Collecting Antiques, Collecting Friends: The Collectors of the Owl-Headed Hu

Collecting is a very personal thing. In a cold sense, one acquires objects and places them into a self-contained system. Collecting is often a manifestation of selfhood, and at times, it can be a lonely act, even secretive. But, collecting can also be a much warmer activity – when collectors get together, collecting can be a physical extension of social relationship. People interact and associate themselves by processing certain types of things, and by forming close groups led by their shared interest. The Chinese have a saying for this: 物以类聚，人以群分 “Things come together in groups, and people separate into distinct groups.”

The aim of this paper is to look into the history of a unique archaic bronze hu, in particular its storied transactions in the 19th century in the southern city of Suzhou. This case study shows how collecting art was an important part of social networking for the elite class in late imperial China. The historical events of that time also add to color to the traditional jinshi scholarship (jinshi meaning, literally, inscriptions on bronze and stone). By tracing the journey of this bronze hu, we can map out the relationships among a number of celebrated collectors and artists, such as Wu Yun, Chen Jieqi and Wu Changshuo.

Wu Yun (1811-1883) was the first collector to record this piece. He published the bronze hu in his “Illustrated Guide to ritual vessels at Liangleixuan” Liangleixuan yiqi tushi in 1873. Liang lei xuan was the name of his studio, and means “Hall of Two Lei” (Lei being a particular kind of bronze vessel). Wu was a native of Anhui, but his family moved to Gui’an in Zhejiang. Having passed the Provincial Examination, he was appointed to several official positions including Magistrate of Suzhou Prefecture, however, his official career was not a smooth ride. Eventually, he retired to Suzhou, following the example of many other retired officials, where he built a private garden, which he named Ting Feng Yuan or ‘Garden Where One Listens to Maple Trees’.

In the nineteenth century, Suzhou, known as the Venice of the East, was a prosperous metropolitan city in the south. With its easy communications and pleasant environment, Suzhou was an ideal place for retired, rich and powerful scholar-officials. Many of them were keen collectors who devoted time and other resources to studying art and antiques, and Wu Yun was one of the most distinguished of them all. He exchanged letters almost daily with other collectors - such as Chen Jieqi, Pan Zuyin and Wu Dacheng - discussing questions of epigraphy, authenticity, and techniques of producing rubbings. In his letters to Pan Zuyin, Wu Yun wrote with excitement when he learnt that Pan had obtained the famous Western Zhou bronze tripod, the “Yu Ding”, in Shaanxi; and on many occasions he mentioned Wu Dacheng’s visits to his house. The prominent collector and connoisseur Chen Jieqi also featured in Wu’s letters.

During his life time, Wu Yun built a remarkable collection of archaic bronzes, seals, paintings and calligraphy. Two celebrated archaic bronze lei-vessels, known as the Qi Hou lei, were his most treasured pieces, and Wu Yun named his studio after them. In illustrated catalogue of his collection, he wrote an accompanying note that this bronze hu came from another retired scholar-official Li Meisheng (1831-1885).
Li Meisheng was a native of Sichuan, and a follower of Zeng Guofan (1811-1872). He was well known for his military prowess, and held very senior government positions including the Director of the Board of War. Like Wu Yun, he had retired to Suzhou, and purchased one of the best gardens, the Wan Shi Yuan or “Garden of the Master of Nets” for his private residence. Li also had a sizable collection of antiques, and was a friend of Wu Yun, Pan Zuyin and Wu Dacheng. Among his collection of archaic bronzes, famous pieces included the ‘Song Ding’, ‘Shi Mao Hu’ (cover) and ‘Guo Ji Shi Zi Zu Hu’. Wu Yun and Li Meisheng had a close friendship. In Wu’s numerous letters, he mentioned how he shared Chen Jieqi’s letters with Li and other friends, and that he also tried to introduce Li to Chen and asked, on Li’s behalf, to buy some of Chen’s rubbings. It is in one of the letters addressed to Chen that Wu told the story of how the bronze hu was retrieved from a metal recycling store in Shanghai in 1861, after the Taiping Rebellion: “At that time many collections belonging to old families in Jiangsu were seized by the rebels, and sold on, using Shanghai as the outlet port. As to whether this bronze was once in the collection of Gu Xiangzhou, I simply don’t have enough evidence to say.”

Gu Xiangzhou was the literary name of Gu Yuan (1799-1851), another well-known collector from Suzhou. His library and collections were regarded at the time as the best in Jiangnan, and he also built a private garden in Suzhou, called Pi Jiang Xiao Zhu or “The small construction of Pi Jiang”.

The intellectual environment of Suzhou and lively gatherings of this elite group were described by Du Wenlan (1815-1887) in his book Qiyuan Cihua (Tales of the ci-writing from Qiyuan), and in which he admired the literary talents of Wu Yun and Li Meisheng. A number of real life characters were portrayed in the world of fiction, such as Weng Tonghe (1830-1904), Gong Zizhen (1792-1841) and Pan Zuyin (1830-1890), who appeared in one of the most popular pieces of fiction at the time - Niehaihua (Flower in the Sea of Evil), by Zeng Pu (1871-1935), which captured the social dramas and changes of late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century life in Beijing and Suzhou.

The famous scholar Yu Yue (1821-1906) was Wu Yun’s neighbor and a close friend, and it was he who inscribed the title page and wrote a preface for Wu’s catalogue of his collection Liangleixuan yiqi tushi; Yu also wrote a couplet for Wu’s seventieth birthday to commemorate their friendship:

“Our fellow shares his birthday with ancient things, forever looked after, forever used and enjoyed, a ding here, an yi there, sitting in the Hall of the Two Lei, already over the Xia-Shang-Zhou dynasties;

You are ten years older than I, I am 60 and you are 70, together we face our parallel universes, separated by an alley, we are two happy men”

Wu Yun’s residence, the Hall of the Two Lei, was always full of guests. In his later years, Wu Yun also became the patron of a number of artists, including Ren Yu (1850-1901), and the famous artist Wu Changshuo (1844-1927). Wu Yun had Ren Yu paint a portrait of him enjoying family life in his garden. From 1880 till his death in 1883, Wu Yun provided lodgings for Wu Changshuo in his house, and shared with him his private collection of ancient bronzes, classical
paintings and calligraphy. All of these factors contributed to the success of Wu Changshuo’s career, and were duly acknowledged in Wu Changshuo’s own writings.

Wu Yun was very pleased to have this bronze hu in his collection of over one hundred ancient bronze vessels. It was, he said, “wondrous and ancient in form and manufacture, a rare treasure among ritual vessels.” But, as he once said, “there are times things come together, but also times when things disperse”. Soon after Wu Yun’s death, this bronze entered the collection of Wan Zhongli (literary name Meiyan), another well-known collector from Hanyang (today’s Wuhan). In the early 20th century, it left China to become a highly valued piece in several distinguished European collections. This is perhaps another story waiting to be told.