

The *Dingzi* Drug as Gift: Its Medical Knowledge and Political Uses in the Early Qing Dynasty

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Abstract

From the latter half of the 17th century and through the 18th century, China became an empire under absolute monarchy in what has become known as its golden age. Under the Kangxi 康熙, Yongzheng 雍正, and Qianlong 乾隆 emperors, the so called “Great Reigns” of the Qing empire, they were known for their Machiavellian leadership style characterized by the simultaneous adoption of carrot-and-stick approaches, setting clear rules for rewards and punishments using both a gentle and severe treatment of subordinates. The emperors often granted precious gifts to civilian and military officials of various ranks in and out of the capital (Beijing), including medicinal materials such as *dingzi* 錠子 drugs and ginseng. Among them, *dingzi* drugs were the most frequently granted. Therefore, this study aims to analyze what kind of medicine *dingzi* drugs are, the description of the drugs in various medical texts, and the features that made *dingzi* chosen by the Manchu emperors as an ideal gift for officials.

Looking at the reward of *dingzi* drugs at the court, there are several issues worthy of further discussion. First of all, in the process of rewarding *dingzi* drugs, what kind of attitude and behavioral patterns did the Manchu emperors display? How did the officials respond to their sovereigns after receiving the drugs? In addition, the granting of *dingzi* drugs to officials symbolized the process of gift giving, reception, and reciprocity. How did this kind of reward connect the emperors and their officials? What kind of interpersonal relationships were established? What were the symbols of the rights and obligations between the emperor and his subordinates? What kind of political interests in the exchanges and implications are seen? Through the discussion in this paper, the author hopes to offer a better understanding of *dingzi* drugs and their political uses, thereby contributing to the knowledge of the relationship between medicine and politics during the Qing dynasty.

Keywords: *Dingzi* drugs, gift exchange system, medicine and politics, emperor-official interaction