

# Chinese Rare Books Cataloging: New Reference Tools for Ancient Materials



Jian Lee  
Chinese Cataloging & Metadata Librarian  
Email: jlee37@uw.edu

## Background

Cataloging Chinese ancient books is difficult because they often lack edition information, especially publisher and publication date, which is necessary to distinguish between different editions produced over thousands of years of Chinese history.

Determining an edition requires looking for clues from the book itself, such as the print technique used, the type of paper it is printed on, use of taboo words, and hints from the preface or postscript. This is known as authentication, and it requires specialized knowledge that cannot be obtained through a cataloger's regular training.

## Objective

To explore online catalogs and assist catalogers who lack rare book expertise to catalog them more accurately and efficiently.

## Method

According to the Cataloging Guidelines for Chinese Rare books, "if some basic information (such as title, author, publisher and date) is not present, consult relevant reference(s) and supply the information in square brackets."

One such reference is online resources. In the digital age, libraries throughout the world can share bibliographic records through union catalogs. Some even provide scanned images.

## Selected Online Resources

- CALIS Union Catalog of Rare Books 中国高校古文献资源系统**  
<http://rbcs.calis.edu.cn:8086/aopac/jsp/indexXyig.jsp>  
 Union catalog of sharing of bibliographic resources of ancient books from 30 academic libraries from China and North America. The content of the catalog not only includes the bibliographic records of the collection from each participating libraries, some also come with scanned images of the title page and caption title page.
- National Central Library Rare Books & Special Collections 古籍與特藏文獻資源**  
<http://rbook2.ncl.edu.tw/Search/Index/0>  
 An integrated platform of four databases: Digital Images Database, Union catalog, Genealogy Catalogue, and Rubbing. The collections range from bronze to strong rubbings, Dunhuang scrolls, rare and exquisite Chinese books made before 1795, and thread-bound volumes produced between 1796 and 1911.
- Chinese Ancient Books Union Catalogue and Evidence-based Platform 中文古籍聯合目錄及循證平台**  
<https://gj.library.sh.cn/index>  
 This is a pilot project for the Shanghai Library digital humanity infrastructure. Currently it includes ancient books catalog from more than 1400 organizations.
- Shanghai Library Ancient Books Catalogue 上海圖書館古籍目錄**  
<https://gj.library.sh.cn/org/shl>  
 Ancient books catalog of Shanghai Library's collection only.

## Example: 新增說文韻府羣玉 = Xin zeng shuo wen yun fu qun yu

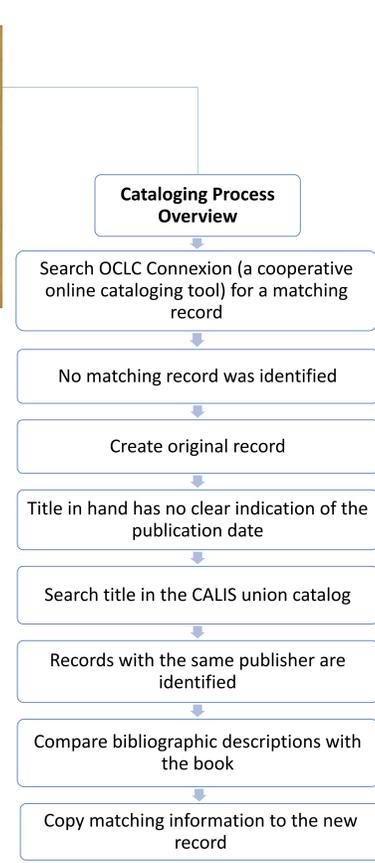
The screenshot shows a search result for '新增說文韻府羣玉' (Xin zeng shuo wen yun fu qun yu). The left sidebar shows details like '新增說文韻府羣玉: 20卷' and '元 陸時夫編'. The main table lists multiple records from different libraries, including 'CALIS 中國高等學校數字圖書館' and '上海圖書館'. One record is highlighted with a red box, showing details for '新增說文韻府羣玉: 20卷' by '元 陸時夫編', published in '1990' by '北京大學出版社'.



One item from the search results has scanned images of the title page and caption title page

This block contains two screenshots. The left one shows a 'New record created in OCLC Connexion' with a list of fields like '001', '010', '020', etc., and their corresponding values. The right one shows the title page of the book '重鐫韻府羣玉' (Chong qian yun fu qun yu) by '陸時夫' (Lu Shifu), with the title '玉原本' and '韻府羣玉' visible.

The screenshot shows the '新增直音說文韻府羣玉二十卷' (Newly added direct sound Shuo Wen Yun Fu Qun Yu 20 volumes) entry in the Shanghai Library Ancient Books Catalogue. It lists the author as '元 陸時夫 撰, (元) 陸時夫 注' and provides details like '20冊' and '1368-1644'.



## Online Resources Selecting Criteria

- Open Access to all Users without Geographic Constraints.**  
 There are many online resources for Chinese ancient books, but most of them are only available in China or with subscription. The selected resources in this poster are open access. Registrations or subscription are not required, which makes them readily available and accessible whenever needed.
- Collection Size.**  
 Three of the four selected resources are union catalogs that combine ancient book collections from libraries around the world.
- Quality of Bibliographic Records.**  
 Bibliographic records are useful when enough descriptions are presented. The union catalogs collect bibliographic records from participating libraries, particularly academic libraries. Most of these bibliographic records have detailed descriptions.

## Limitations

- These online catalogs are open access, but they can be temperamental. Sometimes these websites are unavailable for unknown reasons.
- Although the scope and collection size of these online catalogs are comprehensive, there is still a chance that you may not find what you are looking for.

## Conclusion

- Online Chinese ancient book databases enable catalogers to compare bibliographic descriptions in a wider scale via shared union catalogs, which makes the process of identifying missing edition and publication information easier and faster.
- These tools improve the accuracy of recording bibliographic descriptions of Chinese ancient books and assigning Chinese classification, which ultimately benefits rare book researchers and Chinese catalogers.
- Print reference tools are also available. These are great sources for learning the basics of Chinese rare books but may not be readily accessible.
- It is important to know and network with rare book experts in the field. When we cannot find the missing information from reference tools, what better way than to ask the experts?

## References

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