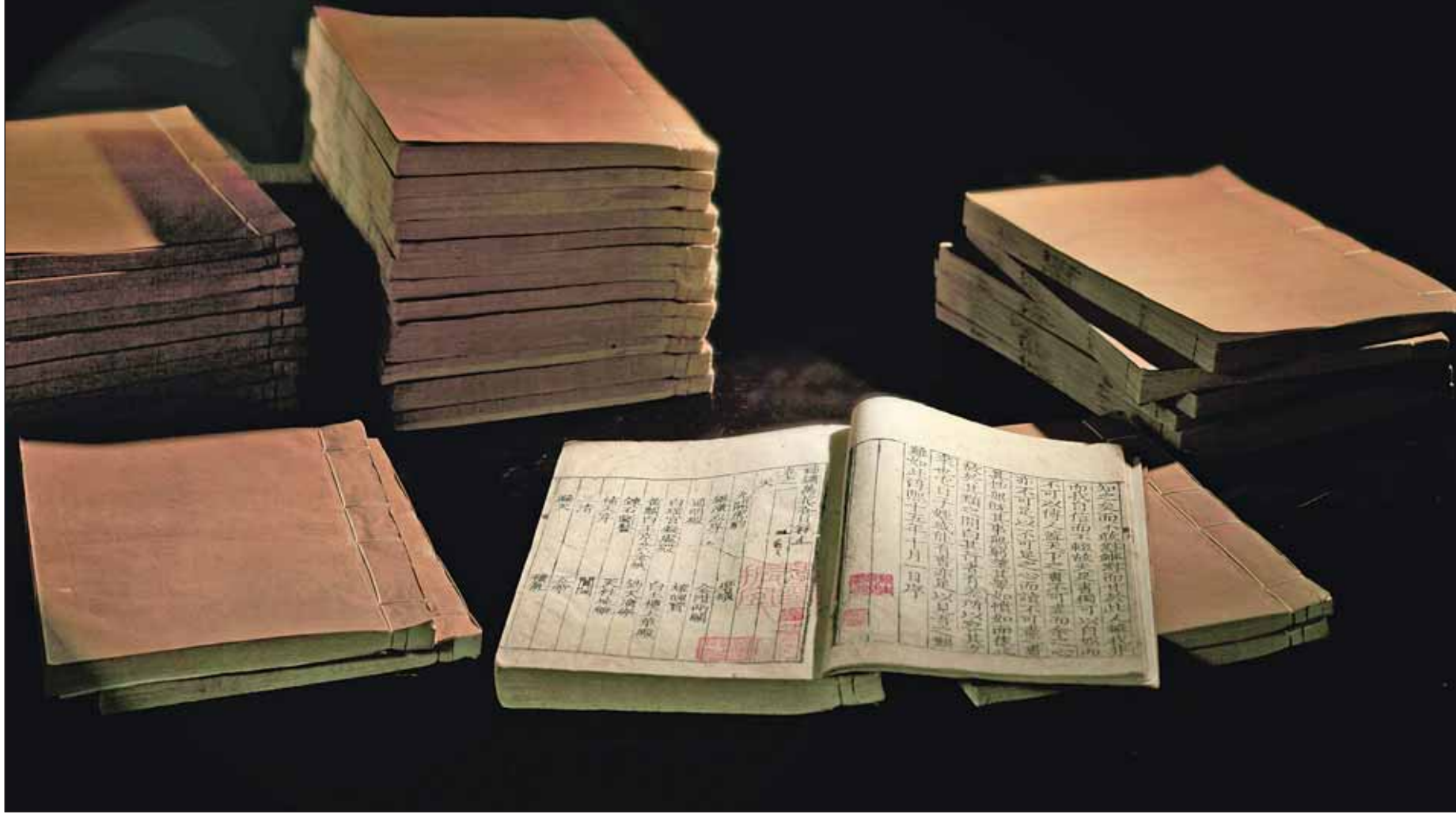


BY THE BOOK



Part of Guoyun Lou's ancient book collection.

PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

A major auction of rare books is a landmark that will enhance knowledge sharing, auction regulations and the public's cultural awareness. **Mei Jia** in Nanjing and **Wang Kaihao** in Beijing report.

The recent auction in Beijing of Guoyun Lou's ancient book collection has caused a stir due to the sky-high price of 216 million yuan (\$33.9 million). This followed Peking University's attempt to acquire the collection by claiming "preemptive rights", which caused a media frenzy.

After the competition between libraries, administrations and cultural enterprises came to a conclusion in late June, it was generally agreed that the record-breaking auction was a landmark that would enhance knowledge sharing, auction regulations and the public's cultural awareness.

"Fortunately, we're competing for cultural things, not for money. It taught us a vivid lesson about the previously underestimated value of ancient books. I think it ended well and nobody really lost," says Ye Jiancheng, director of Phoenix Publishing & Media Group, days after learning his group had finally succeeded in acquiring the collection.

Sitting in his office in Nanjing, Jiangsu province, where Phoenix is based, Ye says he was thrilled to learn that a quarter of Guoyun Lou's legendary book collection was to be sold at the Council International Auction. The treasure trove includes 179 sets of ancient books in 1,292 volumes.

Guoyun Lou, which literally means "the tower of fleeting clouds" (from the saying "fame and fortune are like fleeting clouds"), is a building in downtown Suzhou where the Gu family had stored its collection for a century.

The Gu family is known for its good taste and conservation efforts, collecting ink wash paintings, calligraphy and paintings, including one from the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368) that was auctioned off for 400 million yuan in 2011.

Gu's book collection, however, remained a mystery and the auction enabled the public to learn about it for the first time.

Of the books from the collection

that were sold, two were printed in the Song Dynasty (960-1279), and three in the Yuan Dynasty. According to 89-year-old Shen Xieyuan, a counselor on Jiangsu's ancient book protection committee, a Song book can be worth up to 100 million yuan.

Shen says the Song books are prime examples because engraving technology and paper-making skills were at their best at the time. Also, they're hard to fake.

"The Guoyun Lou books are unique because they were collected systematically by the family for educational purposes. There are many of them and they cover the four categories of Chinese ancient books — Confucian classics, history, philosophy and literature," says Xu Xiaoyue, director of Nanjing Library, which has 1.6 million volumes.

As early as 1992, the library acquired the other three quarters of Guoyun Lou's books from the Gu family, for just 400,000 yuan.

Xu, a former philosophy professor at Nanjing University, says books are mediums for the passing on of thousands of years of Chinese culture.

"Ancient books are live relics showing what passed among Chinese people, their ways of thinking, aesthetics, faith and mentalities," Xu says. "They're the source of our cultural confidence."

Council Auction Chairman Dong Guoqing well understands this and says he would have preferred the auction to fail than split up the collection.

Dong doesn't think the deal price is surprising: "It's a unique collection. The chance of another similar collection, which has such high historic significance and cultural value, is remote."

"An apple fell on Isaac Newton's



A quarter of Guoyun Lou's legendary book collection goes under the hammer at the Council International Auction.

head, and he discovered gravity, though it has always existed," Dong says. "The ancient art works are the apple. Its huge value needed to be determined by someone clever."

To professionals like Shen, Dong's smart tactics created a successful auction. The Council held nationwide previews and a high-level symposium on the auctioned books. It also published a collection of theses after the symposium.

On June 4, Phoenix became the successful bidder. However, Peking University then made a claim and confused the situation.

According to the Law on the Protection of Cultural Relics and Interim Provisions on Auctioning Cultural Relics, State-owned relic collectors, under appointment, have the preemptive right to bid during a certain timeframe. The practice is in tune with auctions in other countries, especially Europe, with the intention of preventing national treasures from leaving the country.

Both the State and the Beijing Municipal Administration of Cultural Heritage were involved in the auction until Jiangsu provincial government prepared a statement saying Phoenix was buying

the books, together with Nanjing Library, Jiangsu's provincial library. The deal finally went to Jiangsu.

Peking University was approached for comment but didn't reply.

The deal ended with Phoenix's Chairman Chen Haiyan issuing a statement with eight "thank yous" to all the sides involved, and three more to Peking University for elevating the deal into a public topic.

"It was a duet without rehearsal that we conducted with Peking University," Chen says. "The public was the enlightened audience."

Phoenix's Ye says they're still waiting for the books' return from Beijing to Jiangsu, when the whole Guoyun Lou book collection will be reunited in its home province.

Phoenix has promised to keep the collection forever and will maximize its value due to its publishing businesses at home and abroad.

Encouraged by the buy, Phoenix is to start a company in the United Kingdom to repurchase Chinese relics scattered abroad, says Ye.

Meanwhile, Nanjing Library will also edit, publicize and digitize the Guoyun Lou books it already has.

"In the past 20 years, people in the auction market have tended to

emphasize the economic values of these works," says Xie Xiaodong, deputy general manager of Council.

"But Guoyun Lou attracted unprecedented attention and presents a good opportunity for the public to pay attention to the cultural values of the arts.

"Auctioning ancient art works are not just for investment. We have to explore their inner meanings rather than simply sell them."

Tian Tao, a veteran legal expert on auctions and an ancient book collector, sees State-owned enterprises working with State libraries to collect valuable works as a trend. Phoenix is just the first example, he says.

Phoenix's Ye agrees and adds that he knows a lot of families in Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces have household collections of ancient books.

"At least they'll start to look after them with more attention," he says.

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Zhou Xueting contributed to the story.

Opinions fly now the Games have begun

While CCTV presenters seemed bemused and moved by the creativity and humor of the Olympics Opening Ceremony, one of my colleagues was knocked out by the segment when the "Queen" was pushed out of a helicopter by James Bond and parachuted into the stadium, pink bloomers exposed to



JULES QUARTLY
WEB CRAWLER

the watching world's billions. "I can't imagine that happening to any of our leaders," he commented. The show was a nation defining itself, focusing on the average man and women's rights, with stolen lesbian kisses, folk traditions and weighty social issues like healthcare. It appeared to cause one of two reactions in the United Kingdom: knight the director, Danny Boyle; or castigate him for producing a socialist ceremony.

"The most leftist opening ceremony I have ever seen — more than Beijing, the capital of a communist state! Welfare tribute next?" tweeted the Conservative lawmaker Aidan Burley. His party leader and Prime Minister David Cameron responded by calling the opinion "idiotic". Which it was.

Here, the micro-blogsphere was just as colorful and the reactions just as diverse.

There were a number of comments about the closing song by former Beatle Paul McCartney, who sang *Hey Jude*. And while the selection appeared to be just a rousing finale, the lyrics — "Take a sad song and make it better ... na na na na na, na na na na, hey Jude" — did cause a frisson in China. The song has been variously cannibalized to refer to Mao Zedong's general Zhu De, and even Deng Xiaoping. One clueless commentator even thought Sir Paul had stolen the song from songbird Stephanie Sun. Enough said.

Others compared the cost of Beijing's 2008 Olympics and the relatively cut-price British version. While it is estimated that China spent an estimated \$100 million on its Opening Ceremony, the UK is thought to have stumped up about half of that at \$42 million.

While some Chinese went online to complain about the respective burden on taxpayers, a vocal majority was patriotic. "Although London cost less and was more environmentally friendly, I have to say it fell far behind Beijing in terms of creativity and scale. Money is power," tweeted Johoshua, from Shanghai.

Also from Shanghai, "First Fresh 15 Again Flavor" contrasted a performance in London "that showed respect and paid tribute to individuals" to the "uniformity and collectiveness" of Beijing, which he/she characterized as "tiny human beings submerged in a sea of people".

There were also a few unkind and politically incorrect comments comparing the London Olympics mascot to a one-eyed monster with a blissed-out face.

Personally, it was a blessed relief when the politics and pomp gave way to sports and the simple equation of winning and losing, individual excellence and team effort. The drama of it all.

Some snapshots for me, so far, include the archery heats, in which the Russian women's team narrowly beat Chinese Taipei in the elegant and iconic surroundings of Lord's cricket ground, and a large Russian woman in the stands who held a toy bear to her ample chest cried uncontrollably with happiness.

Or the men's gymnastic team final, which China almost inevitably won. The battle for second place went down to the wire and the Brits thought they had it, but a last-gasp appeal from Japan snatched the silver. A few boos from the naturally partisan crowd, of course, but general celebration all round.

I hope the British Olympics will be just as successful in their own way as the Beijing Games were four years ago. "Building a peaceful and better world through sport and the Olympic ideal" is such a good idea.

Meanwhile, I was in the elevator the other day (we Brits call it a lift) and I must have been wistfully looking at a bank advert promoting its credit card, using the Olympics: "Fleeting happiness, just for you."

The picture was of a European-looking gymnast, jumping in the air, reaching for the sky, eyes on the prize ... and so on ... when my reverie was broken by someone else getting in, who gave me the once over and asked where I was from.

"London," I said. "Shouldn't you be there, rather than here," he asked.

I wish I was. It looks like a great party.

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