a “geography of skills” approach developed by Lissa Roberts, a historian of science of early modern Europe. Anthropologist Appardurai’s seminal *Social Life of Things* has changed the way historians understand the identity and value of objects—not as something intrinsic to the object but as constituted in social discourse. Building on this notion, Roberts’ method of “geography of skills” tracks the skills “embodied in the construction, display, use, representation, and interpretation of one artifact, or a genre of artifacts.” Without an a priori assignment of the relative value of skills, the historian can map “crisscrossing trajectories of manual, mental, sentient, and social skills” that went into the social life of that artifact (Roberts et al., 216-7). This approach also has the advantage of avoiding a bifurcation of production and consumption, theory and practice, or applied and pure knowledge.

I am committed to a research method that is equally object- and text-based. Among the most rewarding experiences of my career is ethnographic work in the quarries and inkstone workshops in Zhaoqing (ancient name Duanzhou 端州), Guangdong, home of the Duan stone and in Wuyuan 婺源, Jiangxi, home of the She 歙 stone. I also examined Kangxi-era inkstones in the National Palace Museum in Taipei, the Palace Museum in Beijing, the Tianjin Museum of Art, and the studio of a major private collector in Beijing. None of the extant inkstones bearing the mark of Gu Erniang, however, can be collaborated in the extant textual sources (and vice versa). This is a major problem about which I’d like to seek your help at the workshop.

Organization and Key Themes:
I plan to organize my materials into three parts. The first, “Quarrying the Stone,” narrates the mining and processing of Duan stones in Zhaoqing reconstructed from
ethnographic fieldwork and historical documents. Some of the findings, including the imperial monopoly over the quarries in the Qing, business arrangements between investors and hired laborers on site, as well as the tools used, provide fascinating details on the often tense relationship between “indigenous knowledge” (Turnball) held by the local stoneworkers and scholars on the one hand and the prerogatives of the visiting metropolitan authorities on the other.

The second part, “Inscribing Elite Male Subjectivities,” documents the material and emotional investment of a group of inkstone connoisseurs in early-Qing Fuzhou, who comprised the most vocal patrons/clients and collaborators of Gu Erniang. In addition to an analysis of the social forces that led to the formation and dispersal of their collections, also of interest is how their facility as scholars in using the inkstone as an everyday functional object (including its washing, drying, and re-polishing) extended to a host of specialized craft practices that included carving inscriptions on the stone, copying book manuscripts for private circulation and woodblock printing, as well as research into epigraphy. I thus treat writing and epigraphy—the core of Qing evidential scholarship—as material, embodied craft skills instead of abstract mental endeavors.

The third part, “The Body of the Female Artisan,” describes the training, commissioning process, workshop organization, and marketability or fame of Gu Erniang. I am particularly interested in the spatial layout of workshops in Gu’s neighborhood, Zhuanzhu Lane 專諸巷 inside the Chang Gate 閶門 in Suzhou, where some of the foremost artisans of the empire congregated. Did working in the vicinity of

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2 I have problems finding the right word in English to describe this group of scholars and calligraphers who bought raw stones from antique shops and brought them to Gu for her to carve. They include: Lin Ji 林佶 (1660-c. 1723), Yu Dian 余甸 (d. 1733), and Huang Ren 黃任 (1683 - 1768).
jade carvers and wood-block cutters influence her craft? Thus far, details on the physical layout of Gu’s workshop and Zhuanzhu Lane during her lifetime have been elusive, but I may have enough evidence to show a tentative affinity between Gu’s carving and embroidery skills as well as to assess the extent to which Gu’s work and status as an artisan were mediated by her female gender.

At the workshop I will present visual and textual evidence of Gu Erniang’s craft, the commissioning process, division of labor in inkstone-making, and the “iconic circuit” that link some of the pictorial elements on inkstones, paintings, and embroideries.

Works Cited:


