

From the Perspective of Ancient Book Collation: A Textual Investigation into the Compilation Date of the *Gujin Tushu Jicheng*—Based on the 1934 Fourth Printing by Zhonghua Book Company

Authors: Xu Kai, Xu Kai

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Abstract

This study systematically investigates the commencement date of the compilation of the large-scale early Qing encyclopedia *Gu Jin Tu Shu Ji Cheng*, critically examining the widely held claim in general textbooks and reference works that its compilation began in the 40th year of the Kangxi reign (1701). It presents historical evidence and materials supporting a compilation start date in the 39th year of the Kangxi reign (1700). By analyzing factors such as the lack of original historical sources, inconsistent definitions of what constitutes the start of compilation, and citations without reference to primary sources, the paper both explores the origins of the two competing dates and provides grounds for why a definitive conclusion remains elusive. It also briefly introduces the work's value in documentation science, offering a reference framework for future in-depth research and application of this text, while providing practical evidence and a classic case study demonstrating why scholars must rigorously verify and compare cited materials from Ming-Qing compilations and treat popular knowledge from secondary sources with caution, promptly checking against original texts.

Full Text

Preamble

This paper is a research outcome of the 2023–2024 General Project of the Library and Information Committee of Liaoning Province Higher Education Institutions, “A Study on the ‘Reading Promotion +’ Disciplinary System of Chinese-Style Modernization Libraries” (Project No.: LTB202318).

Title

Examining the Compilation Date of *Gujin Tushu Jicheng* from the Perspective of Ancient Text Collation—Based on the 1934 Fourth Printing “Zhonghua Book Company Edition”

Abstract

This paper systematically examines the commencement date for the compilation of the early Qing dynasty encyclopedia *Gujin Tushu Jicheng* (Complete Collection of Illustrations and Writings from the Earliest to Current Times). It challenges the widely cited claim in standard textbooks and reference works that compilation began in the 40th year of the Kangxi reign (1701), instead presenting historical evidence and documentary support for compilation beginning in the 39th year of Kangxi (1700). By analyzing reasons such as lack of access to primary sources, differing definitions of “compilation,” and unattributed quotations, the paper not only explores the origins of these two competing start dates but also explains why a definitive conclusion remains elusive. It briefly introduces the bibliographic value of this work, providing a reference framework for future in-depth research and applications, while offering a practical basis and classic case study demonstrating that scholars must rigorously verify and compare materials when citing Ming-Qing compiled texts, and should treat popular knowledge in secondary literature with caution by consulting original sources.

Keywords: *Gujin Tushu Jicheng*; Republican-era documents; ancient text collation; compilation date; commencement; Chen Menglei

When Did Compilation of *Gujin Tushu Jicheng* Begin?

1.1 Discrepancies in Start Dates

Gujin Tushu Jicheng is a leishu (categorized encyclopedia). Scholarly opinions on its compilation date fall into two camps. The first asserts that compilation “began in the 39th year of Kangxi (1700)”¹, that “the initial draft started in Kangxi 39, with transcription beginning in October of Kangxi 40”², or that “compilation started in Kangxi 39, with finished products gradually produced in Kangxi 40, at which point scribes were hired for copying”³. The second camp claims that “officially, transcription with hired scribes began in October of Kangxi 40”⁴, or that “Chen Menglei devoted himself to editing a major encyclopedia starting from Kangxi 40 (1701)”⁶.

General reference works often omit specific dates entirely, offering only summary descriptions. For instance, *Ciyuan* (Etymological Dictionary) simply introduces the title, author, and number of volumes, stating “originally compiled by Chen Menglei et al., unpublished; during the Yongzheng reign, Jiang Tingxi et al. were ordered to re-edit and rename it *Gujin Tushu Jicheng*”⁷. This description is historically inaccurate. Following *Ciyuan*’s logic, the Yongzheng Emperor named the work, but in fact it was the Kangxi Emperor who did so. As documented,

“Chen Menglei first presented a volume containing the table of contents and editorial principles to Prince Cheng Yunzhi for review in Kangxi 45...After further revision, ‘ten years later it was presented and imperially named *Gujin Tushu Jicheng*’, which corresponds to Kangxi 55”⁸. What Yongzheng actually did was “compose a preface on September 27 of Yongzheng 4, which was printed and placed at the beginning of the volume”⁹—clearly he wrote the preface, not the naming. As secondary literature without citations to primary sources, *Ciyuan*’s historical verification is relatively weak, and its quotations and conclusions are less credible than primary documents—a point researchers must particularly note.

1.2 Who Was the Actual Compiler?

Similar to *Ciyuan*, *Cihai* (Encyclopedic Dictionary) is also vague about the compilation dates of *Gujin Tushu Jicheng*, offering only a general description: “originally compiled by Chen Menglei et al., re-compiled by Jiang Tingxi et al.”¹⁰ This claim is likewise questionable, as “re-compiled by Jiang Tingxi et al.” contradicts historical facts and is inaccurate.

Wang Lei’s statement in *Research on Qing Dynasty Library Thought* is relatively objective: “The actual compiler of *Gujin Tushu Jicheng* was Chen Menglei; Jiang Tingxi was the proofreader”¹¹. Chen Menglei’s authorship cannot be erased, and Jiang Tingxi participated as a proofreader, as confirmed in Yang Yuliang’s “Supplementary Research on *Gujin Tushu Jicheng*”: “After Jiang Tingxi took over, his main work, more precisely, besides thoroughly reviewing the already printed volumes, was to finalize, supplement, revise, and complete the printing of over 3,000 remaining volumes, as well as to handle binding and mounting. Everything else remained unchanged”¹². The article further states: “Looking at the entire process of the book’s formation, it is clear that *Gujin Tushu Jicheng* was produced under the supervision of Prince Cheng Yunzhi and managed single-handedly by Chen Menglei. Therefore, claiming that *Gujin Tushu Jicheng* was ‘edited by Jiang Tingxi’ or ‘re-compiled by Jiang Tingxi’ is historically inaccurate”¹³. Yang Yuliang’s argument effectively refutes *Cihai*’s description and further validates Wang Lei’s designation of Jiang Tingxi as “proofreader.”

This also weakens our trust in *Cihai* and *Ciyuan*’s descriptions of other historical facts regarding this work, making it understandable why they remain silent on the compilation dates. Additionally, Qi Xiumei and Han Xiduo offer a similar perspective: “Jiang Tingxi and Chen Bangyan’s work was completed by December of Yongzheng 3 (1725). They merely re-proofread the 9,621 volumes already printed by Chen Menglei, correcting errors, and for the 379 unprinted volumes, they re-examined, typeset, and printed them...Their work cannot compare with Chen Menglei’s”¹⁴. Only at this point do we gain a relatively clear understanding and recognition of Chen Menglei’s authorship, preventing us from being misled by some general textbooks and reference works.

What Accounts for the Discrepancy in Compilation Dates?

Based on the above documentation, there are two different claims regarding the start date for compiling *Gujin Tushu Jicheng*: Kangxi 39 (1700) and Kangxi 40 (1701). In my view, three factors explain this divergence:

2.1 Difficulty Accessing Primary Sources

Based on our limited available materials, few documents explicitly mention the compilation date. Moreover, facsimile editions of *Gujin Tushu Jicheng* are not circulated online, preventing verification from firsthand sources about whether the printed text explicitly states this time point. However, we can find corroborating evidence in the compiler's surviving collected works to aid our judgment and locate clues. For instance, Chen Menglei's poetry and prose collection *Songhe Shanfang Wenji* (Collected Works from the Pine and Crane Studio) explicitly records the compilation date issue, describing it as: "Officially beginning in October of Kangxi 40, receiving silver to hire scribes for transcription" ¹⁵.

From this we know that in Chen Menglei's own account, "October of Kangxi 40" marks a clear starting point for *Gujin Tushu Jicheng*, with the 标志性 event being "receiving silver to hire scribes for transcription." Whether the collection and organization work before transcription counts as formal compilation of an "imperial commissioned book" requires further investigation into the definitions of "compilation" and Qing dynasty publishing systems and official certification standards.

2.2 Different Definitions of "Compilation"

For example, the claim in *Research on Qing Dynasty Library Thought* that compilation "began in Kangxi 39 (1700)" differs from "receiving silver for transcription in Kangxi 40 (1701)" due to explicit definitions of "compilation" versus historical reality about the starting point. Literally, "beginning compilation" means "starting to compile," which may involve both drafting and formal printing. The creative stage also involves conceptualization, classification, collection, and organization—does the starting point of "compilation" only mean "writing," or do mental activities like conceptualizing and unearthing documents also fall under "compilation"? *Cihai*'s entry for "editing" on page 117 explains: "A specialized intellectual production process aimed at creating spiritual and cultural products, involving planning, organizing, reviewing, selecting, and processing works."

Two key points deserve attention: "intellectual production process" and "planning, organizing, reviewing, selecting." As Du Zexun suggests, dating from Kangxi 40 likely refers to "official funding" and "document authorization" rather than accurate identification of when "editing" began, since editorial work starts with "planning"—equivalent to today's research proposal or application stage, which already falls within the scope of "compilation," not necessarily waiting for the "project approval" or "public funding announcement" milestone. Therefore,

“beginning compilation in Kangxi 39” has logical and documentary basis. As Qi Xiumei’s paper describes, finished products were already being compiled in Kangxi 40, and by October official funding was secured for “precision transcription and engraving.” Before ancient books were printed, they underwent both drafting and transcription stages, just as the earliest extant version of *Dream of Red Mansions*, the Jiaxu edition, is believed by scholars to have been printed in the Jiaxu year of Qianlong 19 (1754). However, that was the publication date, not when Cao Xueqin began writing, much less when Zhi Yanzhai “began compilation.”

Thus we can say that statements like “compiled from October of Kangxi 40 to April of Kangxi 45” in bibliographic surveys, and “began editing a major encyclopedia from Kangxi 40” in version studies, confuse the editing timeline of this massive work and obscure Chen Menglei’s planning, collection, organization, selection, and handwriting work before official “transcription.” This also fragments the creation process of leishu from the perspectives of printing history and compilation history, hindering scholars from conducting more in-depth research on compilation details and editorial concepts.

2.3 The Compilation Start Date Remains Indeterminate

Although we have compiled existing materials providing “conclusive evidence” that Chen Menglei began compiling *Gujin Tushu Jicheng* in Kangxi 39 (1700), this conclusion is not based on comparison with original archives or printed texts, but rather on indirect arguments through cited materials. For instance, the claim in *Gengu Shengju* (Unprecedented Grand Undertaking) that “compilation began in Kangxi 39, with finished products gradually produced in Kangxi 40,” and Wang Lei’s “began compilation in Kangxi 39” in *Research on Qing Dynasty Library Thought*, neither identifies the “original source” for these conclusions. Therefore, we can only temporarily treat this issue as questionable or inferential, pending further analysis and confirmation when scholars can access Qing archives or original texts or facsimiles of *Gujin Tushu Jicheng* for careful examination and comparison. However, this does not rule out the possibility that the original printed book also lacks clear indication or definition of the initial editing time, or that it matches our currently held materials. In that case, we would need to set aside direct evidence and strengthen our current inference through other means and methods. With continuous discovery of historical materials and scientific methodologies, we believe this issue can be pursued more deeply, and based on confirmed editing dates, we can conduct more detailed and comprehensive exploration and revelation of this encyclopedia’s ideas, culture, circulation, and influence.

Finally, let us briefly understand the historical and literary significance of this Qing dynasty document.

The Documentary Value of *Gujin Tushu Jicheng*

According to Qu Mianliang's *Dictionary of Chinese Ancient Book Editions*: "*Gujin Tushu Jicheng*...began compilation during the Kangxi reign of Qing, originally compiled by Chen Menglei under the title *Gujin Tushu Huibian* (Compilation of Illustrations and Writings from Past and Present). After more than ten years it was completed, reviewed by the Kangxi Emperor, and renamed to its current title. It was intended for correction and printing at the Wuying Hall, but because Chen Menglei was exiled for his crimes in early Yongzheng, Jiang Tingxi et al. were ordered to collate and re-edit, completing the work in three years...This book is rich in materials, clearly organized, and innovative in its organizational system, earning high regard from international scholars who praise it as China's ancient encyclopedia...The earliest printing began in Yongzheng 4 (1726) using the copper movable type originally planned by Chen Mengjie, with 60 copies printed in Yongzheng 6 (1728), bound in 5,000 volumes and 523 cases, plus a 20-volume table of contents in 2 cases. The Palace Museum and Beijing Library (now the National Library of China) hold complete copies, printed 9 columns per half-page, 20 characters per column, white margins, double borders on all four sides" ¹⁶.

From this we learn: First, this encyclopedia was innovative in classification, dividing into 32 main categories (dian) and 6,109 subcategories (bu), with detailed and precise examinations, general discussions, charts, and examples. Second, its use of copper movable type printing enjoys high reputation in Chinese printing history, making it important material for studying Chinese book collection history and intellectual history. Third, China's largest encyclopedia, the Ming dynasty's *Yongle Encyclopedia*, survives only in fragments, making *Gujin Tushu Jicheng* the largest extant encyclopedia. Its rich and detailed content, combination of text and illustrations, and scientific retrieval system have earned it international acclaim. As researchers have revealed, "Joseph Needham extensively quoted illustrations from *Gujin Tushu Jicheng* in his *Science and Civilisation in China*" ¹⁷, demonstrating the work's status in Chinese and international academic and bibliographic history.

The work also contains a dedicated "Literature" (yiwén) section including numerous poems and essays, selected according to the principle that "those with biased arguments but admirable diction are included...detailed for pre-Sui Tang, abbreviated for post-Song; lengthy works have their essentials selected, while shorter works are included regardless of flaws" ¹⁸. Truly deserving its reputation as the "foremost among encyclopedias," it preserved vast amounts of precious historical materials compared to the later large-scale collectanea *Siku Quanshu* (Complete Library of the Four Treasuries), which destroyed and revised works under the guise of collection.

Author Information: Xu Kai, Master of Arts, Liaoning Normal University Library, Assistant Librarian. Research Interests: Chinese Classical Philology,

Ming-Qing Fiction, Reading Promotion. Correspondence Address: Liaoning Normal University Library, 850 Huanghe Road, Shahekou District, Dalian, Liaoning Province. Contact: 13478607633. Author of *Reading Promotion +: Theory and Practice* (Liaoning Normal University Press, March 2021).

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