

Buddhist Implements from the Qing Dynasty Presented as Tribute by Eminent Tibetan Figures: Examples from the Collection of the National Palace Museum

Lai, Imann

Department of Education, Exhibition and Information Services
National Palace Museum

Abstract

The Manchu Qing dynasty court pursued a policy of “promoting the Gelug Sect to appease the Mongols” and won over eminent figures in this school of Tibetan Buddhism as a way to manage the various Mongol tribes. In the Qing dynasty, the Dalai Lama and Panchen Lama as heads of the Gelug Sect in favored parts of Tibet would send clerics in alternating years to present tribute for the court. Over the years, a considerable number of tribute items accumulated at the Qing court, serving as testimony to the inclusion of Mongolian, Qinghai, and Tibetan areas into the empire by means of Tibetan Buddhism. Many of these items are also mentioned in Qing court records, the names of the presenters specifically mentioned. Among them, Buddhist implements convey significant historical information. As a result, the present study examines thirty-three Buddhist implements in the collection of the National Palace Museum with such clear records for an overall evaluation of the information they provide.

These Buddhist implements, with the exception of a Gurkha artifact that was returned, were all presented as gifts by eminent figures in the Gelug Sect and the Tibetan government on the occasion of paying tribute, birthdays, and deaths. They also relate to an imperial plaque presented to the Kumbum Monastery in Qinghai in 1748, the arrival of the Panchen Lama in the capital in 1780, the war with the Gurkhas in 1793, and the burial of the Daoguang emperor in 1852 at the imperial mausoleum. Except for a reliquary kept at Jehol, all were treasures stored in the Forbidden City.

Judging from the information provided by label notes in four languages of the Qing court, craftsmanship and artistic styles, the date of production for these works can be traced back to the early Ming dynasty at the earliest and up to the late Qing

dynasty at the latest. The places of production for these Buddhist implements include tribute items from the Tibetan areas of Ü Tsang, Kham, and western Sichuan. With the exception of old Ming dynasty presents, all are products of their respective regions. However, the Buddhist implements presented by lamas from Qinghai stationed in the capital include many of Chinese origin, such as those made in the capital. The art styles and aesthetic traditions of objects presented by eminent lamas from different regions reflect their respective variations. These Buddhist implements are exquisite works or have important historical significance, which the imperial workshops at the Qianlong court strived to imitate. Integrating them with the Chinese tradition and latest techniques for completely new interpretations, they demonstrate the wealth and power of the Qing Empire and its imperial ambitions in the form of art.

Keywords: Qing dynasty, tributary system, Tibetan Buddhist art, religious implements, metalware

(Translated by Donald E. Brix)