**Rethinking Antiquities in Decorative Patterns on Objects for Female Consumption in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century China**

## *Introduction*

A leisure robe (*bianfu* 便服) from the tomb of Princess Rongxian, the third daughter of the Kangxi emperor (r. 1662–1722), in Chifeng, Inner Mongolia, bears a design of antiques arranged in groups on its front (Fig. 1).[[1]](#footnote-1) These antiques are surrounded by other objects, such as flowers, fruit, corals, feathers, and musical instruments. Similar designs of antiquities can be seen on other artifacts that belonged to women, such as porcelain, wood panels, lacquer wares, and dress accessories Although women are virtually absent from the history of antiquarianism and epigraphy (*jinshixue* 金石学) in China, artifacts designed for women have featured antiquities as decorative motifs since the early Qing dynasty (1644–1911). How should we understand the presence and meaning of antiquities motifs on women’s personal belongings and accessories? When considered together with other depictions and descriptions of women interacting with antiquities, how might these examples complicate our understanding of the significance of antiquities in the early modern period more generally, and the practice of antiquarianism as performed by women, which was traditionally considered to be a subject of study restricted to men?

In contemporary scholarship, such decorative patterns incorporating antiquities are associated with *bogu* 博古, a term derived from Emperor Huizong’s (r. 1100–1126) catalog *Xuanhe bogutu* 宣和博古图, compiled and first published in the Song dynasty (960–1279). The first character *bo* 博can be both adjective and verb, meaning ‘rich’ and ‘to gain.’ *Gu* 古can be translated as ‘ancient’ or ‘antiquity.’ Thus, the term *bogu* refers to gaining knowledge of antiquities, or more simply, antiquarianism. In the Song dynasty (960–1279), the term *bogu* referred both to a genre of painting depicting the practice of antiquarianism, and to the illustration of antique objects made of bronze, jade, and stone. In contemporary art historical scholarship, *bogu* has been used to refer to the motif of antiquities such as ancient bronzes and jades, sometimes accompanied by objects made of other materials. More specific terms such as *huabogu* 花博古 and *bogu huahui* 博古花卉 are used to refer to antique flowers containers. However, by putting too much emphasis on *bogu* as a decorative pattern, these contemporary terminologies obscure the original meaning of the antiquities motif. This paper seeks to rectify this by contextualizing the term within broader frameworks of *qinggong* 清供*,* which refers to elegant offerings such as incense, flower, and vegetarian food for ritual practice during festivals and ancestor worship.[[2]](#footnote-2)

In this paper, I propose to reassess the history and meaning of the decorative pattern featuring antiquities that is today generally understood as *bogu*, and suggest a new understanding of the largely overlooked *qinggong* motif, which often accompanies the antiquities in women’s ornaments produced during the Qing dynasty. Whereas literary sources pertaining to women’s history tend to be sparse, evidence from material sources ranging from paintings to textiles forces us to challenge the established narrative of antiquarianism as a purely male scholarly activity, and consider women’s engagement in the appreciation and collection of antiques.

1. Xiang Chunsong, "Neimenggu Baiyinerdeng Qingdai Rongxian gongzhu mu" [The Tomb of Princess Rongxian of the Qing dynasty in Baiyinerdeng, Inner Mongolia], *Wenwu ziliao congkan* 7 (1983), 122-26. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Xia Zhengnong, *Ci hai* [*Word Ocean*] (Shanghai: Shanghai cishu chubanshe, 1999), 1712. Luo Zhufeng, *Hanyu da cidian* [*Comprehensive Chinese Word Dictionary*], 5 (Shanghai: Hanyu dacidian chubanshe, 1986-1994), 1293. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)