

An Overview of Ancient Chinese Books

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Of the four ancient world civilizations (Babylon, India, Egypt and China), the only one whose language is still in use is Chinese, largely due to its possessing a literature written with a unified language system. Although spoken Chinese varies in different areas and changes over time, the written language has been unified since the Qin dynasty, and all subsequent changes in grammar or script have been based on that unified system. The formation of a common writing system was a necessary preparation for book production, and the permanence of the Chinese writing system has made it possible for Chinese people to read older literature, even that written thousands of years ago. However, we may still have problems classifying what is and what is not an ancient Chinese book. Should books written in minority languages be counted as ancient Chinese books? Also, should books in the Chinese language, but written and printed in other countries by the local people, such as those of Korea or Japan, be considered ancient Chinese books? Furthermore, what are the time dimensions of ancient books? Such topics have been discussed by many scholars, but no consensus has been reached. This article gives a brief review of ancient Chinese books written before the year of 1912 (the end of the last dynasty), focusing on paper books written by Chinese people in the Chinese language and printed in China only, no matter where they are conserved today--therefore, Chinese books written by people from Central Asia, the Near East, or Europe are all included. The first part of this article is a brief book history, including writing materials, book marketing, book

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conservation, and book disasters. The second part, taking as an example *Siku Quanshu*, the largest ancient book series in China, discusses what falls under the category of ancient Chinese books. The last part focuses on ancient books today.

I. Development of Ancient Chinese Books

China was one of the first countries to develop a written language and, before the invention of paper, write on different materials which became inscriptions in different styles: shell-and-bone inscriptions, popular in the Shang dynasty (1600-1046 B.C.); bronze inscriptions, popular in the Zhou dynasty (1046-256 B.C.); stone inscriptions, starting around the Qin dynasty (221-206 B.C.) (while retained, these materials were not significant in future dynasties); bamboo-and-wood inscriptions, the main writing material before the invention of paper; and silk manuscript, one of the finest-quality writing materials used by the upper classes. But such materials were too heavy, costly, inconvenient to write, or hard to conserve. Therefore, after the invention of paper in the Han dynasty, most of the former writing media were abandoned, and some of their contents were transferred to paper.

These early historical records before the invention of paper are mostly archival materials, which could be considered as primitive forms of the book. The first real records of book style were formed during the spring and autumn period (770 B.C. - 476 B.C.) when bamboo-and-wooden slips or cloth were the major writing materials. It is the Warring Period when a great deal of information needed to be written down to be spread more quickly from kingdom to kingdom.¹ However, after the invention of paper, hand-writing was still the major writing style.

Following innovations in printing techniques, not only was the writing style replaced by printing, but also the binding style of Chinese paper books, strongly conditioned by older bamboo or wooden slips, developed into several other styles, including scroll, concertina binding, Chinese pithy binding, butterfly binding, back-wrapped binding, thread binding, and others.

Books were very important to the ancient Chinese people, resulting in the mass production of books. There is a famous saying that “You will gain a beautiful wife and rooms of gold by reading books”,² but what makes books so significant?

1 Li Zhizhong, *A Brief History of Ancient Chinese books* (Beijing: Press of the National Library of China, 2008), p. 38.

2 The original poem is longer and is said to have been written by Zhen Zong, an emperor of Song Dynasty.

The first answer would be an interesting chain reaction. Almost all government officials were selected from intellectuals who could advise the emperor on strategies for rule. In order to select the proper intellectuals, the emperor created an imperial examination based on major works during the Sui Dynasty. Therefore, books were in great demand, and the number of intellectuals increased, which created in turn more books. In addition, in order to draw lessons from history, almost every new dynasty would compile an official history of the former dynasty. Furthermore, with the development of agriculture and science, many scientific books were compiled, though never well conserved or widely written compared to the other books. All these factors resulted in the health of the book industry, especially after the invention of mass printing. However, the proliferation of Chinese book markets varied in different areas and times.

The prosperity of the ancient Chinese book industry, as well as the book market, was actually influenced by the two factors: the increase in the Chinese literacy rate, and the technique of book production.

The first factor is the increase in literacy owing to the imperial examination. Previously, books served as a way to promote personal ideas or governmental policies; later on, they became a necessity not only for intellectuals from the higher classes but also the ordinary people. For example, Confucius established the first private school open to people of all social classes. He provided the opportunity for the ordinary people to read and write, but not the motivation, given that many of them were still starving. It was not until the creation of the imperial examination after the Sui dynasty that people were encouraged to read and write, which resulted in the first peak in the Chinese literacy rate between the 9th and 11th centuries, though no exact official data could be found.³ But the education of boys cannot be compared to that of girls in ancient China, partly because the civil service examination was inaccessible to females. Therefore, it was not until the late Qing dynasty, with the impact of western culture, that the literacy rate among girls showed a large increase. For example, according to Evelyn Rawski, until the end of 19th century, the literacy rate among Chinese males was 30-45%, and that of females 2-10%,⁴ which many scholars agree to be roughly accurate, although a few think it was exaggerated. This is why in ancient China book shops and the book engraving industry generally flourished in the cities, especially in the south around the capital, where the imperial examinations were held: such a

3 Bao Weimin, "Several Questions about the Increasing of Literacy Rate During 9 to 11th Century", *Journal of Hangzhou University*, Vol.12. , No.1, Dec. (1992).

4 Evelyn Rawski, *Education and Popular Literacy in Ch'ing China*, (University of Michigan Press (Ann Arbor), (1979), p.5.

foundation encouraged continuous prosperity even when the capital moved to the north.

The second factor would be the improvement of book production. Influenced by techniques of book production, book prices and the range of book consumers changed over time. Before the invention of paper, books could be purchased almost only by the upper classes; ordinary people had scarcely no access to them. The original paper books, all handwritten, were also too expensive for ordinary people, who had to make copies on stones engravings of some certain books, sponsored by the government. It was not until the invention of block-printing, especially the invention of the movable type, that book production became easier, and the price of books fell. For example, during 1250 to 1600, the price of a book dropped from 35 to 3.5 wen (a value of Chinese currency),⁵ which made books no longer the exclusive privilege of the upper classes, or the wealthy, although they remained somewhat pricey for the poor.

As mentioned previously in this article, the major two improvements in book production were paper and printing technique. Though some scholars think paper and printing were invented independently in the West, more scholars agree that the inventions of paper and printing are two of the major contributions of ancient China to the world. Even western scholars, such as Thomas Francis Carter, point out that printing and paper used in the West were deeply influenced by China, and the Chinese technique of paper production was transported to Europe by Chinese prisoners during the War of Talas between the Tang Empire and the Abbasids.⁶ However, the exact date of their invention in China was unclear until recently. The earliest record of paper invention dates to year 105, from *Hou Han shu*, which was seen as the invention of paper in the past; however, many archeology findings put the time of paper invention earlier, as recent findings from the 1990s prove that the earliest paper was three fragments found in a tomb in Xuanquan (Dunhuang, Shanxi Province) during the reign of Emperor Wu of the Han (156-87 B.C.).⁷ Compared to the invention of paper, the invention of printing is more disputed. Most scholars date the invention of paper to the Tang or Sui dynasties, most likely near the beginning of the Tang Dynasty.

5 Joseph p. McDermott, *A social History of the Chinese Book—Books and Literati Culture in Late Imperial China*, (originally published by Hong Kong University Press 2006, translated by He Chao-hui, Beijing: Peking University Press), p.28.

6 Thomas Francis Carter, *The Invention of Printing in China and Its Spread Westward* (New York: The Ronald Press Ronald Press, 1955), pp.119, 201.

7 Huang Aiping, *Chinese Historical Philology* (Beijing: China Renmin University Press, 2010), p. 50.

Not only the time, but also the country of printing invention met with a long-term international debate. For a long time, that China was the first country to use printing was widely agreed, and the earliest printed materials found in China are called *Vajracchedika-Sutra* or *Diamond Sutra*, printed in 868 with an exact date on the text. However, many Korean scholars think Korea was the inventor of the printing techniques because the earliest printed material was found in Korea in 1966, a Buddhist Sutra, called *Dh ranī-Sūtra*, probably printed between 704 to 751, which is 100 years earlier than China's unearthed material.⁸ Many scholars still hold that China was the inventor of printing, because the first printing material in China must be earlier than 868 though not found yet, and even the earliest printed Sutra in Korea may also had been brought from China. They point out that both printed and hand written books of the Tang dynasty are very rare nowadays, and out of these conserved or unearthed books, only a few remain after numerous book disasters.

Ancient Chinese books have experienced sixteen major disasters. The first five of them were described by a scholar of the Sui dynasty in *Suishu*, and the second five were summarized by a scholar of the Ming dynasty in his book *Shaoshi Shanfang Bicong*. These ten disasters were called the "ten book adversities", which is a description of book disasters from Qin to Ming dynasty (221B.C.-1644).⁹ A modern scholar Zhu Wenbai added another five disasters from 1644 to 1949.¹⁰ Besides, the last disaster, as many other scholars have pointed out, was due to the Cultural Revolution during 1966 to 1968.

A famous Chinese scholar, Chen Dengyuan, attributes the disaster of books to four major factors. The first and most important factor is politics. Numerous books were destroyed because of some content that contradicted the official political thinking. For example, in the Qin dynasty, the legalist's political thinking that strengthened the importance of law and strict punishment was the official political thinking. And to ensure the stability of the newly united nation, Qin forbade people from learning any other ideas, including Confucianism, which led to the killing of those who harbored other political thinking and burned many valuable books containing different ideas. Another good example of a political factor is the compilation of *Siku Quanshu*, which I will address later in the

8 Lu Xianzhong, *Chinese Book Science* (Hefei: Anhui University Press, 2004), pp. 226-227.

9 Chen Dengyuan, *Gathering and Scattering of Ancient Chinese Books* (Shanghai: East China Normal University, 2010), pp. 3, 5.

10 Zhu Wenbai, "Disasters of Chinese Books During the Past 2000 Years", *Oriental Magazine*, NO.15, (1945).

article. The second factor is war. Without exception, the replacements of dynasties in China were all the result of wars. Capitals were the most important attacking targets when foreign countries invaded China. Also, capitals where most of the books were conserved would always be destroyed, and such destructions were always fatal, because many big and significant books existed only in a single copy at the time, such as *Yongle Dadian*, the only copy of the biggest encyclopedia of ancient China, which was destroyed during the Invasion of Eight Countries into China at the beginning of 20th century. The third factor is personal book conservation, when most bibliophiles spend their whole life collecting valuable books, and treasure them so much that they are not willing to share their books with others. But their descendants who may not have cherished their books did not know how to keep these books from the process of aging, resulting in the destruction of those books after the death of the bibliophile himself. The last factor is the natural disaster, such as accidental fire or flood, and bookworm damage.¹¹

The integrity of ancient Chinese books was influenced by each disaster. They disappeared, were broken up into several parts, or became unreadable. Some people, for different reasons, took advantage of the situations by re-writing books, and claiming them to be some long-lost books. Such books aroused a good deal of academic dispute. As a result, many responsible scholars realized the importance of studying ancient books, and later on formed four major branches of the study. They are the “Bibliography,” the “Study of Edition Of Books,” the “Textual Emendation,” and the “Gathering of Scattered Writings.”

Bibliography was always considered as the most important branch of ancient book study, and its major purpose is to classify books. Zheng Qiao, a famous scholar of the Song dynasty, pointed out “to do research on a specific field, you need to read books of that field; to read books of a specific field, books should be well classified.”¹² Later on, another scholar of the Qing dynasty, Zhang Xuecheng also said that the purpose of classification is to examining the mirror source and course of academy or knowledge.¹³ In a word, classification is significant in the past. There were several bibliography theories for classifying books. Books had been divided into seven, five, six, nine, twelve, and four parts in different times. Among them, the “quartation theory” that divided books into four parts became the most popular one. *Siku Quanshu* was the most famous to catalogue books into 4 parts, though not the first. It was not only because of the imperial support, but also the precision classification.

11 Chen Dengyuan, *Gathering and Scattering of Chinese Ancient Book*, pp.335, 373.

12 Zheng Qiao, *Tongzhi*, (Beijing: Chinese Publishing House, 1992), p. 1804.

13 Zhang Xuecheng, *Study of Collating* (Shanghai: Shanghai Bookshop Press, 1988), p.1.

II. The Biggest Series of the Chinese Dynasty Era

1. Compilation of *Siku Quanshu*

Siku Quanshu, also called the four parts of the imperial library, is the largest book series of the Chinese dynasty era. It was compiled during the reign of Qianlong (1735-1795) in the Qing dynasty. The emperor set up a professional institution for the compilation work, which included 360 scholars.¹⁴ He asked people all over the country to provide their collections by promising that they would benefit from their contribution, and their collections would be returned once copies had been made. In contrast, those who were not willing to cooperate would be punished, or even killed if they kept books with some reactionary speech.¹⁵ Eventually, more than 13,500 kinds of books were collected, including 272 overlapping collections,¹⁶ but only 3,495 kinds of the collected books were chosen.¹⁷ Nevertheless, the chosen books include about 1 billion Chinese characters in beautiful big hand-writing style and those pages can make a 1/3 circle around the equator of our earth. They include almost all the Chinese books that existed in 18th century.¹⁸

Besides, some books were compiled as supplements, such as *The Catalogue Summary of Siku Quanshu*, which is a book compiled by the chief compilation officer of *Siku Quanshu*, Ji Yun. In this book, the author not only wrote abstract for books in the series, but also for other 6 thousand kinds of books collected, but not used. The abstracts introduce the important information about the author, edition and contents. The following form shows the number of books collected and selected by the emperor when compiling *Siku Quanshu* according to *The Catalogue Summary of Siku Quanshu*.

14 Huang Aiping, *a Study on the Compilation of Siku Quanshu* (Beijing: China Renmin University Press, 1989), p. 107.

15 Although the emperor promised publicly that he would not punish those people who have conserved books with some reactionars speech as long as they could offer them to the government, he did create many miserable stories for those people.

16 Huang Aiping, *A Study on the Compilation of Siku Quanshu*, pp.35, 36.

17 Huang Aiping, *a Study on the Compilation of Siku Quanshu*, p. 270.

18 Sima Chaojun, *Siku Quanshu and Chinese Culture*, (Wuhan: Wuhan University Press, 2010), p.2.

Table 1. The Number of Books in Each Category of *Siku Quanshu*¹⁹

Classification and Contents	Subclasses	books selected with full texts	books conserved with Names (only)
经Jing (Classics of Confucianism)	10	671	1066
史Shi (History, geography, ect.)	15	561	1658
子Zi (Philosophy, science, ect.)	14	924	1872
集Ji (Literature works)	5	1277	2155
Total number	44	3433	6751

Though the compilation of *Siku Quanshu* seems to be a great deed of ancient book conservation, it was also another disaster for books. According to the table above, we can see that the number of books selected by the emperor is less than half of the books collected. One of the biggest reasons is that numerous books said to disobey the official thinking, especially the ones containing ideas that supported the former dynasty (Ming Dynasty 1368-1644) were destroyed by the emperor, including the original copy board.

In addition, the books that remained were merely the remnants of the innumerable ancient Chinese books that survived disasters, and learning from the former book disasters, the emperor required the compilers to make six other complete copies of the book and built seven new libraries at different places for the seven separate complete copies. However, only three versions of them have been conserved nowadays after the modern wars in China.

Table 2. The Seven Libraries Conserved *Siku Quanshu*²⁰

Library name	Original place	Fate of the books
文渊Wen Yuan	Forbidden City of Beijing	Exist (moved to the Palace Museum of Taiwan)
文溯Wen Shuo	Forbidden City of Shenyang	Exist (moved to Gansu Province)
文源Wen Yuan	Summer Palace in Beijing	Destroyed (burned during the Opium War by the British-French army)

19 Data collected from *Catalogue Summary of Siku Quanshu (for Wenyuan Ge Siku Quanshu)* (Compiled by Ji Yun from Qing Dynasty, Edited by Institution of Siku Quanshu Study, Beijing: Zhonghua Press, 1997).

20 Data comes from *Chinese Historical Philology* (Written by Huang Aiping, Beijing: Press of Renmin University of China, 2010), and others.

文津Wen Jin	Temporary Imperial Palaces in Chengde, Hebei Province	Exist(moved to the National Library in Beijing)
文宗Wen Zong	Temporary Imperial Palaces in Zhenjiang, Jiangsu province	Destroyed (burned during the Taiping Rebellion by the Taiping troops)
文汇Wen Hui	Temporary Imperial Palaces in Yangzhou, Jiangsu Province	Destroyed (burned during the Taiping Rebellion by the Taiping troops)
文澜Wen Lan	Temporary Imperial Palaces in Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province	Partly conserved (in Province library of Zhejiang)

2. Four Parts of the Book Series

Despite of the damage caused by the compilation of *Siku Quanshu*, it did help to conserve ancient Chinese books as the largest book series in the time when book production was not as convenient as today, and books were very rare. It divided ancient Chinese books into four major parts, Jing, Shi, Zi, and Ji, which is a proper classification that reflects the ancient Chinese academy.

Books from the first part, *Jing*, were the major Confucius classics, and the official explanation of them.

Table 3. The Number of Books Collected in Jing of *Siku Quanshu*²¹

Subclasses	Full text contained	Names conserved(only)
易类Book of Changes (Yi)	158	317
书类Book of Ancient History (Shu)	56	78
诗类Poem (Shi)	62	84
礼类Book of Rite(Li)	74	130
春秋类Spring and Autumn Annals (Chunqiu)	114	118
孝经类Book of Filial Piety (Xiaojing)	11	18
五经总义类On Five Classics (Wujing)	31	43
四书类On Four Books (Sishu)	62	101
乐类Music Classics (Yu)	22	42
小学类Philology and Phonology (Xaoxue)	81	135

21 Data collected from *Catalogue Summary of Siku Quanshu (for Wenyuan Ge Siku Quanshu)* (Compiled by Ji Yun from Qing Dynasty, Edited by Institution of Siku Quanshu Study, Beijing: Zhonghua Press, 1997).

Confucius compiled six major books in his life time, and used them as textbooks for his students in the 5th and 6th centuries BC. One of the significant theories of Confucianism on being obedient was expressed in his books (Some scholars thought they were not written, but simply compiled by Confucius). However, in the Qin dynasty, when China was united for the first time, it would be easier to use law rather than morality to keep people of different kingdoms with varied cultures from revolting and legal theory of Chinese legalists became the only official governing philosophy. Confucius' thinking was not accepted, and his books were burned. However, legalists alone could never ensure long-term stability. Therefore, in the next dynasty, the emperors of Han made Confucianism the principal official thinking. After the fire of the Qin dynasty, only five major books remained, called "the five classics": *Book of Changes* (Yi), *Book of Ancient History* (Shu), *Ancient Poem* (Shi), *Book of Rites* (Li), *Spring and Autumn Annals* (Chunqiu). Later on, almost all dynasties saw Confucianism as the official thinking, and his books were perfectly conserved, or widely studied.

The major classics had played an important role in Chinese history because the empirical examination of choosing government officers was based on them, but the major books changed over dynasties. In the Tang dynasty, when the empirical examination was just invented, two major classics, *Li* and *Chunqiu*, were both divided into three parts respectively because of different explanations or versions, which turned the original "five classics" into "nine classics". In the Song dynasty, *The Analects of Confucius*, *The works of Mencius*, *Erya* (a book of Chinese language), *Xiaojing* (also called *Book of Filial Piety*) were added to the major classics. Therefore, including the former nine classics, the set was referred to as "thirteen classics." They were engraved on the stones of the Imperial Academy in Qing Dynasty. In the Song dynasty, the empire especially promoted the "four books" from the thirteen classics. These "four books" are *The Analects of Confucius*, *The Mencius*, and two books from chapters of *Liji* (or *The Book of Rites*), *Daxue* (or *The Great Learning*), *Zhongyong* (or *The Doctrine of the Mean*). Since the Song dynasty, the empirical examination was strictly based on these classics, and that is why "four books and five classics" represent the Confucius classics to the world.

The second part contains mostly historical books of different writing styles and of different aspects of recorded Chinese history.

Table 4. The Number of Books Collected in Shi of *Siku Quanshu*²²

Subclasses	Full text contained	Names conserved (only)
正史类(Official history)	38	7
编年类(Annals)	38	37
纪事本末类(Event-based Historical Records)	22	4
别史类(Anecdotes)	20	36
杂史类(Unofficial history)	22	179
诏令奏议类(Official document)	39	96
传记类(Biography)	60	410
史钞类(Extract of history)	3	40
载记类(History of unorthodox government)	21	21
时令类(Books of seasonal regulations)	2	11
地理类(Geographical books)	149	433
职官类(Books of the government official system)	21	50
政书类(Books of official regulations)	57	112
目录类(Catalogues)	47	36
史评类(historical comments)	22	186

“The 24 official histories” act as the outline of Chinese dynasty history, except for that of the last dynasty, Qing. Besides, the new dynasty history of Yuan (finished in 1920), were considered as the 25th official history. In addition, the draft of the official dynasty history of Qing was finished in 1927, and the compilation of the final official dynasty history restarted in 2002, supposed to be completed this year, 2012. It would become the 26th of the official histories.

22 Data collected from *Catalogue Summary of Siku Quanshu (for Wenyuan Ge Siku Quanshu)* (Compiled by Ji Yun from Qing Dynasty, Edited by Institution of Siku Quanshu Study, Beijing: Zhonghua Press, 1997).

Table 5. List of the Major Dynasty Histories of China²³

Name	Histories list
The 24 histories	<i>Shiji</i> (also called The Great History, 3000BC.-122BC.), <i>Hanshu</i> (history of Former Han, 206BC.-23), <i>Houbanshu</i> (history of Later Han, 25-220), <i>History of Three kingdoms</i> (220-280), <i>Jinsbu</i> (history of Jin, 197-420), <i>Songsbu</i> (history of South Song of the South and North Dynasties Period, 420-479), <i>Nanqishu</i> (history of South Qi, 479-502), <i>Liangshu</i> (history of South Liang, 502-557), <i>Chenshu</i> (history of South Chen, 557-589), <i>Weishu</i> (history of Wei of the South and North Dynasties Period, 220-265), <i>Beiqishu</i> (history of North Qi, 550-557), <i>Zhoushu</i> (history of North Zhou, 557-581), <i>South History</i> 420-589), <i>North History</i> (386-618), <i>Suishu</i> (history of Sui, 581-618), <i>Old Tangshu</i> (history of Tang, 618-907), <i>New Tangshu</i> (history of Tang, 618-907), <i>Old Five-dynasties</i> (907-960), <i>New Five-dynasties</i> (907-960), <i>Songsbi</i> (history of Song, 960-1279), <i>Liaoshi</i> (history of Liao, 907-1125), <i>Jinshi</i> (history of Ji, 1115-1234), <i>Yuanshi</i> (history of Yuan, 1271-1368), <i>Mingshi</i> (history of Ming, 1368-1644)
The 25 histories	24 histories, and <i>New Yuan History</i> (1271-1368)
The 26 histories	25 histories, and <i>Draft of Qing History</i> (1644-1912)

Some of the 24 histories were written with the emperors' supports, and some were historians' independent works accepted as official histories afterwards. However, they had many similarities. Firstly, most of them involved only one dynasty, though some are asset in a single period (mostly wartime), and records of a dynasty or period could also appear in several official histories. Moreover, they are all integrated records of the society, including the official system, life style, economy development, culture, domestic ethnic relationships, diplomatic relations, and so on. Furthermore, they are all written in a certain style, called Jizhuan, which mostly based on biographical style. For example, each of the 24 dynasty histories has a "the Biography of the Western Area" (西域传), which are about the communications of China with Central Asian, and European countries, and are significant in Silk Road studies. According to "the Biography of the Western Region" in each dynasty histories, we may conclude that Turkic people originated in northwest China, and established a powerful empire there afterwards. With the development and corruption of the empire, some groups settled in Central Asian countries, and others moved slowly into the Anatolian Peninsula, and beyond, even to western Europe. According to some linguists, the

23 Data collected from the books series of "24 histories" (published by Zhonghua Press in the 1980s), "the Draft of Qing Dynasty History" (published by Zhonghua Press 1976), and "New Yuan History" (Published by China Bookshop Press published in 2011).

Chinese names of Europe in the different dynasties, “伏卢尼(Fūrūmi),”²⁴ “拂林 Folin,”²⁵ or “Folanji佛郎机,”²⁶ all came from “Farang”, in Arabic or Persian language, which proved the contention in the official histories that Near East served as the bridge between China and Europe.

The annals, event-based historical records, unofficial histories, anecdotes, official documents, biographies, extracts of history, and histories of unorthodox governments are all a complementation of the 24 histories. Some of them are of one aspect of history, and some are comprehensive records. Some are written with the classification of certain affairs or historical events, and some are compiled in time sequence. Some are stories of one dynasty, and others are of several dynasties. For example, *Hei Da Shi Lue*, a book about life in northern Mongolia, is much more detailed than the official histories as records of some northern Chinese minority groups, Huihui (Muslim of China), Uighur and Mongolia. Moreover, materials of the official histories mostly come from those unofficial historical records, as for example, *The Living Records of the Ming Dynasty*, which contained material about the communication between the Ottoman Empire and Ming Empire of China, and was compiled into the “the Biography of the Western Region” of *Mingshi*, the official dynasty history of Ming.²⁷

The third part is a collection of books written by ancient Chinese specialists, either thinkers or scientists, including some works of Confucianism.

24 Li Yanshou, *the Biography of the Western Region*, (*North History*, Beijing: Chinese Publishing House, 1974).

25 Song Liang, et al, *the Biography of Aixue*, (*Yuan History*, Beijing: Chinese Publishing House, 1976).

26 Zhang Tingyu, *Ming History*, (Beijing: Chinese Publishing House, 1974)

27 Ma Mingda. & Ma Yi, “The Relationship Between Ming Empire and Ottoman Empire”, *Journal of Wuyi University (Social Science Edition)* 12, No.1, Feb., (2010).

Table 6. The Number of Books Collected in Zi of *Siku Quanshu*²⁸

Subclasses	Full text contained	Names conserved (only)
儒家类(Confucianism)	11	307
兵家类(Military strategy)	20	47
法家类(Legalism)	8	19
农家类(Agriculture)	10	9
医家类(Medicine)	97	94
天文算法类(Astronomy and Mathematics)	56	8
术数类(Numbers and Divination) ²⁸	50	146
艺术类(Art)	81	63
谱录类(Genealogy of plants or animals, classification of goods)	55	89
杂家类(The eclectics) ²⁹	190	565
类书类(Encyclopedia)	65	217
小说家类(Records of the folk life)	123	196
释家类(Buddhism)	13	12
道家类(Daoism)	44	100

You may wonder why works of Confucianism are included this part. Differing from works put in Jing that are all works of Confucius or their explanations, the works included in this part are independent writings by other Confucianists, such as *Xunzi*, and *Zhuziyulei*. The writer of *Xunzi* was a famous student of Confucius,

28 Data collected from *Catalogue Summary of Siku Quanshu (for Wenyuan Ge Siku Quanshu)* (Compiled by Ji Yun from Qing Dynasty, Edited by Institution of Siku Quanshu Study, Beijing: Zhonghua Press, 1997).

29 Shushu(数术), is about numbers and divination, a kind of ancient Chinese art of geomancy, based on “mutual promotion and restraint between the five elements” theory, and “Yin-and-Yang” theory. The five elements are metal, wood, water, fire and earth. Yin and Yang, the two opposing principles in nature, the former feminine and negative, the latter masculine and positive. (Li Guoxiang, *A Dictionary of Common Ancient Chinese Vocabulary*, Beijing: Chongwen Press, 2006, p.466, p.529.)

30 Zajia(杂家), is the Eclectics, a school of thought flourishing at the end of the Warring States Period and the beginning of the Han Dynasty. Later on, it also includes thinking that could not be classified. (Li Guoxiang, *A Dictionary of Common Ancient Chinese Vocabulary*, Beijing: Chongwen Press, 2006, p.556.)

whose thought represented that of the lower class, and who held a doctrine of the evil in human nature by emphasizing the importance of education. The writes of *Zhuizi*, Zhuxi, a famous Confucianist in the Song Dynasty, created the thinking of “upholding justice to annihilate desire,” which is a good way to make people obedient, and a significant theory supported by all the later officials.

Also, there are works of other schools of thoughts, and always named after the writers. For example, *Laozi* (or *morals Doctrines*), written by the initiator of Daoism and named after him, is the classic of Daoism; *Hanfeizi*, the first book for the legalism ideology of ancient China; Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War*, the first and still world-famous guide to military strategy; and Mo Zi’s *Mozi*, a book that advocates world peace .

Moreover, there are many famous scientific books and works of art theories. For example, 97 medical books were collected in the book series, and they are the quintessence of traditional Chinese medicine, which had a great influence on the Chinese medicine system. Also, there are records of great scientific achievement, such as three of “the Four Great Inventions of China,” printing, compass, and gunpowder.

Some books that cannot be catalogued were called *Leishu*, which are very similar to western encyclopedias. Serving as tool books, the material of them were all excerpted from other books and put into a certain order for reference. Other books tell the story of folk life, or legends, such as *Shishuoxinyu*, one the most famous folk stories of ancient China.

There are also subclasses of the books for two Chinese religions, Buddhism and Daoism. But these books are only comments on the two religions, rather than classics expressing their doctrine. Some major classics of Daoism had been placed under Laozi (the creator of Daoism), rather than under Daoism, while the classics of Buddhism were totally excluded in *Siku Quanshu*. Some scholars attribute the exclusion of the classics of these two religions to a conflict with the official philosophy, Confucianism.³¹ Though Confucianism had been discussed by many contemporary scholars as a kind of religion, the biggest difference between Confucianism and the two religious was their attitude regarding worldly affairs, especially politics. Confucianism encourages people to be engaged in worldly affairs, and care about achievements in this life, while the other two encourage people to be merely tolerant of all worldly affairs, and to place hope in the mortal future (for Daoism) or in the next life (for Buddhism). Therefore, the conflict between Confucianism and the two religions never stopped and “the destruction

31 Sima Chaojun, *Siku Quanshu and Chinese Culture*, p.55.

of Buddhism by three Wu emperors” might be the best example. Also, to unify people’s thinking and ensure social stability, Confucianism was established as official doctrine, and explications of it were supervised. For example in the Song dynasty, Chengyi and Zhuxi created a new Confucianism called Li Xue, and since then people have not been allowed to explicate Confucius freely. In the last Qing dynasty, kaoju, which only cares about the literal meaning of a sentence, became important. However, the interaction between these three philosophies has never ceased throughout Chinese history. Though Confucianism had always been the official philosophy because of its positive attitude toward politics, the other two could also promote social stability by convincing people to live with a hope for a better life and to tolerate the government, which might be the reason why Confucianism always changes across dynasties by absorbing their theories. For example, in the Wei and Jin Dynasty, by absorbing some factors from Daoism, Confucianists created a new Confucianism, called Xuan Xue. Aside from Li Xue of the Song dynasty, in the Tang and Ming dynasty Confucianists absorbed factors both from Buddhism and Daoism, formed Dao Xue, and Xin Xue, two more new Confucianisms. Fortunately, the aggregation of the classics for Buddhism and Daoism had been completed before the compilation of *Siku Quanshu*, and these classics were well preserved in the temples, rather than being destroyed as many other books that were not selected by the *Siku Quanshu*. In summary, the fate of the classics and of the two religions is most likely the books only whose names have been preserved, which the emperors thought were of little importance.

The last part of the books series is Ji, which are mostly literature works.

Table 7. The Number of Books Collected in Ji of *Siku Quanshu*³²

Subclasses	Full text contained	Names conserved (only)
楚辞 (The songs of Chu)	6	17
别集 (Personal collections)	961	1598
总集 (Group collection)	165	398
诗文评 (The poetic prose comments)	64	85
词曲 (Ancient Chinese Lyrics)	81	57

32 Data collected from *Catalogue Summary of Siku Quanshu (for Wenyuan Ge Siku Quanshu)* (Compiled by Ji Yun from Qing Dynasty, Edited by Institution of Siku Quanshu Study, Beijing: Zhonghua Press, 1997).

Songs of Chu is a collection of famous ancient poems, written in a style called Song. The most famous poet was Qu Yuan from the Chu kingdom during the War Era of China (475-221BC), the period before China was united as a nation for the first time. He wrote *The Song of Chu* before he died for his country, and became a patriotic symbol in Chinese culture to be memorized with the Aragon Boat Festival. That may be the main reason why *The Song of Chu* became an independent subclass under Jing, and was not deleted even though only few books were collected.

Personal collections included books of the emperor, officials, celebrities, women, monks, eunuchs, ordinary people, and even foreigners. Some of them were compiled by the writers themselves, and some by their students, or a later generation. They contain both articles on politics or social events, and works of literature, or about the writer's personal life, etc.

The group collection is sometimes in one type of literature style within a dynasty or of several dynasties. But some of them include many types of literature styles across many dynasties, such as *Wenxuan* which is a collection of thesis or prose written before the Liang Dynasty, the compiling time.

In summary, these ancient Chinese books describe Chinese history in different aspects, and provide mutual evidence of supporting or opposition. Though the "24 official histories" record all aspects of that dynasty and most of the material is credible, there are still many important facts omitted or incorrectly described, either unintentionally or intentionally. For example, two official histories of the Tang dynasty described the War of Talas between the Tang Empire of China and the Abbasid Dynasty of the Arabic Empire as an invasion of Abbasid Dynasty into Talas, a Tang city. But in the *Zizhitongjian*, annals compiled during the Song dynasty, it described Talas as a place where people from both states lived. Some scholars think that the Tang had a greater advantage to win the war because it was hard for the troops of Abbasid to travel thousands miles to invade China, while other scholars hold that Abbasids settled in Talas long before the war, and that their army was strong enough to prevail over the Tang who had fewer warriors. Fortunately, in *The Complete Literatures of the Tang Dynasty*, there is a record of the Abbasids taxing people living in this area, which means the Abbasids had already controlled many parts of this area, while the control of the region to the Tang central government was very weak. It also could be a clear proof that Abbasid troops had not moved far from their homeland to this area. Therefore, the failure of the Tang could be attributed to its weakened power, and this war is indeed not only the turning point in Tang power, but also the beginning of the reduction of Chinese power over Central Asia affairs.

III. Ancient Books Today

Siku Quanshu was compiled in Qing dynasty, which means that books collected were those known at the time of compilation; furthermore, it was impossible to collect all the books existing before that time. Not all the collected books were included in the book series. That is why scholars nowadays are trying to compile another book series as a replenishment of this history, such as the Four Big Book Series listed in Table 8. These 4 book series are all compiled during the recent years in the structure of *Siku Quanshu*, which divided books into 4 parts (Jing, Shi, Zi and Ji), and due to their different compiling principals, overlapping problems in collecting books are inevitable.

Table 8. Four Big Book Series of to continue *Siku Quanshu*³³

Name	Principal of book selecting	Number of books selected
<i>Siku Quanshu with Preserving Catalogue</i> and its supplementary volume	Books excluded by <i>Siku Quanshu</i> , but conserved with names in <i>The Catalogue Summary of Siku Quanshu</i>	Original: 1200 volumes; 4508 kinds; Supplementary: 100 volumes (catalogue 1), 160 kinds
<i>Siku Quanshu of Having Been Prohibited or Ruined</i> and its supplementary volume	Books survived somehow today after the book disaster of burning or destroying when compiling <i>Siku Quanshu</i>	Original: 310 volumes (Catalogue 10); 634 kinds; Supplementary: 90 volumes, 290 kinds
<i>Series Not Included in Siku Quanshu</i>	Books selected according to the <i>catalogue of books not included in Siku Quanshu</i> , written by more than 30 scholars at the end of 20 th century.	300 volumes; 2000 kinds
<i>The Continuance of Siku Quanshu</i>	Ancient books written before the year of 1912 and excluded by <i>Siku Quanshu</i>	1800 volumes; 5213 kinds

33 Data collected from *Siku Quanshu with preserving catalogue* (Compiled under the leadership of Ji Xianlin, published from 1992 to 1997 by Qilu Press), *Siku Quanshu of Having Been Prohibited or Ruined* (Compiled under the leadership of Wang Zhonghan, published in 1997 by Beijing Press), *Series Not Included in Siku Quanshu* (Compiled under the leadership of Wang Zhonghan, published in 1995-2000 by Beijing Press), *The Continuance of Siku Quanshu* (Compiled under the leadership of the General Administration of Press and Publication of People's Republic of China and Office of the National Ancient Books Publishing Plan Team, published in 1994-2002 by Shanghai Ancient Book Press).

Nowadays, not only the four book series publishing program mentioned above, but also other collation projects of ancient Chinese books have obtained support from a number of sources. For example, thousands of scholars in a number of related fields formed an academic organization, called “Committee of Ancient Books Publishing and Study,” focusing on the work of ancient book study and publishing. In 1958, the government established a special committee, the “Office of the National Ancient Books Publishing Plan Team,” to guide and fund the work of scholars and publishers devoted to ancient Chinese books.

Thus, numerous ancient Chinese books have been reprinted in the book series, and many catalogues that collect all existed ancient books, or indexes of certain topics, have been compiled. There are seven major achievements,³⁴ and most have taken years to complete, with the effort of different publishers and scholars. They are “The Punctuated and Scrutinized Text Version of *The 24 Histories*,” “The Seven Periods of the Complete Works Qing,” “Newly Unearthed Works”; such as *A Collection of Oracle Bone Inscriptions*; the “Ancient Chinese Books Overseas” series, such as *Precious Ancient Chinese Books Overseas*; the “Books of a Special Subject,” such as *A Collection of Chinese Local Records*; the “Selected or Complete Works of One or Many Scholars,” such as *The Complete Works of Zhu Xi*; other large-scale ongoing publishing programs, such as *A Great Dictionary of Chinese Culture*.

The significance of these publishing projects is increasing. On one hand, it is due to the inevitable imperfection of the collation works mentioned previously, and that new materials are only gradually uncovered, thus updates publishing are unavoidable. On the other hand, the new requirements of academic research and culture communication also need the collation of ancient Chinese books to be continued and improved.

First, many precious historical materials which hundreds or even thousands of years were not known to the world until the 20th-century archaeological developments, such as the “Four Discoveries of History Study”: the Dunhuang manuscripts in Dunhuang Buddhist caves (Shanxi Province, found in 1900), shell-and-bone inscriptions in Yinxu (Henan province, found in 1928), bamboo and silk Documents in Juyan (Shanxi province, found in 1926), and the official documents of Ming and Qing dynasties in the Forbidden City. All these discoveries are still being collated by scholars; several have been published.

34 Li Yan, *The Rearrangement of Ancient Chinese Books Publishing Market*, (“Briefing Journal of Ancient Chinese publishing”, No. 11-12, edited by Office Members of the National Ancient Books Publishing Plan Team, 2011), P. 10-11.

Besides, there are also numerous overseas traditional Chinese books, resulting from the communication between China and other countries. On one hand, ancient Chinese people, driven by their superiority, were always actively sharing their culture to the world. For example, the Silk Road played an important role in spreading Chinese classics to European and Central Asian countries. On the other hand, people from other countries also purchased books from China, especially after the 18th century. A famous story concerns the Buddhist sutra Cave in Dunhuang, the most important transfer station along the Silk Road. The cave, not only contains many Buddhist sutras, it also includes materials that cover local life, international trade, and culture exchange, etc. However, because of the ignorance of those who discovered it, many of the materials were bought and taken away by foreign expeditions at a surprising low price. That is why there is a saying in China, “Dunhuang is in China, but the study of Dunhuang is in overseas.”

Furthermore, as computer technology develops, academic research, like many other activities, is becoming more dependent on information technology. For example, many books, in order to serve as a research database, must be digitized and re-edited. A number of Chinese and foreign companies or cooperatives, be they government-run, state-run, institutional, or personal, have developed numerous databases of Chinese classics: Some are integrated databases, such as the “Database of Wenyuange *Siku Quanshu*,” “Database of Sibu Congkan,” and “Database of Basic Chinese Classics.” Some are databases devoted to special subjects, such as “Database for Chinese Chorography,” the “Database of Chinese Chronological Life,” and the “Database for Chinese Genealogy.” Some are made by foreign institutions, such as the “Database of All Chinese books in Images Conserved by Institution of Oriental Culture” by the Institution of Oriental Culture at the University of Tokyo, and the “Database about Chinese Genealogy” by the Utah Family History Library.

Finally, while numerous Chinese classics have been translated into several languages, the work of translation is still far from complete. Take the translation of the most famous Confucianism classic, “The Four Books and Five Classics” as an example: some of them were firstly translated into Latin before the 19th century, followed by translations into a number of other languages, especially English: the result is that scholars have studied the different English-language translations themselves.³⁵ However, works translated into other languages, their quality notwithstanding, are merely a small portion of all the Chinese classics, thus there is a still long way to go in order to make ancient Chinese literature available for global use.

35 Fang Hanwen, *a Comparative Study on Western and Eastern Literature* (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2005).

Appendix

The Chronology of Chinese dynasties³⁶

Dynasty	Time		
Xia	2070 B.C -1600 B.C		
Shang	1600 B.C-1046 B.C		
Zhou	1046 B.C -249 B.C	West Zhou, 1046 B.C- 771 B.C	
		East Zhou, 771 B.C-249 B.C	
“Spring Autumn Period” and “War Period”	770 B.C- 221 B.C	S. A, 770 B.C- 476 B.C	
		W, 476 B.C -221 B.C	
Qin	221 B.C- 206 B.C		
Han	206 B.C- 220	West Han, 206 B.C-9	
		East Han, 9-220	
Three Kingdoms	220-266	Wei, 220-265	
		Shu, 221-263	
		Wu, 222-280	
Jin	266-420	West, 266-316	
		East, 316-420	
North and South Age	420-589	South, 420-589	North, 439-589
Sui	589-618		
Tang	618-907		
Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms	907-960	South dynasties, 907-960	North kingdoms, 902-979
Song	960-1279	North, 960-1127	
		South, 1127-1279	
Yuan	1279-1368		
Ming	1368-1644		
Qing	1644-1912		

36 Data before Zhou came from *Ancient Chinese History* (Zhu Shaohou, Fujian: Fujian People Press, 2005 p.39, p. 56, p. 153). Data after Zhou is a briefing of “*The Chronology of Chinese History*” (Appendix II of *Ancient Chinese History Dictionary*, Compiled by Zheng Tianting and Tan Qixiang, published by Shanghai Dictionary Press, 2010).