

The Mediating Function of Bookplates in Ancient Chinese Bibliophilia

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore the mediating role of bookplates in the interactions among ancient Chinese bibliophiles. By conducting an in-depth analysis of the evolution of bookplates as a medium and combining it with empirical historical materials, this study reveals the mediating functions of bookplates from two aspects: their mediating process and historical context. Furthermore, it examines the crucial role of bookplates in cultural heritage, social interaction, and knowledge dissemination, highlighting their significance in constructing personal identity, maintaining family cohesion, and influencing social structure. The findings not only enrich the cultural connotations and mediating functions of bookplates but also provide a new perspective for understanding their value in traditional culture.

Keywords: Bookplate, Cultural Connotations, Ancient Chinese Bibliophiles, Mediating Function, The Mediating Function of Bookplates

DOI: 10.7176/JLPG/148-05

Publication date: June 28th 2025

1. Introduction

Bookplates, as a medium, not only signify the ownership of books but also play a multifaceted role in cultural heritage, social interaction, artistic expression, emotional memory, and the transmission of knowledge and wisdom. As a medium, bookplates demonstrate profound mediating properties and multidimensional functions, serving as an essential bridge connecting the past and present, the material and spiritual, and the individual and society. Their comprehensive value is irreplaceable in academic research and cultural heritage. This section will delve into the nature of bookplates as a medium by examining their mediating role and functions.

2. Analysis of the Mediating Function of Bookplates

2.1 The Mediating Process of Bookplates

Bookplates are a type of seal used to mark ownership on books and documents. They can be categorized into private and institutional bookplates based on their ownership. (Liu, C. M., & Yang, H. 2025). In addition to indicating the identity of the book owner through stamping, bookplates also function as a medium to reflect the owner's personal interests and tastes. The use of seals predates that of bookplates, with the earliest records tracing back to the Warring States period's "Shangshi Seal." Initially, seals were symbols of identity and power. Although bookplates emerged alongside seals, their scope of use was narrower, confined to the realm of book collecting, hence their alternative name, book seals.

The earliest historical records of bookplates are associated with the Western Han Dynasty's renowned literary figures Liu Xiang and Jia Yi. It is documented that Liu Xiang acquired a pre-Qin classic, *Dengqian Suilu*, which his friend Jia Yi borrowed and refused to return despite Liu's repeated requests. Jia then created a bookplate inscribed with "The love of books and the love of wealth are both forms of greed; the scholar's greed is for books." Additionally, official bookplates originated in the Tang Dynasty, with Emperor Taizong and Emperor Xuanzong commissioning the "Zhen Guan" and "Kai Yuan" bookplates for their imperial collections. (Huo, Y. F., & Zhang, M. 2023). These marks represent the earliest instances of bookplates signifying book ownership. By the late Tang Dynasty, numerous records of literati bookplates had emerged, such as those found in the *Complete Tang Poems*. Volume 628 of *Complete Tang Poems* contains Lu Guimeng's poem "Playful Inscription on the Bookplate Bag of Xi Mei," and Volume 615 includes Pi Rixiu's poem "Reply in Rhyme to Lu Guimeng's Playful Inscription on the Bookplate Bag," both of which are themed around bookplates.

However, the true development of bookplates occurred during the Song and Yuan dynasties. Records in the History of Song indicate that more literati participated in seal-making during this period. This involvement expanded the use of bookplates from the upper echelons of literati to a broader range of scholars. As a result, the forms and styles of bookplates became more diverse. Calligraphers and painters such as Mi Fu and Zhao Mengfu contributed to the stylistic evolution of bookplates. The Ming and Qing dynasties witnessed the peak of bookplate usage, with most book collectors possessing their own unique seals, sometimes numbering in the dozens. For instance, the early Ming Dynasty collector Song Lian had multiple bookplates, including "Song's Jingqian," "Jinhua Song Dingguo," "Song's Jingjian," "Taishi's Seal," "Yutang Scholar's Seal," and "Song Jinglian's Collection." According to incomplete statistics, Mao Jin, the owner of the Ji Gu Ge Studio during the Ming Dynasty, had over forty bookplates. (Dictionary of Bibliophiles, p.)A review of the history of bookplates reveals a close correlation with the development of books.

During the Western Han Dynasty, paper emerged as a new writing material. Although no physical bookplates from this period have survived, historical records suggest that bookplates likely appeared around this time. The use of bookplates in the Tang Dynasty was closely related to the invention of woodblock printing. The Song Dynasty, characterized by its policy of emphasizing literature and suppressing military affairs, saw the establishment of numerous academies and extensive book compilation activities. The rudimentary form of the Chinese literati seal essentially took shape during this period. The Ming and Qing dynasties marked a period of prosperity in Chinese book history, and the expansion of bookplate usage to the general literati class also occurred during this time. Unlike books as independent media for information transmission, bookplates cannot function independently. Their value and information dissemination rely on the physical presence of books. This dependency on books as a medium determines that bookplates, as a medium for information transmission, must be attached to books. Marshall McLuhan, in his book *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, first proposed the view that "the medium is the extension of man." (McLuhan, M. 2019). It can even be said that bookplates are an extension of book media and an extension of book expression. In the process of book mediatisation, the mediating functions of bookplates gradually enriched and expanded, evolving from merely indicating ownership to becoming a symbol of the book collector's personal taste and cultural cultivation. Bookplates played a significant role in the dissemination of books and cultural exchange

2.2 The Social Context of Bookplate Mediation

Private book collecting in ancient China was a cultural activity influenced by regional economic development and social cultural levels. (Liu, X. W., Lv, C. Y., & Ning, D. Y. 2023). Bookplates, evolved from seals, not only marked property rights but also carried the sentiments and interests of scholars, becoming an important carrier of documentary value. Their mediating process was closely related to the collection, circulation, and inheritance of books, as well as interacting with social culture and technological development. For example, the evolution of bookplates in terms of material, style, and craftsmanship reflects the trajectory of social, economic, and technological changes. A comprehensive analysis of the preserved bookplates from various dynasties shows that the mediating process of bookplates was mainly influenced by four factors: policy, economy, culture, and technology. These factors did not exist in isolation but interacted with each other.

Firstly, from a political perspective, the use of bookplates to some extent reflected the rulers' emphasis on cultural heritage and knowledge accumulation, as well as the literati's pursuit of personal cultural identity. For instance, official bookplates not only marked the official collection status of books but also demonstrated the government's control and guidance over cultural dissemination and knowledge accumulation. The Tang Hui Yao records the use of official bookplates during the Tang Dynasty. Volume 65 and Volume 64 respectively document the requests for casting bookplates by official book collection institutions. Volume 65 of the Secretariat records, "The Vice Minister of the Secretariat, Li Sui, petitioned, 'Since the military turmoil, the book seals have been lost. The newly written scriptures and histories now have no verification. I respectfully request the casting of new seals.'" Volume 64 of the Jixian Academy also contains similar records, with the Secretariat's bookplate being "Secretariat Seal" and the Jixian Academy's bookplate being "Jixian Seal."

The Song Dynasty's founding emperor, Zhao Kuangyin, implemented a policy of emphasizing literature over military affairs and employing literati officials. Subsequently, Emperor Taizong continued this policy, promoting "the flourishing of culture and the suppression of military affairs." Under this cultural policy, the Song society was imbued with a strong cultural atmosphere, and private book collecting became increasingly common. The

personalization and artistic trends of bookplates became more pronounced, becoming an important part of the literati's cultural life and reflecting their political status and cultural taste.

Secondly, the production and use of bookplates were also influenced by the economic environment. The production and use of bookplates to some extent reflected economic development and personal wealth accumulation. Since the Song Dynasty, with the prosperity of book civilization and the development of the printing industry, the use of bookplates became more widespread, closely related to the economic prosperity and growth of cultural consumption at that time. As a cultural symbol, bookplates carried rich cultural meanings and historical information. They not only indicated book ownership but also reflected the cultural cultivation and aesthetic taste of the book collector.

Finally, the design and use of bookplates also reflected the Chinese traditional culture's respect for knowledge and cultural heritage. The phenomenon of technological mediation was particularly evident in the use of bookplates. From manual engraving to mechanized production, the craftsmanship of bookplate making continuously improved, which not only increased production efficiency but also diversified the artistic forms of bookplates. At the same time, with the development of printing technology, the use of bookplates on books became more widespread and convenient.

3. Interaction Between Bookplates and Bibliophiles

In ancient China, the tradition of book collecting was influenced by cultural practices and technological development. In addition to the technical difficulties and high cost of book production, there was also the psychological factor of maintaining an advantage in the examination system for official positions. Due to these multiple factors, the concept of private book collecting among ancient Chinese bibliophiles focused primarily on preserving the privacy of their collections. Under historical conditions where the circulation and usage of books were significantly limited, face-to-face communication between book collectors and readers was almost non-existent. In this context, bookplates served as a medium of communication between book owners and readers. Through the communicative bridge built by bookplates, bibliophiles could engage in intellectual exchanges with readers. Such exchanges might be direct interactions among contemporaries or transcendent interactions across different times and regions.

Based on the presence or absence of blood relations, the interactions among bibliophiles can be categorized into two basic types: horizontal interactions and vertical interactions. Horizontal interactions refer to activities among different bibliophiles, usually without involving blood relations. These activities include a wide range of connections such as book exchanges and book gifts among peers. For instance, the Ming Dynasty bibliophiles Wang Shizhen and Fan Qin were good friends who copied books for each other. Wang Shizhen even gifted books to Fan Qin. During the process of giving books as gifts, bookplates were transferred along with the books to other bibliophiles, thus exhibiting horizontal transmissibility. On the other hand, vertical book-collecting activities refer to the process of book inheritance between bibliophiles and their descendants or family members. As outlined in the previous text, bibliophiles would engrave adages, maxims, or poems on their bookplates. The texts on these bookplates often condensed the bibliophiles' outlook on life, values, and academic thoughts. Bibliophiles used these to inspire and guide their descendants in thinking and learning, passing on knowledge and wisdom to them. In the reading activities and book-collecting practices of the descendants, bookplates served as carriers of emotion and memory. They helped the younger generation establish emotional connections with their predecessors, recall and understand their lives and thoughts, and fulfilled their role as an important medium in the vertical interactions of bibliophiles.

3.1 Horizontal Interactions Between Bookplates and Bibliophiles

For book collectors, bookplates appeared alongside the books during the processes of collecting and reading. To a certain extent, they served as a public announcement, with a nature of wide dissemination. By using bookplates, collectors could convey necessary information to those who came into possession of the books. This information included not only the ownership and identity details typically indicated by seals but also version information of the books. Sometimes, collectors would even communicate their requirements or expectations to the readers through the bookplates. For instance, the Qing Dynasty bibliophile Wu Cheng had a bookplate inscribed with the

words "May it be passed down without damage." Additionally, the Ming Jiaping edition of "Yek Ke Congshu" in the collection of the National Library of China bears the bookplate of Gan Run Tang Zhou, which states, "Only for on-site reading, never lent to others." (Yuan, Y. 1999). The inscriptions on these bookplates not only reflect the collectors' deep affection for their books but also demonstrate a set of norms and constraints on readers' behavior. Faced with such a bookplate, even readers intending to borrow the book would hesitate to make such a request out of respect for the collector's evident care for the book.

Ancient people placed great importance on the act of reading. It was not uncommon for them to engrave admonitions for readers on bookplates. For example, a colophon on the Song Dynasty woodblock print "Xin Kan Jian Nan Shi Gao" extensively quotes a passage from the "Yan's Family Instructions" regarding the lending of books: "The 'Yan's Family Instructions' says, 'When lending books to others, they must be cherished. If there are any damages, they should be repaired promptly. This is one of the hundred virtues of a scholar.'" Whether it is the "Eight Don'ts" or "Ten Don'ts" mentioned earlier or the advice here to "repair damages promptly," the essence is to protect precious books and establish norms and standards for readers' behavior. These bookplates, which regulate readers' behavior, can be regarded as the prototype of modern library reading rules. They serve as both a warning and a reminder from the collector to the reader and are generally acknowledged and followed by most readers. In a sense, these seals not only reflect the collector's one-way admonition and expectations of the reader but also represent a set of mutually recognized and conventional behavioral norms between the reader and the collector. The existence of these bookplates is not merely a form of physical protection for books but also a cultural and spiritual inheritance. They are a silent dialogue between the collector and the reader, embodying respect for the transmission of knowledge and a shared recognition of reading rules.

However, it is important to note that the power to affix seals on books was not exclusive to collectors. Sometimes, readers would also leave their marks on books they borrowed or had the fortune to encounter. These seals, more accurately referred to as "reading seals," served as evidence of the reader's engagement with the book. Rather than being proprietary marks of the collector, these imprints were testaments to the reader's personal reading experience. They signified the reader's respect and care for the book and recorded their individual reading journey. Such reading seals often took forms like "XX's personal correction," "XX's personal note," "XX has reviewed," "XX has read," "XX has perused," or "XX's proofreading." For instance, the Qing Dynasty bibliophile Wang Wenbai had a reading seal called "Keting Appraisal," and the renowned bibliophile Huang Pile had seven proofreading seals, including "Raopu's Glimpse," "Raoweng's Reading," "Raopu's Hand-Correction," "Raofu's Hand-Correction," "Shili House's Precision-Corrected Book Mark," "Huang Raopu's Hand-Corrected Rare Edition," and "Shili House's Huang Family Appraisal."

These "reading seals" are not merely proof that someone has viewed, handled, or appraised these books; they also function as a widely recognized and unique medium of exchange within reading communities. Through this medium, readers convey their gratitude and profound respect to the book's owners. Specifically, as unique cultural symbols, the content of the inscriptions on bookplates is often personally crafted by the owner to highlight individuality. Furthermore, in some cases, the entire process from engraving the seal to affixing the imprint is independently completed by the owner. This process is not only an inheritance and display of the wisdom and exquisite craftsmanship of predecessors but also a window into the owner's spiritual world, serving as a bridge and a ladder to their inner self. Consequently, bookplates become a bond of interaction between readers and collectors across temporal and spatial boundaries. By carefully examining and analyzing bookplates, readers can delve into the collector's spiritual world, touch the depths of their soul, and thereby gain a more essential and profound understanding of the collector's philosophy of life, attitude toward existence, and aesthetic preferences. This process not only deepens the reader's comprehension of the collector's spiritual world but also provides the reader with the possibility of exerting influence on the collector, fostering a more profound resonance and interaction between them on a spiritual level. It is through the long-term exchange and interaction between collectors and readers that the artistic value of bookplates is continually elevated.

3.2 Vertical Interactions Between Bookplates and Bibliophiles

The transmission and use of bookplates reflect mutual understanding and cultural resonance among family members, serving as a crucial pathway for the continuation of family culture and values. Vertical book-collecting activities are multi-layered and multi-dimensional processes of cultural inheritance, in which bookplates play a significant role. They are not only conveyors of knowledge and wisdom but also carriers of emotions and

memories.

In ancient times, as book collectors regulated their descendants' book-collecting activities through bookplates, these seals functioned as symbols, continuously serving as a medium in vertical interactions. The book-collecting practices and rules of the collectors were also reshaped in this process. The theory of symbolic interactionism originated with George H. Mead and was later named by Herbert G. Blumer. Symbolic interactionism focuses on social phenomena constructed through symbolic communication and interaction between individuals. (Ke, Z. 2014). From this perspective, social reality is jointly created through symbolic exchange between individuals. People understand the world through shared symbolic systems and form consensus and collective actions based on this understanding. Re-examining the process by which book collectors participate in social interactions through bookplates through the lens of symbolic interactionism, it can be seen that the descendants of collectors absorb the value concepts conveyed by the content recorded on the bookplates. This absorption continuously forms a consensus on book collecting, which is also one of the reasons why ancient Chinese book-collecting activities have been sustained over time.

Furthermore, Chinese society has been profoundly influenced by Confucian thought since ancient times. Confucianism particularly emphasizes the maintenance of the orthodox patriarchal system centered on monarchs and ancestors. Consequently, the concept of bloodline and clan has become ingrained in the spiritual world of the Chinese people, shaping the organizational form of ancient Chinese families and leaving an indelible mark on Chinese values and behavioral habits. The patriarchal system establishes hierarchical order and rights and obligations within the family, stresses respect for ancestors, advocates for family unity and filial piety, and these principles gradually become the foundation of social ethics. In ancient book-collecting practices, the influence of clan concepts is also evident. Book collectors growing up in this social order inevitably incorporate traditional filial and fraternal virtues into the content of their bookplates. For example, the Juye Chao family, a renowned book-collecting family during the Song Dynasty, passed down their legacy for six or seven generations since Chao Jiao. Not only were their extensive collections widely praised, but it was also said that "since Jiao, the family has passed down literary traditions, with almost everyone having their own collection." (A General History of Chinese Book Collecting. 2001).

Another prominent example is the Ming Dynasty, where the Mao family, centered around the bibliophile Mao Jin, along with Mao Biao, Mao Bao, and Mao Yi, formed a notable family of collectors. Mao Jin established the Ji Gu Ge (Antiquity Drawing Studio), and his fourth son, Mao Biao, adopted the bookplate "Descendant of Ji Gu" to signify his lineage. Another son, Mao Yi, used the inscription "Xuhe Youngest Son, Mao Family Books to be Permanently Preserved by Descendants" on his bookplates. These seals not only provide insights into the collectors' family backgrounds but also serve as a medium that allows readers to deeply appreciate the collectors' pride and honor in their prestigious heritage, as well as the strong sense of self-identity derived from it. This emotional resonance stems from the profound influence of Confucian filial piety on the collectors' spiritual world. Specifically, the principle of filial piety, as a core tenet of family ethics, enables the collectors to consciously establish an inseparable link between family honor and personal identity. This connection is concretized through the material carrier of the bookplate and transcends time and space to be conveyed to every reader who peruses the books.

In ancient China, private book collections were not only a testament to the intrinsic value of books but also encapsulated the labor and dedication of the collectors. Essentially, these collections constituted a form of family-owned property meticulously curated by the collectors and passed down through generations. (Tao, J. 2024). Consequently, restricting the outflow of these precious books was, in essence, a measure to protect family-owned property, reflecting the ancient Chinese respect for and safeguarding of property rights. For thousands of years, the self-sufficient and insular nature of small-scale farming nurtured a system of communal family property ownership. Under this system, economic power within the family was centralized under the patriarch. Without the patriarch's consent, younger or subordinate family members were prohibited from utilizing family assets. Family members were merely nominal possessors of the family property, with personal property rights never truly established. The book collector's admonitions, serving as guidance and instruction from the family's senior collector to other members, often included restrictions on the dispersal of family books. This was, in fact, a method employed by the patriarch to manage and protect the family's communal property. Within these admonitions, it was stipulated that family members must perpetually preserve the books and prevent their outflow, effectively depriving them of the rights to control, partition, or convert the family's assets into personal

property. On the other hand, the collectors instilled in their descendants a reverence for the family's collection. Through their exemplary conduct, they silently transmitted their deep affection for books and accumulated wisdom to the younger generation. By absorbing the wisdom of their ancestors from these admonitions, family members continually upheld and enriched the tradition of book collecting. This not only contributed to the family's cultural heritage but also reinforced the familial tradition of valuing books, ensuring the enduring continuity of book-collecting culture.

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