

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF *GEGU YAOLUN*

格古要論 –

a 14th century antiquarian guide

for the development of China's knowledge

and material culture

G*egu yaolun* 格古要論 or *The Essential Criteria of Antiques* by Cao Zhao 曹昭 (pseudonym Cao Mingzhong 曹明仲) is one of the oldest compendia regarding works of art and antiques to be created in China. The author of this book, published in 1388, was an ardent collector and researcher. The translation of Cao Zhao's text into English was first made in 1971 by Sir Percival David who, in addition to the basic content, also included facsimiles from 1388 and comments from later editions considered lost in the European circles. The whole appeared under the title: *Chinese Connoisseurship. The Ko Ku Yao Lun. The Essential Criteria of Antiquities.*¹⁾ Sir Percival, in the *Introduction* to his work, described the intricate history of his own studies on *Gegu yaolun*, indicating at the same time the dates of subsequent editions of the mysterious book and the authors of extensions and additions.²⁾ The completion of the book is very important as it tells us about the authority of the original textbook, which is the starting point for further research on collecting in China. The original text written by Cao Zhao was first published in 1387 in Nanjing. It consisted of three *juans* (chapters),

¹⁾ David (1971).

²⁾ David (1971: xliiii).

one of which was later quoted in *Siku Quanshu* 四庫全書 (1773–1782) – the *Complete books of the Four Storehouses*.³⁾ The entire text considered thirteen subjects, such as: ancient bronze vessels, painting, calligraphy, rubbings of model inscriptions engraved on stone steles, ancient musical instruments, ink stones, unusual stones (*zhuqi* 珍奇, or jades, agates, pearls, rhino horn and ivory), metal objects, faience and porcelain, textiles, unusual wooden items and strange stones.

The next edition, edited by Shu Min 舒敏, was published between 1388 and 1397. It was later improved and increased by two chapters. The third edition was published in 1462, and was supplemented by Wang Zuo 王佐 (pseudonym Zhuzhai 竹齋) originating from Jishui 吉水 in Jiangxi province, who expanded the book with two hundred and ninety completely new sections and made additions to fifty-four already existing (out of two hundred one). The author thus expanded the book with ten new chapters, and regrouped three – existing in the original version – into seven.

The fourth edition was published in 1596 by *Huwen huan* 胡文煥 in a shorten version of five chapters. The last of the old versions appeared around 1600 and it was a kind of revision of the third version published in thirteen chapters. In 1937, the Commercial Press in China issued a reprint with a facsimile *Yi men guang du* 夷門廣牘 from 1596 (or 1598) by Zhou Lüjing 周履靖 (1570–1620), which contained a three-part edition of *Gegu yaolun*, thus making this important tome available for a wider circle of readers. As for the translation of *Gegu yaolu* by Sir Percival David, it was made on the basis of a copy of the original, which the translator purchased from the Suzhou bibliophile collection. This copy, as stated by the owner, also comes from the early period of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644).

Who was the author of *Gegu yaolun*? It is known that he came from Songjiang 松江區 in Jiangsu province, and that his passion for collecting was probably inherited from the father, as he wrote in the introduction:

³⁾ It is a collection of hand-written copies of the most important Chinese works written over the centuries, and collected in one piece in the days of Emperor Qianlong (1736–1795). The impulse to create this huge compendium was the desire to outdo the Ming Dynasty's encyclopaedia – *Yongle Dadian* 永樂大典 (1403–1408). The imperial project involved 3,826 people who made seven full copies, each of which had 3, 461 texts arranged in 36, 381 volumes divided into four main parts. Two hundred years after the completion of this project, four copies remain, of which the oldest is in the Palace Museum in Taipei, the others in the National Library of China in Beijing, the Gansu Library in Langzhou and the Zhejiang Library in Hangzhou.

“My late father, the retired scholar Cao Zhenyin [曹真隱], was all his life fond of antiquities, of which he had a wide knowledge. He collected ancient rubbings, famous paintings, ancient zithers, ancient ink-stones, and bronze vessels of *yi*, *ding*, *zun*, and *hun* types, and placed them in his study as objects for aesthetic appreciation.”⁴⁾

Cao Zhao, raised in an atmosphere of science, art and culture, could use the books on a daily basis, immerse himself in study, acquire knowledge and shape his aesthetic taste. The eagerness to acquire knowledge in the field of antiquities must have been unusual, which he wrote about in the following way:

“Whenever I came upon on an object [of interest], I would search through all the books and illustrated catalogues [at my disposal] in order to trace its origin, evaluate its quality, and determine its authenticity before I laid it aside. This habit has persisted to the present day; my only concern has been lest my researches have lacked thoroughness.”⁵⁾

Gegu yaolun in the version with additions is a source of valuable information that also mentions new observations of collectors and experts who continued this book in the following years after its first publication. Particularly valuable information was provided by:

- Wang Zuo 王佐 who drew information, or rather quoted it mainly from *Shilin guangji* 事林廣記 (Vast records of the matters forest) – an encyclopaedia compiled during the Southern Song Dynasty (1127–1279) by a scholar Chen Yuanjing 陳元靚,
- Yanpu 硯譜 (Notes on inkslabs) – a short treatise of anonymous authorship, which included texts by Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 (1007–1072),
- *Shu shi hui yao* 書史會要 (Important matters in the history of calligraphy) by Tao Zongyi 陶宗儀 (active in 1360–1368),
- *Tuhui baojian* 圖繪寶 (Precious mirror with illustrations) by Xia Wenyan 夏文彥 (active in the 14th century) and various gazetteers.

⁴⁾ David (1971: xlv). Compare with: Cao Zhao, *Xin zeng Gegū yaolun (san)* online version: <https://archive.org/details/02097189.cn>

⁵⁾ David (1971: xlv). Compare with: Cao Zhao, *Xin zeng Gegū yaolun (san)* online version: <https://archive.org/details/02097189.cn>

Most of the added information concerns two topics – calligraphy and painting, which are the main interests of contemporary scholars and art lovers, but Wang Zuo also wrote about something that transcended the contemporary framework of the theory of Chinese art and archaeology. These were topics related to the Imperial Seals and Iron Signs (*juan* 11), Official Costumes (*juan* 12), and palace architecture from the Song and Yuan (*juan* 13) dynasties. By raising these issues, Wang Zuo was the first historian to introduce a new way of perceiving art and archaeology to Chinese research – several hundred years before the introduction of Western research methods. Wang Zuo's approach to the issue of the antiquity of objects is also interesting. According to the author, only the zithers could be included in such a category, which does not change the fact that calligraphy should be of most interest to scholars.⁶⁾ Why did he regard the zithers as the only real antiquities? This is probably because of, as Sir Percival observes, an unquestionable reference to the beliefs of legendary kings who constituted part of the mythical Confucianism.⁷⁾ Since Wang Zuo was not only a scholar, but also an official who respected honesty and loyalty, morality was more important to him than artistic criteria.

According to Sir David, the edition by Wang Zuo appeared posthumously, as evidenced by various mistakes overlooked by probably not a very professional printer.⁸⁾ In addition, in the *Introduction*, the author wrote that he intended to make the plans of the palaces of the Song and Yuan 元 (1271–1368) dynasties available to his readers and were supposed to appear in the final chapters of the book. None of this, however, came to fruition.

Gegu yaolun was not the only work on the subject of collection and connoisseurship in those centuries. For comparison, it is worth mentioning what had been written previously, such as: *Dong tian qing lu* 洞天清錄 (Pure records of the Cave Heaven) by Zhao Xihu 趙希鵠 (active around 1180–1240), *Yunyan guoyan lu* 雲煙過眼錄 (Record of clouds and mist passing before one's eyes) by Zhou Mi 周密 (1232–1298) and *Fuxuan yelu* 負暄野錄 (Miscellaneous notes by the Rustic while warming himself under the sun) by Chen Yu 陳樞 (active in 1190–1219). Nevertheless, *Gegu yaolun*

⁶⁾ David (1971: lv). Compare with: Cao Zhao, *Xin zeng Gegū yaolun (san)* online version: <https://archive.org/details/02097189.cn>

⁷⁾ David (1971: lv).

⁸⁾ David 1971: lv, lvi.

was “the earliest comprehensive and systematic treatise on Chinese art and archaeology”.⁹⁾ In addition to traditional themes such as calligraphy, painting, zithers, stones, bronzes, and inkstones, Cao Zhao has also added two large parts on ceramics and objects made of lacquer, which were in fact the first such type of discussion in history.

However, some parts of the book have been criticized by later Chinese scholars, including Lang Ying 郎瑛 (1487–1566), who in his book *Qixiu leigao* 七修類稿 (A manuscript divided into seven categories), wrote that Cao Zhao focused on zithers yet completely omitted other instruments, such as *shengguan* 笙管, that is, wind instruments. Ying also regretted that the author of *Gegu yaolun* had focused only on the calligraphic models from *Chunhua jie* 淳化帖 while omitting others, and moreover did not provide any information on stones such as *zumülü* 祖母綠 (emeralds), *shengtie* 聖鐵 (red iron), or Dali xiangu 大理仙姑. Despite these polemical comments, *Gegu yaolun* is still a treasury of knowledge on aesthetics, technologies, fashion and taste of those times in China. Critical analysis of the text allows for the creation of a very convincing picture of people living in the 14th and 15th centuries, in whose lives a sense of aesthetics and the desire for knowledge played an exceptional role. Of course, it is impossible to analyse the content of all *juans* here; nevertheless two, one of which is dedicated to bronze vessels and the other to zithers, are interesting enough to be used as an illustration of the Chinese fascinations with antiques, as well as to consider whether *Gegu yaolun* is still valid as a type of “manual”, and if the information contained there is reliable.

PRACTICAL KNOWLEDGE AND METHODS FOR ANALYSING BRONZE VESSELS

The first of the *juan* entitled “On Ancient Bronzes” was divided into eleven parts with the following captions: The colour of ancient bronzes, Fakes bronze vessels, Vessels of the Three Dynasties [about 2070–256 BC], Factory vessels, New bronzes, Ancient castings, Designs and inscriptions in relief and intaglio on ancient bronzes, Ancient incense-burners, Ancient mirrors, Ancient vessels as repellants evil spirits, and Ancient vessels for keeping flowers.¹⁰⁾

⁹⁾ David 1971: lvx.

¹⁰⁾ David (1971: 9–13). Compare with: Cao Zhao, *Xin zeng Gegū yaolun (san)* online version: <https://archive.org/details/02097189.cn>

The first of them discussing the “Colour of ancient bronzes” presents a method that allegedly allowed for the identification of genuine vessels. Cao Zhao listed essentially three colours by which, according to the author, ancient bronzes that survived for hundreds or even thousands of years in different conditions are characterised. As the first Cao Zhao mentioned bronzes with the hue of turquoise (*cui* 翠) or kingfisher feathers, due to prolonged storage in the ground. In the second group, the author included bronzes of pure green colour (*lü* 綠), a hue that was caused by centuries of submersion under water. A feature indicating their prolonged stay under the surface of the earth, or water, is their specific gentle shade similar to that of jade. The third group specified by Cao Zhao were very dark coloured bronzes with spots of cinnabar resulting from corrosion. The author considered the latter to be particularly valuable. He claimed that their colour – sometimes similar to the colour of powdered tea from Fujian, or black lacquer – as well as their vermilion patterns had been preserved as a result of being stored for a long time above ground. Not everyone, however, shared Cao Zhao’s views on the above topic. One serious critic was Sun Jiong 孫炯 (Qing dynasty (1644–1911)), the author of *Yanshanzhai zhenwan jilan* 硯山齋珍玩集覽 (Peculiarities from Yanshan in a nutshell).

In the next section devoted to “Faked Bronze Vessels”, Cao Zhao gathered a lot of comments on the process of their production, providing a series of practical information. According to the author, bronze vessels could have been easily faked using a mixture of thick vinegar and excellent quality sand, which was enough to cover a new vessel. After obtaining a dark colour similar to black tea from Fujian, or black lacquer, or also green, the vessel had to be kept in water, then put over a fire of burning straw and hold until soiled. After obtaining the right effect, the bronze vessel was polished with a clean cloth or brush, adding a spot of cinnabar lacquer here and there. However, as Cao Zhao claimed, such counterfeit treatments were easy to detect, as they only concerned the surface of the vessel, not the entire body. However, the author did not explain the steps necessary to recognize a fake. It can be assumed that the removal of a fragment of the surface of a given vessel could reveal the lack of natural corrosion, but Cao Zhao did not provide information on how to make this “incursion”. He gave a surprising information written as a note under the next issue’s title – on “Vessels of the Three Dynasties Period”, which talks about the possibility of detecting a fake vessel “by smell”.¹¹⁾ You just had

¹¹⁾ David (1971: 10p.1a). Compare with: Cao Zhao, *Xin zeng Gegü yaolun (san)* online version: <https://archive.org/details/02097189.cn>

to rub your hand over the surface of the vessel, and then sniff your hand to be able to tell if the smell was unpleasant or not. Real, ancient bronzes, according to the author, did not seem to have a nagging odour, which could not be said about fakes... Nowadays it is rather difficult to tell if this information is true, even assuming that we are dealing with a fourteenth century counterfeit.

In the third subchapter entitled “Bronzes of the Three Dynasties Period” (about 2070–256 BC) there is a brief description and a comparative analysis of vessels from different periods of time, which, according to Cao Zhao, facilitate the recognition of styles. The analysis was based on a method that could be described as “characterological”. It consists in recognizing in the patterns of bronze vessels the features that characterize particular dynasties. Cao Zhao described the Xia 夏 dynasty (about 2070 BC – 1600 BC) as “loyal”, and the Shang 商 dynasty (about 1558 BC – 1046 BC) as “plain honest”, and the Zhou dynasty (around 1046 BC – 256 BC) as “elegant”.¹²⁾ And so in the patterns of bronze vessels from the Xia period, the author noticed something characteristic of that era, although in all truth it is difficult to understand the relationship between form or pattern with the above-mentioned attitude. However, an observation that Cao Zhao allegedly made in relation to the vessels from the Xia period is noteworthy – namely, the author stated that such items are “very often inlaid with gold wire as thin as hair”.¹³⁾ The collector was most likely aware of the uniqueness of this type of bronzes. Even today archaeologists have a problem finding them, and thus material proof of the existence of the Xia dynasty, although Cao Zhao held the conviction that all the vessels from this period must have looked like this (fig. 1). The question then arises whether the author was actually referring to bronzes from the Xia dynasty – of whose presence only written sources speak – or maybe he studied items from a completely different period? The fact is that gold incrustation does occur, but only in vessels from the period of the Warring States (403–222 BC) (fig. 2, 2a).

As for the vessels from the Shang Dynasty (figs. 3, 4), Cao Zhao described their design as simple, devoid of ornaments and thus perfectly reflecting the “plain honest” character of this dynasty. In turn, in the designs of vessels from the Zhou period (fig. 5), the author of the text saw sophisticated

¹²⁾ On the basis of which the author of *Gegu yaolun* defined the character of the Three Dynasties using only one term for each of them – it is difficult to say, although there is undoubtedly something poetic in it.

¹³⁾ David (1971: 10). Compare with: Cao Zhao, *Xin zeng Gegū yaolun (san)* online version: <https://archive.org/details/02097189.cn>

decorativeness, which went hand in hand with the “elegance” typical of this era. Moreover, the distinctive feature of the bronzes from this period was illustrated, as the author of *Gegu yaolun* noted, by numerous inscriptions decorating the vessels.

The way in which Cao Zhao described the design of bronzes from the above-mentioned epochs may raise doubts, although it is not deprived of a certain logic and brevity, which in many specific cases turns out to be surprisingly accurate.

In the next part devoted to “Factory vessels” Cao Zhao presented some very short information about the bronzes cast specifically for the imperial court in the period from the reigns of Emperor Tianbao 天寶 (742–755) of the Tang Dynasty (618–907) to the last king of the Southern Kingdom of Tang 南唐 – Li Yu 李煜 (reign 961–975). From this information we learn that the official production of vessels existed in Jurong 句容 (Jiangsu). The vessels were marked with the stamp of the head of the workshop and were characterized by lightness, thin walls and fine decoration. Undoubtedly, the impact on the production of bronzes at that time had a production of delicate and refined dishes made of gold.

For Cao Zhao, the vessels from this period were not antique, the connoisseur included them with contemporary products, similarly to the bronzes from the Song and Yuan dynasty, he called them “New Bronzes”.

During the Song Dynasty, according to the information provided by the author of *Gegu yaolun*, the production of bronze vessels continued in Jurong and Taizhou 台州 (Zhejiang 浙江), and the characteristic feature of these bronzes was allegedly a decoration in the form of small designs *leiwen* 雷紋 (lightning strike). The so-called “new bronzes” were supposed to produce a specific muffled sound when struck, which should actually be understood as a negative trait, especially in comparison with antique bronzes, whose tone – according to the author – was sonorous and probably easier on the ear.

In this part, we also learn about two famous collectors from the Yuan Dynasty – Jiang Niangzi 姜娘子 from Hangzhou 杭州 and Wang Ji (Qi) from the Pingjiang county 平江. Both collected bronzes, although according to Cao Zhao, “better” examples were accumulated by Jiang Niangzi. We do not know exactly what the author meant by “better”, all the more since he ended up expressing criticism of both collections, claiming that the patterns on each set of bronzes were clunky and devoid of value ... We also do not know whether this unequivocal opinion resulted from information taken

from another source, or if Cao Zhao saw both collections with his own eyes (which in this case must have survived to his times).

In the next section devoted to “Ancient Castings” Cao Zhao expressed the opinion that “ancient moulds for casting bronze were made of wax”,¹⁴⁾ but did not record (or did not know) that this was done only at the end of the Spring and Autumn period (770–476 BC).¹⁵⁾ In fact, the Chinese from earlier eras first made clay moulds, then removed the negative imprint by pressing the clay tiles on which more complicated patterns could also be cut, and then all the elements were burned out. After that, they composed the mould and filled it with liquid metal.¹⁶⁾

It was this kind of technique that allowed the ancient Chinese to produce sophisticated decorations, which Cao Zhao praised in his text, comparing the care invested in cutting them to the perfect line of the hair. He also admired the way ancient inscriptions were made, praising the precision with which the lines were cut. However, the collector claimed that only “official” bronzes were perfect; the others did not allegedly have such subtlety or regularity of forms. It is worth noting, however, that during the Three Dynasties, bronze vessels were not made for common use, but only for the purposes of the royal family,¹⁷⁾ so the question arises as to what Cao Zhao meant by suggesting the existence of “unofficial” bronzes?

In the section devoted to “Ancient incense-burners”, Cao Zhao focused on explaining to the reader the history of a device used to release characteristic fragrances during combustion (fig. 6).¹⁸⁾ This is a special kind of censer called *boshanlu* 博山爐, only used since the Han 漢 dynasty (206 BC–220 AD). The name means the censer in the shape of a mountain that is supposed to evoke associations with the holy mountain Kunlun or Penglai. According to Cao Zhao, *boshanlu* is the only such accessory that deserves to be called a real censer because of the incense used in it, which previously – i.e. probably before the Han dynasty – was not known. Instead of incense, as the author wrote, mugwort (*Artemisia annua*) once burned giving off an intense smell.

¹⁴⁾ David (1971: 11). Compare with: Cao Zhao, *Xin zeng Gegū yaolun (san)* online version: <https://archive.org/details/02097189.cn>

¹⁵⁾ EACIA (2008: 98).

¹⁶⁾ Honour, Fleming (2002: 87–88); EACIA (2008: 108–111).

¹⁷⁾ Li (2006: 35).

¹⁸⁾ David (1971: 11). Compare with: Cao Zhao, *Xin zeng Gegū yaolun (san)* online version: <https://archive.org/details/02097189.cn>

Nevertheless, for its burning, ritual vessels like *yi* 匱 or *ding* 鼎 were used, which generally had a different purpose.

In addition to information on the utility character of the vessel, Cao Zhao also drew attention to the fact that there were many *boshanlu* fakes and therefore recommended that connoisseurs carefully examine the possible object in terms of quality and colour to avoid later disappointment.

One more section is worthy of note, devoted to “Ancient mirrors” (fig. 7), which reveals the emotional relationship of the author of *Gegu yaolun* with these objects. In all likelihood, glass mirrors imported from the West were already available in China in the second half of the fourteenth century, which is why Cao Zhao wrote that once the only material from which such objects was made was bronze. In fact, Chinese mirrors for over three and a half thousand years – i.e. from about 2000 BC until the Qing 清 dynasty (1644–1912) – were mainly made of bronze, assuming mostly round forms, although there were also square or multi-leaf shape ones. For the author of the text, all the mirrors were “beautifully cast”, although those from the Tang Dynasty must have been extremely important to him, because of their special properties, namely the high and large knobs, which he nicknamed *Tang dabi* 唐大鼻, which means “Large noses of the Tang Dynasty”.

It is worth noting that this time the author treated the mirrors from the Tang dynasty as antique rather than contemporary objects as it had been in the case of the bronze vessels.

Based on one of the last, short sections devoted to “Ancient vessels as repellants of evil spirits”, we learn that the author of *Gegu yaolun* strongly believed that the possession of magical items could protect the owner and his whole family from devastation made by mountain and trees spirits. Cao Zhao was of the opinion that bronze vessels from the Three Dynasties were especially endowed with magic, because of their age. In addition to them, there were also items intentionally made to exude magic. These were mirrors with special inscriptions of Twelve Earth Branches (*shier shiqing* 十二事情) indicating the time counting system (twelve branches are twelve hours corresponding to two hours in the western system). Today we call them TLV mirrors due to their numerous symbols resembling the Latin letters T, L, V (fig. 8). They were produced mainly in the Han era and therefore Cao Zhao wrote that such mirrors were “a veritable wonder of a bygone era”.¹⁹⁾ Did they really work,

¹⁹⁾ David (1971: 12). Compare with: Cao Zhao, *Xin zeng Gegū yaolun (san)* online version: <https://archive.org/details/02097189.cn>

and if so, how? Cao Zhao only mentioned that they automatically marked double hours.

For Cao Zhao not only the age of the bronze or the clay vessel was important, but also its permeation with the spirit of the earth, as he evidenced in the last part of this *juan* entitled “Ancient pots for keeping flowers”. Cao Zhao claimed that if the vessel was imbued with this kind of spirit, then it could unleash magic that would maintain the freshness of flowers, cause their earlier flowering, extend their life, or even produce fruit. Could the author check these properties via the vessels in his own collection? Today we cannot say.

PRACTICAL KNOWLEDGE AND METHODS OF ANALYSING MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS LIKE ZITHERS

In China, people played the zither as far back as 700–800 years BC.²⁰⁾ Nevertheless, apart from its musical qualities, the instrument – with time – also gained aesthetic values, encouraging its fans not only to discuss its musical value, but also its collectability.²¹⁾

In the *juan* devoted to zithers, Cao Zhao focused primarily on the distinguishing characteristics of ancient *qin* instruments and their counterfeits (fig. 9).²²⁾ He described the cracks in the lacquer which might have been useful in

²⁰⁾ Sun (2015: 19). The Chinese distinguish two types of zithers: *qin* 琴 – an instrument without frets, and *guzheng* 古箏, or simply *zheng* 箏 – with moveable bridges. The first written information about the *qin* and *zheng* provided about 109 BC Sima Qian 司馬遷 (about 145 or 135–86 BC) – historian and chronicler who in his book entitled *Shiji* 史記 (Historical Records) mentioned about *qin* instrument submitted together with other objects to the Confucius’ tomb during his burial. See: Pingqiu (2008: 1. 285). As to *zheng* – Sima Qian presented it as a native folk instrument originating from the Qin 秦 areas (i.e. today’s areas of the Shaanxi 陝西 and Gansu provinces) from the Warring States period (475–225 BC), but archaeological research indicates that it was well known earlier and not only in the Qin areas.

²¹⁾ From the account of Zhang Yanyuan 張彥遠 (c. 815- c. 877) saved in his work entitled *Lidai Minghua Ji* 歷代名畫記 (On famous paintings through the ages) we know that the zithers were the subject of numerous conversations and the admiration of two collectors from the eighth century: the prince of Wei 魏 – Zhang Yanshang 張延賞 (723 or 727–787 AD) and the prince of Zhen 貞 – Li Mian 李勉 (717–788 AD). See: Acker (1979: 133–135).

²²⁾ David (1971: 103–107). Compare with: Cao Zhao, *Xin zeng Gegu yaolun (san)*

determining the date of instrument, presented their different types, pointed to the importance of *yin* 陰 and *yang* 陽 when choosing the right wood to make a zither, described the tables that form a set with instrument, and also provided information about the eminent masters of the *qin*. Wang Zuo supplemented the text in 1462 with additional information on how to make the instruments, how to handle them and how to store them. Cao Zhao divided the whole *juan* into nine sections ranging from the issue of cracks on the zithers, and ending with the instrument tables.

According to Cao Zhao one of the basic features of the instrument's antiquity were the cracks that appeared on the zither (or actually on the lacquer covering the wooden instrument). Without them, it was practically difficult to talk about a *qin* as antique. Cao Zhao specified several types of cracks, some of which at intervals from 2.5 cm to 4.25 cm were to cut the surface of the instrument along and be called *shifu duan* 腹斷 (snake skin), others – small and numerous – looked like thousands of tiny hairs (*mao duan* 毛斷), and still others called *meihua duan* 梅花斷 (plum blossom) arranged in the pattern of plum buds, were, according to the author, a sign indicating that the item was old. However, as Cao Zho claimed, the value of an old instrument could be seriously reduced due to the lack of clean sound or other defects. It seems, then, that the antiquarian values in the case of a *qin* had less significance than the possibility of obtaining a beautiful sound.

Cracks must have undoubtedly played an important role in the assessment of the instrument, since the counterfeiterers made amazing attempts to beguile possible connoisseurs of old zithers. In the section devoted to “Fake Cracks”, Cao Zhao claimed that cracks on the surface of the lute could be obtained by putting the instrument in the winter in the harsh sun or by heating it near a fire and then applying snow. As a result of such processes, cracks were supposed to appear, but the colour remained the same and still looked fresh. This was by no means the only way to cheat customers, so in a note added to *Gegu yaolun* in 1462 by Wang Zuo, the author presented yet another method of acquiring “old cracks” quickly. It consisted in covering the wooden instrument body with a mixture of lime and eggs, after which a layer of lacquer was applied. After this treatment, the instrument was suspended in a dry place until the expected cracks appeared.

While it was possible to falsify the cracks on the lacquer covering the instrument, it was a more difficult to achieve an “old colour” effect, accord-

ing to Cao Zhao. It was actually not so much about the colour as the faded gloss making the matt black similar to ebony. Probably most of the old *qin*, which the author had in mind while writing the “Colour of an ancient zither” section was characterized by such an ebony hue, which does not exclude the occurrence of specimens with a shining lacquer, although these, as noted by Cao Zhao, in his day were extremely rare.

The issue of the authorship of a *qin* instrument, i.e. its design and crafting, seems to have started to preoccupy connoisseurs only in the Tang Dynasty. Knowledge of the author’s name was an undoubted advantage and probably a bargaining chip when setting the price of an instrument. Such information could also be a determinant of solid and original work, especially since, as Cao Zhao wrote in the “Zithers from the Tang and Song dynasties” section, the Song period witnessed the official manufacture of almost identical zithers according to a specific pattern and size, called *guanqin* 官琴 (official). All the others zithers, as the author of *Gegu yaolun* put it, were “made unconventionally”, which may suggest approval for unusually crafted instruments. On the other hand, Cao Zhao mentioned the mass counterfeiting of *guanqin*, making it clear that the series released by the imperial workshop was limited, and the pattern itself had a number of recipients.

As for the times of the Tang Dynasty, Cao Zhao noted above all two names, claiming that they belonged to the best zither makers of that time. This were Lei Wei 雷威 and Zhang Yue 張說. The instruments they both made produced sounds with good sustain, thanks to the specially hollowed space between the two holes on the surface of the zithers called *longchi* 龍池 (dragon’s pond) and *feng zhao* 鳳沼 (phoenix pond). According to Tao Zongyi 陶宗儀 (1329–1421) Lei Wei was to call one of his instruments *Jiu Xiao Huan Pei* 九霄環佩 / 九霄环佩 (Wonderful Huanpei). The name refers to four instruments preserved to this day and placed in various places: Beijing Palace Museum, the China National Museum, the Liaoning Provincial Museum, and an unspecified location where the instrument went after its sale in Beijing on 13 June 2003 (China Guardian, lot 1274).²³⁾

The particularly interesting instruments that Cao Zhao wrote about include “hundred-patch” zithers (*baina qin* 百衲琴). This unusual name reflected a rather complicated *qin* construction method consisting in combining about

²³⁾ See: the information from the Sotheby’s auction catalogue: <http://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2015/inscriptions-history-as-art-n09337/lot.123.html> [access 09 03 2019].

a hundred pieces of wood in one surface shaped into squares or diamonds and then cutting out the *qin* body from it. Although this process was extremely difficult, time-consuming and the work easily damaged (mainly due to improper storage and climatic conditions), it could, however, guarantee superior sound quality. Nevertheless, hardly anyone undertook such a complicated occupation, so one can guess that the *baina qin* was an exclusive item.

Cao Zhao wrote that he had the opportunity to admire a zither made in the *Liezi* style (the name comes from the Taoist text “Letters by Master Lie” attributed to Lie Yukou 列禦寇 active around 400 BC) made of *tong* 桐 wood (paulownia) stripes stuck together). In spite of their age (indicated by numerous cracks), the author considered the sound of the instrument to be flawless.

It is difficult to say what distinguished *Liezi*’s style. Wang Zuo wrote in 1462 that the zithers of this type were no longer identifiable. Nevertheless, the connoisseur was of the opinion that the best *tong* wood to be used for this instrument should be very dry, light and good if it came from a tree growing in the vicinity of a Buddhist or Taoist temple in which the bell sounds would have had a great influence on the quality of wood.

The concept of two opposite, but at the same time complementary forces referred to as *yin* and *yang* in Chinese philosophy, could be – as seen in the example of *Gegu yaolun* – also used to analyse the sound of musical instruments. Cao Zhao – in the section entitled “The yin and yang wood for ancient zithers” – expressed the opinion that the sound of the *qin* is largely dependent on the place where the *tong* tree, from which the particular instrument was made, grew. And so, for the author of *Gegu yaolun* the wood material obtained from a tree growing in full sun exposure had the typical features of *yang*, while one that was obtained from a tree growing in the shade was characterized by properties of *yin*. Most probably, these terms were related to the moisture content in the wood. One that was sunny as well as dry corresponded perfectly to the nature of *yang*, while one that had a high density and was not completely dry – due to the shade – harmonised with the moist nature of *yin*. Cao Zhao wrote that a piece of wood with a *yang* nature was able to float on the water, unlike wood with a *yin* nature, which would sink directly to the bottom shortly after immersion. Probably the author had the opportunity to experiment many times, as he wrote that “there is no exception to this rule”.²⁴⁾

²⁴⁾ David (1971: 105). Compare with: Cao Zhao, *Xin zeng Gegu yaolun (san)* online version: <https://archive.org/details/02097189.cn>

What's more, depending on the nature of the wood (*yin* or *yang*), the instrument – according to Cao Zhao's assessment – produced muffled or clean sounds. For example, a *yang* zither, when used in the morning, and on a clear day would give slightly muted sounds, while in the evening, or during rain, it would be absolutely clear and resonant. With the *yin* wood zither it was supposed to be quite the opposite.

A zither of pure *yang* wood, was – as defined by Cao Zhao – a kind of contemporary instrument made of *tong* wood (paulownia), unfortunately deprived of properties characteristic for ancient zithers, whose sound carried to the sky, was slightly muffled in the evenings or on rainy days. The author of *Gegu yaolun* believed that the sound of a zither made of *tong* wood could obtain the proper “carrying capacity” only as a result of a long practice. This fragment was eventually supplemented by Wang Zuo in information from the *Shilin guangji* 事林廣記 (Vast records of the matters forest) encyclopaedia compiled during the Southern Song Dynasty (1127–1279) by Chen Yuanjing 陳元靚, then developed during the Yuan 元 Dynasty (1279–1368) and Ming 明 (1368–1644). The additions concerned “methods of making zithers” consisting mainly in the right choice of wood taking into account the elements *yin* and *yang*. Like Cao Zhao, Wang Zuo in his addition referred to the information about the *tong* wood (paulownia) corresponding to the nature of *yang* and its use to make the upper, slightly convex resonance plate symbolising the heavens. The wood of the catalpa tree was supposed to reflect the *yin* element and be suitable for making the lower, flat segment of the zithers symbolising the earth. Wang Zuo determined the length of the instrument – based on *Shilin guangji* – as 3 feet and 6.5 inches (or 107, 95 cm) which was supposed to suggest 365 days of a year, while the 13 harmonic points (reminiscent of the points of the string pressure) were described as a symbol of the 13 months of the Chinese lunar calendar.

In the “appendix” Wang Zuo referred to *Diwang shiji* 帝王世紀 (genealogical annals of the emperors and kings) by Huangfu Mi 皇甫謐 (active during Jin 晉 (265–420)) in the context of the authorship of a five-string (which means the earliest) zither which gave the opportunity to play on a five-point scale. The inventor of this instrument was thought to be the legendary ruler Yan 炎帝 (Shennong 神農) from the pre-dynastic period. The number of silk strings increased over time. The sixth string was allegedly added by King Wen and the seventh by King Wu 武紘 of the Zhou Dynasty (around 1046–256 BC).

In reference to the *tong* wood, Wang Zuo described an anecdote about the scholar Cai Yong 蔡邕 (132–192), who happened to be passing by a man

burning a *tong* wood for cooking. From the crackling sounds, the poet guessed that this was excellent quality material. So he asked the owner for a scorched piece of that wood and made from it a wonderfully sounding zither. As its end was burnt, Cai Yong called the instrument a “scorched tail”, which initiated a specific type of zither with that name.

Cao Zhao defined the existence of only two types of ancient zithers coming from the manufactories of the Confucius and Liezi periods. They were called *daigu* 太古 – meaning from distant antiquity and made of one piece of wood. Nevertheless, according to the connoisseur, none of the recently produced instruments in the *daigu* type, or with patterns in the style of *yunhe* 云和 (clouds and harmony) come from ancient manufactories. This would mean that in Cao Zhao’s times, some attempts to imitate old zithers were made – albeit rather unsuccessfully. However, on the basis of the writer’s words it is difficult to say what was characteristic for contemporary production.

In the last part devoted to zithers, Cao Zhao described the features of the appropriate tables for the instruments, which, according to the connoisseur should stand on two legs, be about 20 cm high and have enough space for sitting under the top. The width of the table should be equal to the width of three zithers, and the length should exceed the length of the average instrument by about 0.3 meters. The table top ought to be made of burnt and polished Guo Gong brick,²⁵⁾ agate, or Nanyang 南洋 or Yongzhou 永州 stone. However, if the material of the table top was wood, it needed to be hard, 2.5 cm thick and protected with two or three dense layers of lacquer, covered with a final layer of black glossy lacquer.

Wang Zuo, who wrote that he had personally seen the Guo Gong table tops, later developed this topic. According to him, they were characterised by a slightly grey colour, a depression in the middle and spots – small like the eyes of an elephant. The brick tops allegedly came from the swampy areas of Zhengzhou 鄭州 in Henan 河南 province and offered a high level of performance. Moreover, these items might have supported the excellent sound of the zither on the condition that the top was about 1.5 m long and 0, 3 m wide. The connoisseur, however, warned against the numerous fakes circulating at the time.

²⁵⁾ The chapter entitled *Shuzheng* 書證 in *Yanshi jiaxun* 顏氏家訓 (Family instructions of Master Yan; in short *Jiaxun* 家訓) written by Yan Zhitui 顏之推 (531–591) mentions Guo Gong – the maker of polished bricks, gloss of which was associated with baldness characteristic for members of the Guo Gong family. David (1971: 106 p. 1).

The later additions made by Wang Zuo based on *Shilin guangji* were related to the “Five abstention” and “Methods of preserving zithers”. The warnings were to make the player aware that his/her music served noble purposes and was not a mere form of entertainment. This is a tribute to the sages as well as a lesson in observing the rules “embodied” in the instrument. Playing a zither, therefore, should be avoided in strong wind, heavy rain, or in a public place like a fair, or among people sat in the wrong way and in the wrong attire, without headgear.

In order to protect the ancient zither against the cold, Wang Zuo – on the basis of *Shilin guangji* – advised, for example, that the instrument be placed in a bag of warm sand, which should be replaced several times in order to maintain the right temperature. Another method – on windy days – was to put the zither in the container and subject it to a steaming process – a bit like in a sauna – and then dry in the wind. The author of the advice was of the opinion that such a cure would help restore the lost resonance. To improve the sound – regardless of the age of the instrument – there was also a method of heating it in one’s own bed... Also the antique zither strings had to be maintained by wiping with silkworm leaves, according to the instructions. Zither enthusiasts should never leave their instruments at the mercy of wind, dew, or sunlight – neither in summer nor in winter. Zithers should be stored in a darkened, warm place, free of wind and dew.

Although some of the information contained in *Gegu yaolun* might seem unreliable, other points could definitely find practical application today. In any case, both Cao Zhao and Wang Zuo introduced a lot of innovative research methods and originality.

It can be assumed that the creation of *Gegu yaolun* resulted in the events of the eleventh century, i.e. the Mongol invasion, the fall of the Northern Song Dynasty and, consequently, the destruction of many collections, including the largest built by Emperor Huizong over many years.²⁶⁾ The painful awareness of ephemerality and the ultimate atrophy of material things could have aroused in many art amateurs the desire to protect heritage from oblivion in the form of even an essay or drawings. However, the content of *Gegu yaolun* was not meant to force us to reflect on the transience of life, but rather to elucidate its resources and their appropriate assessment. This is undoubtedly a kind of professional guide to the aesthetic peregrinations of Chinese art enthusiasts.

²⁶⁾ Łakomska (2016: 177–179, 198–201).

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1. Bronze *jue* vessel. Erlitou culture (ca. 1750 - 1530 BC). Excavated from the Erlitou site, Yanshi, Henan province. Photo: Bogna Łakomska.



2. Bronze *hu* vessel. Warring States Period. Excavated from Dangyang, Hubei province. Photo: Bogna Łakomska.



3. The Shang bronze vessels (*jia*, *gu*, *jue*). Excavated from the tomb 4 at Yangjiawan Locality of the Panlongcheng Site in Wuhan province. Photo: Bogna Łakomska.



4. Fuhao square *yi* wine vessel. Late Shang dynasty (early 13th century). Excavated from the tomb of Fuhao, Yinxi site, Anyang, Henan province. Photo: Bogna Łakomska.



5. Bronze *yi* with characters “*ri ji*”. Mid Western Zhou dynasty. Excavated from a bronze hoard, Qijia village, Fufeng County. Photo: Bogna Łakomska.



6. Boshan incense burner. Western Han dynasty. Excavated from Chang'an city site of Han, Xi'an, Shaanxi province. Photo: Bogna Łakomska.



7. Bronze mirror with gold and silver applications. Tang dynasty. Excavated at Zhengzhou, Henan province. Photo: Bogna Łakomska.



8. ◀ TLV mirror from the Eastern Han period. Illustration from the website: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/TLV_mirror.

9. ▼ Qin instrument 4th c. BC. Excavated from Jiuliandun ("Nine Mounds in a Row"), an archeological site south of Zaoyang city in Hubei. Illustration from the website: <http://www.silkqin.com/09hist/images/yqzaoyang.jpg>.

