

Southern Craftsmen in the Workshops of the Imperial Household Department During the Middle to Late Qing Period (1821-1911) and Issues Related to Them

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Abstract

After analyzing and compiling information about the archives that have been made public so far about workshops within the Imperial Household Department during the Qing dynasty, the number of southern craftsmen serving the court in the early Qing period can be determined to be about 140. However, in the nearly one hundred years of the middle to late Qing period, their number only exceeded thirty, with most of them being painters. And as for craftsmen, there were a mere two jade artisans and four ivory carvers recorded.

In the early Qing period, southern craftsmen in the capital not only received wages for provisions, some also were paid for their clothing, while those from the Guangdong region were even provided with funds to settle down. By the middle to late Qing, southern craftsmen are also recorded as receiving payment for provisions, but their minimum wage was still only comparable to that of the early period and did not reach the highest previous levels. At the end of the Guangxu seventh year (1881), eight painters in the Ruyi Hall group simultaneously received a wage hike, though other craftsmen did not benefit nearly as much. Even if they did receive a monthly payment increase, it did not reach the highest income standards found in the Qianlong reign.

After the fall of the Qing dynasty, the imperial workshops were dismantled and craftsmen entered the private sector. Research indicates that the direct influence of these court artisans on painting and craft circles in Beijing during the early twentieth century to be negligible, not to mention that of southern craftsmen.

Keywords: workshops of the Imperial Household Department, imperial workshops, southern craftsmen, northern craftsmen, painters, painting masters

(Translated by Donald E. Brix)