

Further Thoughts on the Study of Qing Dynasty Court Beads

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Abstract

The use of court beads in the Qing dynasty had a special place within the regulations governing apparel and accessories at the imperial court. The present study builds upon the research of previous scholarship by reassessing historical materials and court archives and then compares them to the style and form of court beads that survive today. From a historical perspective, three facets emerge that are worthy of further discussion. First, the actual name of court beads shows that they consistently encompassed two functions, one religious and the other political in nature. Second, through the interaction between Tibetan Buddhist beliefs of the Qing imperial family with Mongolia and Tibet, the study explores how court beads incorporated religious elements in the process of their stylistic formation and were transformed into a political symbol. Third, changes among the groups who used court beads offer a glimpse into how the political elite with interpretive authority played a role in developing court beads as a part of court apparel.

Court beads all along had both religious and political connotations. Early forms were influenced by Mongolian bead strings and not easily distinguished from prayer beads of a religious nature. After the Manchus took control of China under the Shunzhi emperor, the peoples under their rule expanded significantly to include many Han Chinese with a background in Confucian culture. While retaining the religious nature of bead strings, such ornaments as the “back cloud” string were thus included to create a standardized form giving bead strings political meaning as well. Then, under the Yongzheng emperor, the name for these beads went from “court stately bead strings” to just “court beads,” further testifying to the political status that they reached at this time.

As for the changes among the groups who used court beads, in the early days they were restricted to the imperial family and Manchu nobility. At the court of the Kangxi emperor, the group was expanded to include both civil and military officials of middle and high rank, thereby restricting court beads to important officials in the country. Starting from the early Yongzheng reign, however, lower level officials in the Forbidden City and as part of the emperor’s retinue or staff were included. Starting from the early Qianlong reign, and with the concurrent and attendant status of courtiers, court beads also became a

required accessory among high officials accompanying the emperor. Gradually, the groups approved to use court beads exceeded the rank limitation prescribed in official regulations to become symbolic of trusted aides to the emperor. Furthermore, the participation of members from the Ministry of Rites and Directorate of Ceremonies meant that they, too, had to wear a formal set of court beads. Such was the close connection between the wearer of court beads and imperial authority, the emperor himself, and the state, thereby delineating a political realm of high rank for court beads symbolizing the emperor at its center.

Keywords: Court beads, Qing dynasty dress system, prayer beads, bead string, imperial authority, Tibetan Buddhism

(Translated by Donald E. Brix)