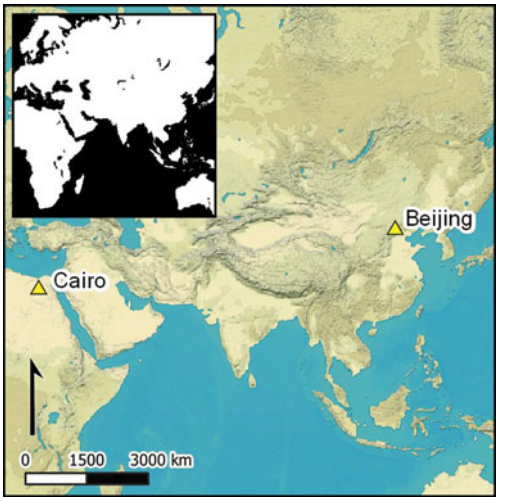
Antiquity 2025 page 1 of 14
https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2025.10098

Research Article

Duanfang's Egyptian rubbings: the first Egyptian collection in Late Imperial China

Tian Tian

School of Historical Studies, Birkbeck, University of London, UK
✉ tian.tian.14@ucl.ac.uk



The Egyptian antiquities collected by the Chinese diplomat Duanfang at the beginning of the twentieth century were largely overlooked by Chinese scholarship until the early twenty-first century, when interest in translating the inscriptions grew. Yet the collection provides a window not just into the cultural history of Egypt but of China as well. By revisiting the history of Duanfang's collection, the author examines how its perception was shaped by Chinese antiquarianism and the evolving archaeological and political landscapes of twentieth-century China. In doing so, they reveal new insights into the agency of the replica in archaeological theory and practice.

Keywords: Egypt, China, Qing Dynasty, antiquarianism, history of archaeology, replica

Introduction

On 25–26 June 1906, Duanfang, grand minister of Qing China and one of five delegates sent to Europe and the USA to study constitutional government, purchased 51 Egyptian antiquities. He thus created the first Egyptian collection in China and one of the earliest in East Asia, acquiring it just before the 1907 allocation of Egyptian antiquities to the University of Tokyo by the Egypt Exploration Fund (Stevenson 2019: 134, fig. 3.5).

This pioneering act notwithstanding, Duanfang's collection has received little attention in anglophone academia. Although Chinese scholars have translated some of the hieroglyphic inscriptions and explored their reception within Chinese society (Yan 2006, 2008, 2021; Xue 2023), these studies do not answer some vital questions: under what circumstance did Duanfang make his purchases? Were all the artefacts authentic? What roles did they play in Chinese perception of the ancient world and China's own cultural practices?

Received: 01 March 2024; Revised: 07 January 2025; Accepted: 10 February 2025

Recent scholarship manifests a growing interest in Chinese archaeological practices (e.g. Chang 2001; Hein 2016; Liu 2017; Storozum & Li 2020) and in Chinese studies of ancient Egypt (Tian 2021; Langer 2023; Langer & Zhao 2025). This article contributes to the existing research, providing a synthesis of available literature and historical sources—including Duanfang's Egyptian rubbings, published posthumously and now housed in the Princeton University Library, New Jersey, USA—to analyse the evolving understanding of Duanfang's groundbreaking collection.

Late Qing antiquarianism

The motivation to purchase Egyptian antiquities, and Duanfang's understanding of them, was rooted in Late Qing (1840–1912) antiquarianism. This intellectual trend originated in a shift from introspective Neo-Confucianism of the sixteenth century to a source-based philology in the eighteenth century. Verification of historical accounts and the study of ancient scripts were prioritised, and inscribed objects were venerated as vital materials and evidence. This was collectively known as *kaozheng* (search for evidence) scholarship (Elman 2001: 90–93). The research of ancient inscriptions became an intellectual hobby and in the nineteenth century gave rise to collecting, connoisseurship and antiquarianism (Brown 2011: 63). This shift to philology and textual studies also created a peak in *jinshixue* (the study of ancient bronze and stone), a discipline connected to the interpretations of ancient scripts and objects, and it is regarded as the precursor of Chinese archaeology (Trigger 2006: 74).

Many ancient Chinese inscriptions are not portable, so rubbings became the ideal method for recording them and facilitating discussions (Wu 2003: 56). Rubbings were also collectable objects, with related connoisseurship developing over time. Hence, it is not surprising that when Chinese people encountered ancient Egyptian monuments in the late nineteenth century, they aspired to generating rubbings from them (Wang 1982: 86; Zou 1897: vol. 4, 17). Authentic Egyptian inscriptions and large objects, such as those purchased by Duanfang, and the rubbings produced from them remained rare (Ye 1995: vol. 6, 14), and Duanfang was proud of the fact that the rubbings in his collection all corresponded to an original, authentic object (Duanfang 1982: 1).

Duanfang's purchases in Cairo

Objects in Duanfang's Egyptian collection were likely purchased in Cairo, one of two main antiquities markets in early-1900s Egypt (the other being Luxor). The most dynamic markets of antiquity dealers were found north of the Ezbekiya Gardens and at Kafr El Haram (The Village of the Pyramid) close to the Great Pyramid, where some local villagers sold illegal finds (Hagen & Ryholt 2016: 65–76). In March 1905, the German Egyptologist Wilhelm Spiegelberg took a photograph of a stela at the shop of Michel Casira on the Haret el-Zahar, north of Ezbekiya Gardens (Spiegelberg 1913: 79, 81). It depicted Emperor Tiberius making offerings to Horus and Isis, and the demotic inscription mentioned the name Parthenios (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Photograph of the Stela of Parthenios in 1905 (above; Spiegelberg 1913: 81) and the photograph of its rubbings from Duanfang's collection (below; Duanfang 1912: 24). Height 564mm, width 386mm (figure courtesy of Princeton University Library PJ1521.A43).

Rubbings of this stela were identified among Duanfang's collection, now in the National Library of China (Yan & Clarysse 2006: 3, 7), as were rubbings of stela of KA-wD-anx, noted in the same shop in 1902 by Egyptologist Percy Newberry (Figure 2; Newberry 1912: 79, note 2). The inscription from a door jamb in Duanfang's collection was published by French Egyptologist Émile Chassinat four years before it was purchased by Duanfang—it originated in Qau El Kabir, reaching Cairo around 1899 (Figure 3; Chassinat 1901).

Some artefacts reveal a provenance from archaeological sites close to Cairo, such as Giza and Saqqara (see online supplementary material (OSM) Appendix 2), and may have been illicit finds. Artefacts from sites in Lower Egypt, such as Kafr Al Meqdam (Clarysse & Yan 2006: 834; 2007) and Qantir (Habachi 1969: 41) are also presented. Thus far, only one block that depicts Peteharpokrates (pAdi-Hr-pA-Xrd) worshipping Min and Khnum (Figure 4; Yan 2006: 38) shows a clear southern connection to Luxor and Aswan, yet the exact provenance is unknown. A wooden coffin from Duanfang's collection mentioned Thenu (tA-Hnw), daughter of Peteharpokrates, "chantress of Min of Akhmin" (Clarysse & Yan 2006: 835; Yan & Clarysse 2006: 4). If the father of Thenu was the same Peteharpokrates on the aforementioned block, then the provenance of the block could also be Akhmin. One stela of Inaroys was from Thebes (Yan & Clarysse 2006: 6). As Luxor dealers sent their goods to Cairo for sale, Duanfang could have procured objects from Upper Egypt.

While most shops in Cairo were open for business during the daytime, the epigraph by Deng Bangshu, another member of the delegation, about one rubbing from the National Library of China implies that Duanfang also made purchases at night: "I visited … Cairo, and read stelae by the candlelight" (Yan 2006: 39). In 1900, Egyptologists Hans Langer and Valdemar Schmidt also visited the storeroom of the dealer Soliman Abd es-Samad, located

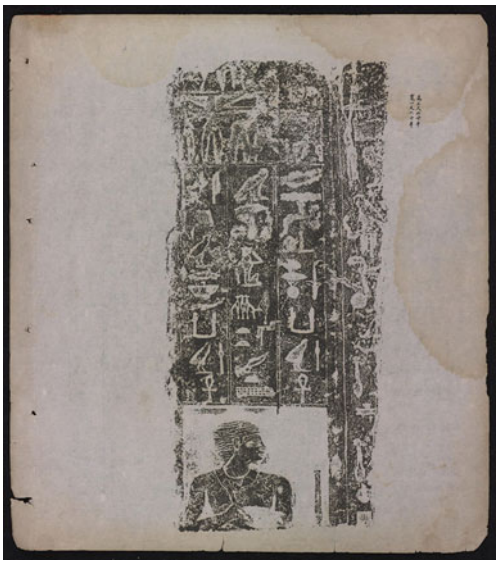


Figure 2. Photograph of the rubbing of the stela of KA-wD-anx (Duanfang 1912: 2). Height 1175mm, width 531mm (figure courtesy of Princeton University Library PJ1521.A43).

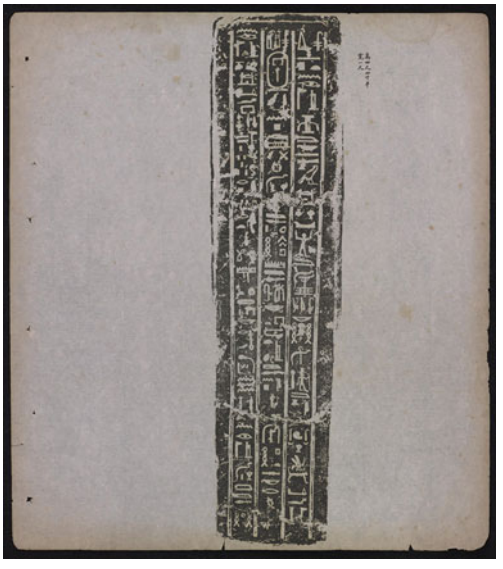


Figure 3. Photograph of the rubbing of the jamb from El-Kabir (Duanfang 1912: 9). Height 1433mm, width 322mm (figure courtesy of Princeton University Library PJ1521.A43).

just a few minutes' walk from Casira's shop, at night and read inscriptions by candlelight (Hagen & Ryholt 2016: 53, 264).

Problems of 'forgeries'

An intensive shopping trip in the dark left little time for careful examination, and it is likely that Duanfang purchased forgeries. But, for Duanfang's collection, 'forgery' refers to both forgeries made for profit, and replicas made not for sale but for study. Forgeries were common in antique markets in early-twentieth-century Egypt; portable objects such as scarab seals and shabtis were newly made (Potter 2022), while ancient statues were augmented with new inscriptions to raise their price (Dunham 1933; Cooney 1950: 11–13). Duanfang also made concrete replicas of his collection after returning to China and produced rubbings from these replicas. Such duplication was not malicious, but a practice deeply rooted in Chinese antiquarianism; yet Duanfang's Egyptian rubbings became targets of forgery. Due to their popularity, dealers produced fake stelae and made rubbings from them for sale and, as the authenticity of Egyptian hieroglyphs was difficult to discern, these forgeries could easily fool buyers (Wang 1934).

Although some unpublished, authentic inscriptions have been translated, the authenticity of at least 18 rubbings from Duanfang's collection remains unexamined. Two inscriptions are unusual, indicating that either the inscribed objects or the inscriptions were forgeries. One is from a fragment of a lintel (Figure 5; Duanfang 1912: 21). Inclusion of the title "Wab Priest (Pure one) in the Nekhen" refers to members of temple

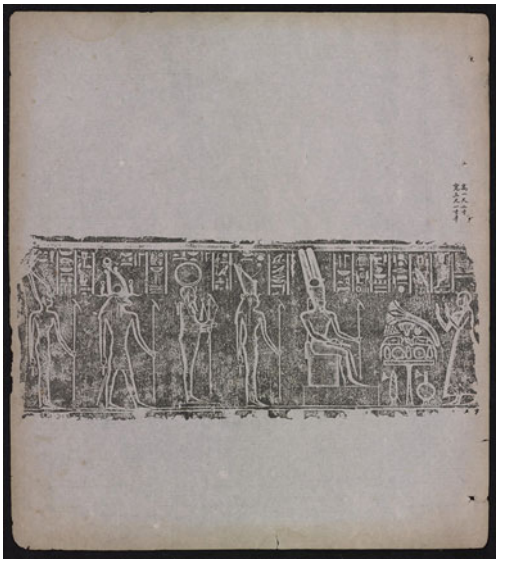


Figure 4. Photograph of the rubbing of the block depicting Peteharpokrates (Duanfang 1912: 8). Height 1014mm, width 386mm (figure courtesy of Princeton University Library PJ1521.A43).

staff responsible for the upkeep of the temple's daily activities. The title suggests a date in the early Fifth Dynasty (2494–2345 BC) (Nuzzolo 2010: 309), yet the representation of 'Nekhen', the Sun Temple built by Userkaf, the first pharaoh of the Fifth Dynasty (reigned from 2494–2487 BC), is exceptional. Determinative signs depicting the temple are usually included in the name (Figure 6a; Jones 2000: 127, 375, 528, 534–35, 841, 921; Bolshakov 2005: 214–17; van de Walle 1977: 22) but are not present here. The epithet "who is in his mummy wrapping" for Anubis was from the Fourth (2613–2494 BC) to Fifth dynasties, but, unlike in this case, does not appear directly after the name 'Anubis' in the inscriptions from the burials of temple staff of Nekhen (Roeder 1913: 44–45, 60; Borchardt 1937: 150–51; James 1961: pl. XXII). Thus, the lintel was either an exceptional case or of doubtful authenticity.

A lid of a cylindrical stone vase bears an incomplete inscription (Figure 7; Duanfang 1912: 22; Wang 1936: 518–19; Tian 2017: 177, fig. 1). The final six signs form an unsuccessful attempt to write an epithet, such as "one who praised his father" or "whom his lord favours" (Jones 2000: 658–60). The inscription also lacks the owner's name, and the vertical 'platform' sign (Figure 6b) inserted after the title "the acquaintance of the king" is clumsy and arguably unnecessary.

Unlike these potential forgeries for sale, Duanfang's replicas were created to facilitate the production of rubbings without damaging the originals because the pounding involved during the process was destructive. Chinese rubbing production is a multi-step process. First, the surface of the inscription is cleaned. A thin sheet of paper is then affixed to it using a water-based adhesive. The damp paper is gently pounded so that it conforms to the depressions. An ink pad is then used to apply pigment to the surface—also by repeated pounding. Finally, the paper is peeled off, leaving a high-contrast impression of the carved text (Wu 2003: 46–47). This practice was common in Chinese antiquarianism, where replication was a form of reincarnation. For example, the Stela of Mount Hua (Shaanxi, north-west China) was erected in 165 BC but destroyed in an earthquake in AD 1555. Rubbings had been collected from the stela for generations, and the scholar Ruan Yuan fashioned replicas from these rubbings in 1811. A replica stela was erected in the original location and was venerated as the original (Wu 2003: 41–45). Hence, artefacts could be reincarnated in generations of rubbings and replicas, long after the original had vanished. It is difficult to assign the labels 'authentic' and 'forgery' to Ruan's replicas; Chinese antiquarianism's approach to 'cultural authenticity' is different from that of European culture (Scott 2023: 23).

Figure 5. Photograph of the original rubbing of the lintel of the Wab Priest of Ra in the Nekhen (above; Duanfang 1912: 21) with a modern rendering of the hieroglyphs (below); the translation reads "an offering of the King gives, and an offering of Anubis, who is in [his (mummy) wrapping] . . . the Wab priest (the Pure one) of Ra, in the Nekhen, [priest] of Hathor". Height 322mm, width 499mm (figure courtesy of Princeton University Library PJ1521.A43).

The Chinese acceptance of rubbings as authentic inscriptions aligns with previous findings that authenticity was created and renegotiated by different groups (Holtorf & Schadla-Hall 1999: 238). Moreover, it was considered that rubbings were able to capture the aura of the original, thereby validating their authenticity. The example of the Mount Hua stela illustrates the extended agency of original artefacts through replication (Foster & Curtis 2016: 129–31; Foster & Jones 2019: 13). That Duanfang's replicas were produced solely to facilitate the rubbing-making—rather than for display or commercial sale (Brulotte 2012: 85)— also underscores cultural variation in the use and purpose of replicas. Finally, the practice of producing rubbings out of a replica presents a unique case of replicas as "copies of copies" (Foster & Curtis 2016: 132).

The blurred line between original and replica made Duanfang's replicas intellectually and culturally acceptable. Duanfang also followed a recent precedent. In 1889, Zhang Yinhuan, the ambassador to the USA, sent a gypsum replica of the Canopus Decree to Pan Zuyin, the grand councillor and collector. The original was a decree of Ptolemy III in 238 BC, inscribed on multiple stelae, but Pan's replica was made from an 1876 cast of the original, now in the Smithsonian Museum (USNM Number A24300-0). Zhang warned Pan to be gentle with the fragile gypsum when producing rubbings (Pan 2019: 33; Tian 2021: 71–72). And the gypsum was initially mistaken for 'cement' (Ye 1979: 11 897). The warning and misidentification may have influenced Duanfang's unusual choice of concrete as the, much more durable, material for replicas. The choice of concrete also reflects profound differences between perceptions of replicas in China and the West. Concrete replicas prioritise durability at the expense of faithfulness to the original in colour and material. Moreover, a comparison of the rubbings made from the original sarcophagus of Esnehemaoui from Qau El Kabir and rubbings made from Sarcophagus' concrete replica reveals that the latter omits a substantial number of cracks on the original (Xue 2023: fig. 1b & c). The concrete replicas of the St John's Cross at Iona suffer from the same limitations, lacking traces of ageing or patina (Foster & Jones 2019: 10). However, none of these limitations elicited complaints from Chinese collectors, for whom the material was of lesser importance than the presence of the artefact and inscriptions. For Duanfang, the replicas

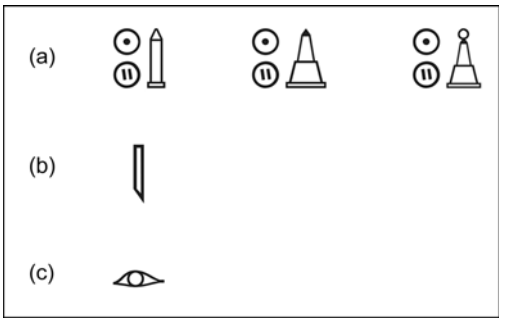


Figure 6. Hieroglyphic words and signs mentioned in this article: a) various forms of the term Nekhen in hieroglyphic writing (Jones 2000: 127, 375); b) the vertical platform (variant of the Gardiner Sign List Aa11); c) the eye (Gardiner Sign List D4) (figure by author).

were not intended for display but for producing rubbings, meaning their colour was of minimal concern.

Using concrete also impaired the faithfulness of replica inscriptions, which was interpreted by later collectors as a loss of the original's aura (Wang 2005: 1889). The concrete replica of Esnehemaoui's sarcophagus presented many cracks as hieroglyphic signs, while all the eye signs lost their pupils (Figure 6c). No information survives about how Duanfang's replicas were produced, but they were probably cast from master models imitating the originals, in a method similar to the production of the concrete replicas of the St John's Cross (Foster & Jones 2020: 122). Thus, unlike plaster casts or squeezes, which were cast directly from the originals, these replicas were cast from an intermediate replica.

Duanfang's rubbing practices

Duanfang's replications, despite being called 'replica', do not always record the originals faithfully. His rubbings prioritised objects' inscriptions over the shape. This *modus operandi* manifests itself in three rubbings of the sarcophagus of Esnehemaoui now in the National Library of China. One includes the entire sarcophagus while the other two present only the inscriptions—one taken from the original and the other from a replica (Li 2004: 118; Xue 2023: fig. 1a–c). Moreover, later collectors spotted the differences between the original and Duanfang's replica complaining about the clumsiness of its makers (Wang 2005: 1889). Yet, sometimes Duanfang endeavoured to present a holistic image of the artefacts. The rubbings of the statue of Jbttj include the back pillar and a full three-dimensional image, known as a composite rubbing (Xue 2023: 33, fig. 7). Traditional rubbing presented distorted images. To remedy this, in the early nineteenth-century artisans painstakingly produced rubbings from different parts of objects and assembled them into one (Brown 2011: 65–66; Starr 2018: 128–44). Thus, Duanfang must have commissioned skilled artisans to depict the statue as faithfully as possible.

Duanfang's preference for inscriptions reflects the persistent focus on texts among the *kaozheng* scholars and it shaped interest in Egyptian writings in late-nineteenth-century China (see also Monteith *et al.* 2025). This tendency continues to influence Chinese Egyptology and Egyptian archaeology. Furthermore, rubbings influenced Duanfang's visual understanding of Egyptian antiquity; by translating Egyptian antiquities into black-and-white images, Duanfang achieved a visual affinity between Egyptian imagery and reliefs from the burial chambers of Han Dynasty China. Thus, the unfamiliar Egyptian antiquity could be appreciated within the Chinese contexts. Han reliefs had been captured as rubbings for centuries, and were also collected by Duanfang. In colophons (added to margins of the

Figure 7. Photograph of rubbing of the flat lid (above; Duanfang 1912: 22) with a modern rendering of the hieroglyphs (below); the translation reads "the acquaintance of the king, beloved of his lord". Height 129mm, width 129mm (figure courtesy of Princeton University Library PJ1521.A43).

rubbings to give information about them) of Egyptian rubbings, he commented that they are similar to rubbings of a Han dynasty *shitang* (食堂), a term which was previously translated as 'canteen' or 'feast' (Yan & Clarysse 2006: 6; Dong 2015: 73, fig. 1). This translation follows the modern Chinese usage of the term, overlooking its architectural and ritual connotations in a historical context. Drawing on study of Han ritual architecture (Jiang 1983: 746), I propose that 'Offering Hall' more accurately reflects the term's original function. Art historians also noticed that rubbings transformed the once refined and vivacious Han style into something austere, thus heightening the antiquity of the images (Figure 8; Ling & Zhu 2013: 14). Similarly, Duanfang stated that Egyptian inscriptions were "five thousand years old" (Figure 9; Xue 2023: fig. 1 b & c); hence, rubbings—by visually conveying age through their aesthetic qualities and connection to Han images—were the most suitable media to reproduce such antiquity.

Duanfang's collection after Qing

Duanfang's sudden death and the chaos after the fall of the Qing Empire in 1911 saw his Egyptian collection dispersed, leaving little trace in the written record. Some rubbings were reprinted by Youzheng Publish house in Shanghai around 1912 (Xue 2023: 24, note 1), and this volume was later auctioned and, without detailed record, reached Princeton University Library. In 1914, Duangfang's son Jixian offered more than 1300 pieces of Duanfang's collection, including Egyptian antiquities, to the newly founded Republic of China for 2 000 000 silver yuan, thus converting this private collection to a public one. By 1916, a presidential decree approved this purchase. But later, Jixian nullified the purchase (Second Historical Archives of China 1995: 3–5). Duanfang's rubbings were still available in markets because he had gifted many to friends and guests. These were sought after by the celebrated painter Li Kuchan and the scholar Wang Xiang. After acquiring the list of Duanfang's Egyptian artefacts proposed to be nationalised, Li searched for rubbings and antiquities within it (Li 1994: 25; see OSM Appendix 1). Wang frequented the Liulichang market, the centre of Beijing antique dealing, in search of these rubbings (see OSM Appendix 2) and composed poems about them in the 1930s (Wang 2005: 2517–18). Some rubbings went abroad: one was purchased by Korean artist Li Hanbok in Beijing in 1938 and is now in the

Figure 8. Photograph of the rubbing of "Wu Family Shrines" pictorial stones depicting mythological and historical figures, Shandong Province, China, mid-second century (stone); the rubbing was produced during the late nineteenth–early twentieth century (figure courtesy of Princeton University Art Museum y1957-140 e).

Boston Museum of Fine Art, another two were gifted by Duanfang in 1906 to Arthur Moore, Commander-in-Chief of China Station, and are now in Maidstone Museum, England (see OSM Appendix 1). The Qau El-Kabir jamb was acquired by the secretary at the German Legation in Beijing, Mu Xuexun, who agreed to display it at the Meridian Gate outside the Forbidden City for nine days in May 1926 (see OSM Appendix 2).

The early twentieth century also saw the arrival of modern archaeology in China; for example, Johan Gunnar Andersson's excavation of Yangshao sites in northern China in 1921. But China's early archaeologists paid little attention to Duanfang's Egyptian collection as their work focused on prehistoric and early China. Collectors were not satisfied with owning Egyptian texts without translation. In the same year that Andersson started his excavation, Mu Xuexun mistaking the Qau El-Kabir jamb for a sarcophagus lid, asked Barry O'Toole from the Catholic University of Peking for a translation. O'Toole contacted Egyptologist Georges Daressy for a translation from hieroglyphs to French, then translated it into English himself (Mu *et al.* 1922).

As an eminent collector and important historical figure (see Figure 10), Duanfang and his Egyptian collections were immortalised in popular narratives. The carvings of "an Egyptian king and queen" became a significant curio (Xu 1917: vol. 34, 343); while his rubbings became show-pieces for good taste among the literati (Chen 1922: 58).

The 1920s and 1930s witnessed the rise of Chinese urban culture. In port cities such as Shanghai, magazines catered for the urban appetite for the latest cultural topics (Lee 1999: 67; Bevan 2020: 202). In 1930, *Shanghai Cartoon* published a rubbing of a statue from Duanfang's collection; just a page away, there were Chinese men in tuxedos (Shanghai Sketch Society 1930). In 1934, *Nanking Daily* published an article by Wang Xiu, who regretted not having purchased a hieroglyphic dictionary for translating the Egyptian inscription of the collection (Wang 1934). On the Lunar New Year's Eve of 1938, Wang Xiang hung four rubbings over flowers, praising this exotic mix "enriched the joyful atmosphere" (Wang 2005: 1921). These practices gave Duanfang's rubbings new meanings. They are no longer records of a collection but part of a bricolage of modern and traditional lifestyles.

Duanfang's rubbings gained political meaning after the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. In 1956, the Nasser government of Egypt recognised the

Figure 9. Photograph of the cover of Duanfang's rubbing collection. The Chinese title on the right says "5000-year-old ancient Egyptian inscriptions". The rubbing on the left is the stela of Anx-bA-Dd.t (?), depicting him and his family making offering to Osiris and Isis. Height 1030mm, width 515mm (figure courtesy of Princeton University Library PJ1521.A43).

PRC and, in response, PRC sent Chinese books from the National Library of China to Al-Azhar University, along with 12 Egyptian rubbings from Duanfang's collection (*People's Daily* 1956). Fifty-one years after Duanfang's visit, the rubbings of some of his purchases returned home as a symbol of friendship (Qian 1981). The cultural exchange also brought the Egyptologist Mustafa El-Amir to China in 1956. During his stay, he examined Duanfang's eight shabtis in Peking University (El-Amir 1958). But the turmoil of subsequent political movements meant many of the rubbings were either lost or destroyed (Li 1994: 26). Replicas survived in the storeroom of the Forbidden City, National Museum and Peking University, and were rediscovered in the early 2000s (Yan 2006: 35). The sarcophagus of Thenu, its replica and the surviving replicas of Egyptian inscriptions were displayed in rooms outside the Gate of Uprightness, south of the Forbidden City, from 2005 to 2011, managed by private companies.

Conclusion

Although Duanfang's Egyptian collection was dispersed more than a century ago, this study offers a holistic view of its background by examining historical materials from China and abroad. The artefacts were almost exclusively purchased in Cairo through an extensive network of antiquity markets and, within just 24 hours, an impressive quantity was acquired but some pieces might be forgeries. Once in China, the artefacts were reproduced as concrete replicas and rubbings were taken. In the twentieth century, these rubbings outlasted the originals, influencing Chinese perceptions of ancient Egypt and relations with modern Egypt. This study enhances our understanding of Duanfang's collection by situating it within the broader archaeological and heritage contexts, presenting a new perspective on the current state and international impact of the collection. By tracking Duanfang's rubbings globally, museums can better contextualise them and identify the original artefacts. For the first time, problematic inscriptions are re-evaluated, suggesting possible forgeries, a matter that has not been thoroughly investigated before. This study also highlights previously overlooked materials and offers a different translation of *shitang*—proposing 'Offering Hall' rather than earlier renderings such as 'canteen'—by situating the term within its historical and architectural context, rather than its modern usage.

Figure 10. Photograph (date unknown) of Duanfang (seventh from the left) and colleagues, with an Altar Set from the late eleventh century BC (formally Duanfang's collection, now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art 24.72.1–.14) (figure courtesy of National Museum of Asian Art Archives, Smithsonian Institution, FSA_A2004.03. Photograph by Laurence Sickman).

By incorporating non-Western perspectives on Egyptian artefacts, this study contributes towards decentralising the Eurocentrism in archaeological theory. Duanfang's collections demonstrate that historical interest in ancient Egypt was not confined to Europe; the value and interpretation of Egyptian artefacts have also been influenced by non-European traditions. Yet this interest remained peripheral even after the emergence of modern Chinese archaeology. The study of Egyptian artefacts differed from early-twentieth-century scientific Egyptian archaeology: replicas were considered valid study materials (unlike the European concept of authenticity) and interpretations were framed within Chinese art history.

This study provides a case for the growing interest in replicas of archaeological artefacts. It illustrates several key insights from previous studies. Authenticity is socially constructed and continually negotiated (Holtorf & Schadla-Hall 1999: 238), while the agency of objects can be extended across time through replication (Foster & Curtis 2016: 129–31; Foster & Jones 2019: 13). Moreover, the meaning of artefacts shifts across regions, with Egyptian objects evolving from exotic curiosities to cultural capital and symbols of national friendship.

Acknowledgement

I am grateful to Professor Julia Lovell (School of Historical Studies, Birkbeck, University of London) for her invaluable assistance in proofreading this manuscript.

Funding statement

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency or from commercial and not-for-profit sectors.

Online supplementary material (OSM)

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2025.10098 and select the supplementary materials tab.

References

BEVAN, P. 2020. *"Intoxicating Shanghai" – an urban montage: art and literature in pictorial magazines during Shanghai's jazz age*. Boston: Brill.

BOLSHAKOV, A. 2005. *Studies on Old Kingdom reliefs and sculpture in the Hermitage*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.

BORCHARDT, L. 1937. *Denkmäler des Alten Reiches (ausser den Statuen) im Museum von Kairo. Catalogue Général des Antiquités Égyptiennes du Musée du Caire, teil 1*. Berlin: Reichsdruckerei.

BROWN, S. 2011. *Pastimes, from art and antiquarianism to modern Chinese historiography*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

BRULOTTE, L. 2012. *Between art and artifact: archaeological replicas and cultural production in Oaxaca, Mexico*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

CHANG, K. 2001. Reflections on Chinese archaeology in the second half of the twentieth century. *Journal of East Asian Archaeology* 3(1): 5–13. https://doi.org/10.1163/156852301100402714

CHASSINAT, É. 1901. Sur quelques textes provenant de Gaou el-Kébir (Antæpolis). *Le Bulletin de l'Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale* 1: 103–107.

CHEN, H. 1922. *Jianshuxian biji [Stories from Jianshuxi study]*. Shanghai: Xiaoshuo Congbaoshe (in Chinese).

CLARYSSE, W. & H. YAN. 2006. Antiquités égyptiennes à Pékin. *Comptes Rendus des Séances de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* 50–52: 833–39.

– 2007. Two Ptolemaic stelae for the sacred lion of Leonton Polis (Tell Moqdam). *Chronique d'Égypte; Bulletin Périodique de la Fondation Égyptologique Reine Élisabeth* 82: 77–100. https://doi.org/10.1484/J.CDE.2.309317

COONEY, J. 1950. A re-examination of some Egyptian antiquities. *Brooklyn Museum Bulletin* 11(3): 11–26.

DONG, J. 2015. Duanfang tiba de gu Aiji shike tapian jiantan Yangsanlao Shitang huaxiang tizi xiangguan wenti [Egyptian rubbings with colophon of Duanfang, and related questions on the inscription from Yang Sanlao offering hall of the Han Dynasty]. *Shoucangjia [The Collector]* 7: 72–74 (in Chinese).

DUANFANG, T. 1912. *Aiji wuqiannian guke [Ancient carvings of Egypt of 5000 years old]*. Shanghai: Youzheng shuju (in Chinese).

– 1982. *Taozhai Cangshiji [Inscribed stones in Duanfang's collection]*. Taibei: Xin Wen Feng Press Company (in Chinese).

DUNHAM, D. 1933. An ancient Egyptian forgery? *Bulletin of the Museum of Fine Arts* 31(187): 79–81.

EL-AMIR, M. 1958. Jieshao Beijing daxue suocang xiabodixiang [Introduction to the Shabti figures in Peking University]. *Wenwu [Cultural Relics]* 9: 46–47 (in Chinese).

ELMAN, B. 2001. *From philosophy to philology: intellectual and social aspects of change in Late Imperial China*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.

FOSTER, S. & N. CURTIS. 2016. The thing about replicas—why historic replicas matter. *European Journal of Archaeology* 19: 122–48. https://doi.org/10.1179/1461957115Y.0000000011

FOSTER, S. & S. JONES. 2019. The untold heritage value and significance of replicas. *Conservation and Management of Archaeological Sites* 21(1): 1–24. https://doi.org/10.1080/13505033.2019.1588008

– 2020. *My life as a replica: St John's Cross, Iona*. Oxford: Oxbow.

HABACHI, L. 1969. *Features of the deification of Ramesses II*. Glückstadt: J.J. Augustin.

HAGEN, F. & K. RYHOLT. 2016. *The antiquities trade in Egypt 1880–1930: the H.O. Lange papers*. Copenhagen: Royal Danish Academy of Sciences and Letters.

HEIN, A. 2016. The problem of typology in Chinese archaeology. *Early China* 39: 21–52. https://doi.org/10.1017/eac.2015.18

HOLTORF, C. & T. SCHADLA-HALL. 1999. Age as artefact: on archaeological authenticity. *European Journal of Archaeology* 2: 229–47. https://doi.org/10.1179/eja.1999.2.2.229

JAMES, T. 1961. *Hieroglyphic texts from Egyptian stelae etc., in the British Museum 1*. London: The Trustees of the British Museum.

JIANG, Y. 1983. Handai de xiaocitang—Jiaxiang Songshan Han huaxiang de jianzhu fuyuan [Offering Hall of Han Dynasty—The reconstruction of reliefs from Han Offering Hall of Jiaxiang Songshan]. *Kaogu [Archaeology]* 8: 741–51 (in Chinese).

JONES, D. 2000. *An index of ancient Egyptian titles, epithets and phrases of the Old Kingdom Volume 1* (British Archaeological Reports International Series 866). Oxford: BAR.

LANGER, C. 2023. Chinese archaeology in Egypt: between Eurocentrism, de-Westernisation and decolonisation, in V. Chan, Y.-H. Hui, D. Hui & K. Vafadari (ed.) *Heritage conservation and China's Belt and Road Initiative*: 121–42. London: Routledge.

LANGER, C. & K. ZHAO. 2025. The Nile and the Yellow River: comparative studies between Ancient Egypt and China. *Cambridge Archaeological Journal*: 1–12. Published online 21 February 2025. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0959774324000349

LEE, O.-F. 1999. *Shanghai modern: the flowering of a new urban culture in China, 1930–1945*. London: Harvard University Press.

LI, C. 2004. Gu Aiji zaoxing yishu zai Zhongguo de liuchuan [The spread of Egyptian imageries in China]. *Xungen [The Root]* 2: 116–20 (in Chinese).

LI, Y. 1994. Kuchanlaoren de shoucang yu shoucang guan [Li Kuchan's collection and his ideas on collecting]. *Shoucangjia [The Collector]* 2: 22–26 (in Chinese).

LING, X. & Q. ZHU. 2013. *Hanhua zonglu 14, Nanyang [Complete works of pictures of the Han Dynasty, 14 Nanyang]*. Guilin: Guangxi Normal University Press (in Chinese).

LIU, L. 2017. A history of Chinese archaeology, in J. Habu, P. Lape & J. Olsen (ed.) *Handbook of East and Southeast Asian archaeology*: 39–58. New York: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4939-6521-2_4

MONTEITH, FRANCESCA, ZHIJUN TANG, LIANG CHEN, LIYA TANG, JIAQI LIU, KANGTE HE & CHUN YU. 2025. Building on written texts: anthropological and archaeometric approaches to post-Qin archaeology in China. *Antiquity*. https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2025.75

MU, X., T. LI & G.D. O'TOOLE. 1922. Xila Aiji shidai zhi guanming kaoshi [Studies of inscriptions on Greco-Egyptian sarcophagus]. Unpublished report, one copy now held in Smithsonian Libraries and Archives, Call number 429.O8; another in Library of Peking University, Call number 995.1/4408 (in Chinese).

NEWBERRY, P. 1912. The tree of the Herakleopolite Nome. *Zeitschrift für Ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde* 50: 78–84. https://doi.org/10.1524/zaes.1912.50.12.78

NUZZOLO, M. 2010. The V Dynasty sun temples personnel. An overview of titles and cult practice through the epigraphic evidence. *Studien zur Altägyptischen Kultur* 39: 289–312.

PAN, J. 2019. Pan Zuyin de gu Aiji shike shoucang [The Egyptian stone carvings in Pan Zuyin's collection]. *Xi Ling Academic Magazine of Traditional Arts* 4: 30–35 (in Chinese).

PEOPLE'S DAILY. 1956. Woguo zengsong Aiji yipi tushu [Our country gifted books to Egypt]. 1 June 1956: 1 (in Chinese).

POTTER, D. 2022. A note on modern (fake) shabtis as tourist art. *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 108: 279–86. https://doi.org/10.1177/03075133221101079

QIAN, D. 1981. Zhongguo shiwen zhong de Aiji [The Egypt in Chinese poetry], in D. Qian (ed.) *Aying wenji [The works of A-Ying]*: 732–37. Beijing: Sanlian Bookstore (in Chinese).

ROEDER, G. 1913. *Aegyptische Inschriften aus den Königlichen Museen zu Berlin 1*. Leipzig: Hinrichs.

SCOTT, D. 2023. The construction and deconstruction of authenticity in Chinese art, in

A. Hein & C. Foster (ed.) *Understanding authenticity in Chinese cultural heritage*: 21–34. London: Routledge.

Second Historical Archives of China. 1995. Beiyang zhengfu shougou Duanfang wenwu youguan wenjian [Documents concerning the purchase of Duanfang's collection of antiquities by Peiyang Government]. *Minguo Dangan [Archival material of Republic of China]* 2: 3–5 (in Chinese).

Shanghai Sketch Society. 1930. You wei guangxu bingwu qiyue changbaiduan zhijun zi oumei kaocha xiegui zhi aiji wuqian nian guwu [On the right is the 5000-year-old Egyptian antiquity bought back by Duanfang from Europe in August 1906]. *Shanghai Manhua [Shanghai Cartoon]* 1930(9): 6 (in Chinese).

Spiegelberg, W. 1913. Neue Denkmäler des Parthenios, des Verwalters der Isis von Koptos. *Zeitschrift für Ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde* 51: 75–88. https://doi.org/10.1524/zaes.1914.51.12.75

Starr, K. 2018. *Black tigers: a grammar of Chinese rubbings*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.

Stevenson, A. 2019. *Scattered finds: archaeology, Egyptology and museums*. London: University of Central London Press.

Storozum, M. & Y. Li. 2020. Chinese archaeology goes abroad. *Archaeologies* 16: 282–309. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11759-020-09400-z

Tian, T. 2017. Budding lotus: Egyptology in China from the 1840s to today, in C. Langer (ed.) *Global Egyptology: negotiations in the production of knowledges on ancient Egypt in global contexts*: 173–98. London: Golden House.

– 2021. Thoth with four eyes—Chinese views of Egyptian hieroglyph in Late Qing Period (1840–1912). *Journal of Ancient Egyptian Interconnections* 31: 55–80.

Trigger, B. 2006. *A history of archaeological thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

van de Walle, B. 1977. Deux monuments memphites au nom de Hordjedef Iteti. *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 36(1): 17–24. https://doi.org/10.1086/372528

Wang, D. 1936. *Taozhai guyu tu [Ancient jade in Duanfang's collection]*. Shanghai: Laiqing Shuzhuang (in Chinese).

Wang, T. 1982. *Manyou suilu Fusang youji [The travel writings of a wanderlust; journey in Japan]*. Changsha: Yuelu Shushe (in Chinese).

Wang, Xiu. 1934. *Aiji shike: Changxing Wangshi Yizhuanglou cang* [Egyptian stone carving: in the collection of Yizhuang Tower of Wang family at Changxing]. *Dongnan Ribao [South-East Daily]* 7: 4 (in Chinese).

Wang, Xiang. 2005. *Wangxiang zuopin xuanji di san juan [The selected works of Wang Xiang. Volume 3]*. Tianjin: Tianjin Guji (in Chinese).

Wu, H. 2003. On rubbings: their materiality and historicity, in J. Zeitlin, L. Liu & E. Widmer (ed.) *Writing and materiality in China: essays in honor of Patrick Hanan*: 29–72. Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Asia Center.

Xu, K. 1917. *Qingbai leichao [Anthology of historiographical essays of Qing Dynasty]*. Shanghai: The Commercial Press (in Chinese).

Xue, J. 2023. Duanfang cang guaiji renxing guan ji xiangguan wenti [On the Egyptian anthropic coffin rubbings collected by Duanfang], *Gudai wenming [The Journal of Ancient Civilizations]* 17(1): 24–34, 157.

Yan, H. 2006. Guojia bowoguan gu Aiji wenwu shoucang [The ancient Egyptian artefacts in the National Museum of China]. *Journal of National Museum of China* 4: 35–40, 96 (in Chinese).

– 2008. Guojia bowoguan gu Aiji shibei shidu [Readings of the stela in the collection of National Museum of China]. *Journal of National Museum of China* 3: 44–50 (in Chinese).

– 2021. *Zhongguo shoucang de guaiji wenwu [The ancient Egyptian artefacts in China]*. Beijing: China Social Sciences Press (in Chinese).

Yan, H. & W. Clarysse. 2006. Ägypten in der Verbotenen Stadt: der kaiserliche Beamte Duanfang brachte zu Anfang des 20. Jhs. zahlreiche Aegyptiaca nach China. *Antike Welt* 37(1): 47–51.

Ye, C. 1979. *Yu shi (shike shiliao xinbian di 12 ji kaozheng mulu lei 16) [Words on stones (New collection of historical documents of stone-inscriptions, series 12, no. 16)]*. Taibei: Xin Wen Feng Press Company (in Chinese).

– 1995. *Yuandulu rijichao [The diary of Ye Changchi]*. Shanghai: Shanghai Guji (in Chinese).

Zou, D. 1897. *Xizheng jicheng [Records of the westward journey]*. Hunan: Xinxue Shuju (in Chinese).