Appreciating works of art became an essential part of the Qianlong emperor’s life at court. His infatuation with jade ware, his collection of and commentaries on these objects contributed to the sheer size and exceptional quality of the Qing court’s jade collection.

1 Emperor Qianlong Appreciating Antiques  
Height 118 cm, width 198 cm  
 Palace Museum Collection, Beijing

THE QIANLONG reign (1736–1795) of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911) marked yet another pinnacle in the history of Chinese jade carving. Although there has never been a lack of research on the making of jade objects, the results of which have contributed to in-depth knowledge on the subject, there has been little discussion on the transference and correlation between jade carving craftsmanship of the imperial court and that of private workshops. In particular, the relationship between the imperial court and Suzhou deserves further exploration, as I believe they occupy a pivotal role in historical research of Qianlong period jade carving (1).

The city of Suzhou was once a primary centre of jade carving in China. As early as the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), the area around Zhuanzhu Lane and Tiankuqian within Suzhou were already a crucial base for the production of jade ware (2). By the Qing dynasty, workshops as well as stores specialising in jade flanked the streets in the vicinity of this neighbourhood; the incessant sound of jade grinding could be heard day and night. As one of the most
prominent production bases for jade objects at the time, Suzhou-made jade was widely distributed. Despite this fact, the imperial court remained, and had always been, the foremost client. This article focuses on how the Qianlong emperor influenced the design and production of folk jade ware from Suzhou through a series of methods that, in turn, channelled the development of jade ware towards meeting the expectations of the imperial court for more than twenty years.

I. The Appeasement of Aesthetic Conflicts

During the Qianlong reign, numerous pieces in the imperial jade collection were acquired directly from the imperial workshops. In addition, a substantial portion of the collection was obtained from the private sector through alternative channels. The producers were private jade workshops led by those in Suzhou. Since the production of folk jade ware was a highly commoditized environment that was beyond the control of the imperial court, the official archives provide less than abundant information on materials found in the production process. However, plenty of poems left by the Qianlong emperor provide a systematic set of criteria for evaluating the production of private jade ware from Suzhou, serving as an appropriate source for further research.

Sentences praising the skills of Suzhou jade craftsmen can often be seen in the collection of imperial poems by the Qianlong emperor. For instance, “Zhuanzhu Lane accommodates many skilful hands”, “Zhuanzhu Lane bears an increasing number of skilful hands”, “Sundry craftsmen fill the Zhuanzhu Lane”, “In Zhuanzhu, skilled craftsmen are commonplace”. These verses demonstrate that although the Qianlong emperor resided within the walls of the imperial court, he was well acquainted with jade artisans and shops in the city of Suzhou. He regarded jade artisans from Zhuanzhu Lane as a group of craftsmen of considerable creativity and, for this reason, jade objects that were commissioned to the Bureau of Suzhou Textiles early in the Qianlong period were often unaccompanied by design drafts, thus allowing greater space for artisans to explore their artistic expression. An example of this can be seen when one hundred pieces of white jade belt plaques, fifty-four pieces of green jade belt plaques, and forty plain white jade belt plaques of various sizes were commissioned by the Bureau of Suzhou Textiles in the third year of the Qianlong reign (1738). Its superintendent was instructed to have the pieces rationed and made into various small accessories in archaic styles and designs. From the acceptance of finished products presented to the court, it is seen that the Qianlong emperor acknowledged arbitrary designs from Suzhou, praising those of exceptional quality.

This situation, however, did not last. In the second half of the Qianlong reign, flamboyantly ornate carvings that may have included openwork, together with those that were too delicate or excessively intricate, became popular in Suzhou. These designs overlooked the role of artistic taste by embarking on an imbalanced pursuit of sheer skill. There
was even a tendency to keep the original shape of material to reduce waste, hence resulting in improper design. These trends became evident to the Qianlong emperor through objects sent to the imperial court from Suzhou. Had the jade merchants of Suzhou exercised self-restraint before a serious situation arose, it probably would not have mattered as much. As this style gained increasing popularity, it generated negative effects on the quality of the imperial jade collection and strongly contradicted the artistic taste advocated by the Qianlong emperor. It was at this point that he could no longer pretend to be oblivious. Depictions and criticism of this phenomena became commonplace in imperial literature towards the end of the Qianlong reign. By studying these texts, it can be observed that the Qianlong emperor influenced the production of Suzhou jade ware. He addressed undesirable practices through his commentary on specific objects.

In the poems of the Qianlong emperor, these types of jade were often referred to as “the new style”, “the contemporary style”, or “the uncultured style”. It was in the thirty-ninth year of the Qianlong period (1774) that the term “new style” was first mentioned in *Yong Fang Gu Kui Wen Fu Pei* (Ode to an Axe-shaped Jade Pendant Adorned with an Old Kui Dragon Pattern) [3]. It became a recurrent term in subsequent literature. The emperor’s attitude towards such styles was mild at first. He only mentioned that the finest jade material was best “not to be commissioned to an uncultivated craftsman...new styles ruin the essence of jade”, and even laughed in condescension, saying that he “scorned at those that appear in the new style where (he considered) ostentation was expressed in vain” [3].

Nevertheless, driven by financial motivation, these new decorative styles spread rapidly within the Suzhou jade trade. By the forty-sixth year of the Qianlong reign (1781), the situation became so serious that these vulgar designs flooded the market and became “unbearable and unsightly” for the Qianlong emperor. Convinced that this was a disaster for jade ware in general, the Qianlong emperor thus brought forth the idea of a “jade calamity” and all its relevant manifestations (4). To the emperor, Suzhou was the

---


source of such misfortune as well as the area most severely affected by this vulgar trend. There was an outbreak of jade fashioned in the “new style”, and so the Suzhou jade trade frequently faced his most strident criticism. For instance:

“Fine Khotan jade material is not rare to come by, but whenever it is carved by an uncultured craftsman in the new style, the jade is ruined”.9

“Whenever jade craftsmen from Suzhou acquire raw jade material, they are inclined to sculpt it in the new fashion after appraising its appearance, not knowing they have created an increasingly unsophisticated style. I have denounced this trend rather frequently in the recent past.”5

“In hope of generating more profit, craftsmen from the alleyways of Wu carve pieces according to their original form and adhere to the new style. They also take pride in their delicateness, without realising their work has become so unbearably vulgar that I would not lay my eyes upon them ever again after setting them aside.”6

“Whenever jade craftsmen from the Zhuanzhu Lane of Suzhou acquire Khotan jade, they tend to sculpt the material into objects and vessels after their natural shapes in order not to waste the material. However, this approach often leads to unsophisticated designs, which have flooded the market.”7

“Recently, many jade craftsmen from Wuzhong have been making objects in the new style. They flaunt their skill and boost profits, unaware that their carvings become vulgar in appearance. This is a type I least desire to select.”8

Jade craftsmen and jade ware in the new style became the subject of the Qianlong emperor’s most intense criticism. He even expressed on occasion that it was fortunate for fine jade stones to have been sent to the inner court as tribute where they could be put to good use, instead of being leaked to the Suzhou market, and later being presented to the court as tasteless articles. From these examples, it is clear how much he detested jade of this type from Suzhou.

The Qianlong emperor’s dissatisfaction with the new style led by the Suzhou jade artisans did not only remain a matter of commentary. In addition, he took corrective measures into his own hands. To overhaul the situation thoroughly, he had to begin by managing the Suzhou trade, the source of this trend. These remedial measures are mentioned in the Qianlong emperor’s literary works as well.

First, he dismissed presented jade ware decorated in the unrefined, contemporary style. The Qianlong emperor was well aware that Suzhou jade artisans were motivated by economic reward. Their fundamental purpose, which was obviously commercially inclined, was to “seek speedy sales”, “seek good prices” and to “boost profits”. For a jade object to be presented at court, or even accepted by the emperor, was the dream of any artisan. In doing so, the jade article would be sold for a high price. It became an advertisement that could bring in more business.9 Hence, the Qianlong emperor took this matter into his own hands by “setting aside and not laying his eyes upon” new style Suzhou jade wares presented to him. By adamantly refusing to accept these objects, he attempted to prevent these tasteless designs from becoming fashionable items flooding the market at the consumer level.

Second, the emperor would order works that were sal-
6 Green Beast-Shaped Jade Yi Water Vessel
Height 10.2 cm, width 13.2 cm, depth 6.6 cm
Palace Museum Collection, Beijing

This is a Qianlong period jade article fashioned after ancient styles. The engraved imperial poem dated to the forty-first year of the Qianlong reign reflects the emperor’s aesthetic principles for producing jade ware at that time; a return to the classics in the pursuit of purity.

stage by providing guidance on jade ware as it was made. His specific approach was to order craftsmen to carve pieces following the design drafts given to them; for example, he wrote: “Do not order the Suzhou artisan to show off a new design, but have him copy the clouds and young dragons on this ancient bi.”12 In this instance, the emperor had a Suzhou craftsman carve a piece of jade according to the young dragon pattern on an ancient bi (disc); in other cases, he gave clear orders that no new styles should be adopted, and provided general direction and references for design. For instance, he “instructed craftsmen from Wu not

vageable to be re-done by removing tasteless designs. Should the Qianlong emperor have indiscriminately dismissed all presented jade ware, private jade production would have been forced into a predicament. As this could adversely affect the ability of artisans to meet the court’s demand, which was not the emperor’s wish, he treated each case according to specific circumstances. Apart from having the most tasteless pieces “discarded to the outer chamber”, the Qianlong emperor was rather lenient in certain cases by ordering court jade artisans to polish off the original design and re-carve individual pieces. These are the so-called “less tasteless designs of excessive decoration.”10 Re-carving was chiefly performed on jade objects of fine material with improper designs. For instance, several white jade ruyi sceptres were re-sculpted from the fifty-fourth year (1789) to the fifty-sixth year (1791) of the Qianlong period.

One piece in the fifty-fourth year of the Qianlong reign received the Qianlong emperor’s comment as plain craftsmanship with tasteless design. An order to “re-carve the jade ruyi sceptre by the tasteless craftsman”11 was issued (5). By displaying the difference before and after the same object was re-worked, one can see the sharp contrast between the unrefined, contemporary style and that approved by the Qianlong emperor. These actions consequently produced a deterrent effect on the undesirable trend.

As for the other types of jade objects presented to the emperor, he would show design drafts to the jade artisans, promoting the classics and returning to aesthetic purity (6, 7). He tackled this predicament during the production

7 Stand for the Green Beast-Shaped Jade Yi Water Vessel

It bears the engraving of an imperial poem by the Qianlong emperor.
8 Khotan Jade Vase in the Shape of a Frost-Covered Cabbage
Height 16 cm, width 12.2 cm, depth 6.1 cm
Palace Museum Collection, Beijing

This Suzhou-made jade article bears the carved inscription of an imperial poem dated to the forty-first year of the Qianlong reign. It was considered by the emperor to contain an “advising quality, which artisans expressed through forms of art.”

9 Khotan Jade Vase Decorated with a Coiled Dragon Guarding a Pearl
Height 20.5 cm, diameter of mouth 11.5 cm
National Palace Museum Collection, Taipei

Carved on a band around the centre of the vessel is a poem written by the Qianlong emperor, entitled, Yong He Tian Yu Pan Long Shou Zhu Pin (Ode to a Khotan Jade Vase Decorated with a Coiled Dragon Guarding a Pearl), which is dated to the forty-first year of the Qianlong reign. This item is regarded as serving the dual purpose of advising against extravagance while reminding the emperor to guard his territories.

to imitate unrefined jade objects by promoting learning and understanding of pure and sincere styles from ancient works of art”. Suzhou artisans were therefore provided with certain styles and specific objects to follow.

Discarding, re-carving and showing design drafts as mentioned above were concrete actions taken by the Qianlong emperor to address the undesirable trend taking place in the Suzhou jade trade. In the meantime, the emperor also delivered information regarding the types and aesthetics he promoted by commenting on specific objects. This method thus provided direction for designing jade ware. To sum up, the types and styles of jade ware that the Qianlong emperor favoured included the following:

The first category included “works with an advising quality”. For the Qianlong emperor, jade wares were more than just accoutrements for appreciation; they were also carriers of ideas with specific functions. They were able to promote virtues as well as express protest. The emperor specifically stated that he “accepted artisans’ advice expressed through art” when he appreciated jade objects. In the forty-first year of the Qianlong reign (1776), the reason the “Khotan Jade Vase in the Shape of a Frost-Covered Cabbage” (8) was considered an exemplar piece where, “a Wu artisan complemented the material with applied carving” was because it “advises me through art or serves as an allusion.” The Qianlong emperor was more tolerant towards these types of work that gave “artistic advice” despite minor shortcomings. An example of this can be found in the “Khotan Jade Vase Decorated with a Coiled Dragon Guarding a Pearl” (9). At the neck of this jade hu container crouches a dragon. Such a piece, according to Qianlong’s standards, should have belonged to the skilful, but unrefined, category that was ordinarily rejected. However, he considered the workmanship an act of refrain from extravagance that symbolised safeguarding one’s territories, “dual meanings held in one object, I ought to ponder on artistic recommendations”. Therefore, this piece was kept in the imperial palace. The same type of object was also seen in the “Cloud and Dragon Khotan Jade Vase” (10) dated to the fiftieth year of the Qianlong reign (1785).
Despite the fact that this piece was criticised as being unrefined, clearly having been made to show off the artisan’s skills, the emperor still considered the motif’s meaning to have merit. This is why certain objects that were “unrefined and clever in a vulgar sense, but conveyed a good message,” could still be kept in the palace. Through commentary by the emperor, he expressed an emphasis on moral messages conveyed through jade objects. By displaying disapproval for clever, but vulgar, designs he gave future reference for jade craftsmen.

The second category comprised works in the style of scholarly paintings. Painting style jade ware refers to objects which take on the themes of scholars’ leisure activities or famous landscapes and are carved in a two or three-dimensional painterly fashion. Because the enduring elegance of this genre was in line with the scholars’ aesthetic, actively pursued by Qianlong, it won favour with the emperor and he actively promoted it. Suzhou jade craftsmen picked up on this preference, and the focus of their designs thus gradually shifted. This brought about the phenomena of “changing unrefined designs to those found in paintings and then selling them” and “knowing that unrefined designs were despised, they were changed to images of famous tourist attractions in the hope of gaining appreciation”.

Although the Qianlong emperor knew that a desire for higher prices motivated the Suzhou jade artisans, he also found time to give frequent acknowledgement. The emperor’s comments on jade objects from Suzhou in painterly style are found in his later poetry. These include commentary where “the carvings do not harm its ancient elegance”, “still offer graceful amusement to be appreciated”, “find them rather refined”, all of which show his basic inclination towards this style. Due to the Qianlong emperor’s promotion, jade table screens, boulders (11) and brush pots (12) that possessed the spirit of painting were all popular items at one time, making them a distinctive genre of exceptional quality.

The third category encompassed imitation works with profound historical significance. Found in imperial poems from the late Qianlong reign, there was an obvious increase in praise for jade ware made in imitation of ancient designs. “Learning from the ancients” by promoting imitation wares in ancient styles was a clear and established concept. Qianlong’s attention on, and promotion of, this type of jade reflected his admiration and personal feelings for the ancients (13). Learning from the ancients was a long-term advocacy that was applied specifically in the process of artistic creation. Crucial measures were adopted to re-address vulgar inclinations found in jade making of the time. It was under the Qianlong emperor’s strong endorsement, that a large amount of jade ware was produced in the city of Suzhou. “Recently, Zhuanzhu is filled with objects that tell of the ancients” was an honest testimony of this phenomenon.

The aforementioned measures adopted by the Qianlong emperor achieved tangible results. What the Suzhou jade artisans and merchants could sense most notably was the stagnation in sales of jade objects found in the so-called “contemporary style” or “new style”. This consequently left the Suzhou jade craftsmen with no choice but to echo the preferences of the emperor. His denunciation of undesirable trends led by Suzhou artisans was finally held in check; designs were shifted to those that emulated ancient objects or jade ware that conveyed the spirit of paintings.

Sometime around the fifteenth year of the Qianlong reign, accounts and approval of such transformation could be found in the emperor’s poetry.

10 Cloud and Dragon Khotan Jade Vase
Height 18.1 cm, diameter of mouth 3.6 cm
Palace Museum Collection, Beijing

This is also a jade vessel that the Qianlong emperor deemed to have an “advising quality, which artisans expressed through forms of art”.

---

11Hongli, “Yong He Tian Da Yu Wan Liu Yun, You Xu”, Yu Zhi Shi Wu Ji, scroll 39.
13Hongli, “Ti He Tian Yu Lou Shuang Song Hua Cha”, Yu Zhi Shi Si Ji, scroll 38.
14Hongli, “Yong He Tian Yu Pan Long Shou Zhu Ping”, Yu Zhi Shi Si Ji, scroll 40.
15Hongli, “Yong He Tian Yu Yun Long Yu Ping”, Yu Zhi Shi Wu Ji, scroll 15.
16Hongli, “Yong He Tian Yu Guan Quan Tu”, Yu Zhi Shi Wu Ji, scroll 29.
17Hongli, “Yong He Tian Yu Qi Xia Tu”, Yu Zhi Shi Wu Ji, scroll 56.
18Hongli, “He Tian Long Wei Gong”, Yu Zhi Shi Yu Ji, scroll 17.
Green Jade Boulder Carved with the Image of “Spring Dawn over the Elixir Terrace”
Height 23 cm, width 28.3 cm, depth 11 cm
Palace Museum Collection, Beijing

This jade boulder is mentioned in an imperial poem from the fifty-ninth year of the Qianlong reign, which is entitled, Yong He Tian Yu Shi Shi Cang Shu Tu (Ode to a Khotan Jade Piece Depicting a Stone Chamber for Storing Books). The Qianlong emperor considered this a successful example of a Suzhou craftsman redressing a tasteless jade article by imitating a landscape painting.

Spinach Jade Brush Pot Carved with a Stone Book Storage Chamber
Height 16 cm, diameter 12.5 cm
National Palace Museum Collection, Taipei

On the rim of the brush pot is a carved poem by the emperor from the fifty-ninth year of the Qianlong reign. It is entitled, Yong He Tian Yu Shi Shi Cang Shu Tu (Ode to a Khotan Jade Piece Depicting a Stone Chamber for Storing Books). The poem mentions that Suzhou “jade craftsmen have gradually followed the ancients by learning from the classics” and have also removed vulgar influences to create jade articles through imitating old styles or pictorial works. The Qianlong emperor placed equal acclaim on this brush pot.
13 Green Jade Boulder Carved with Zhao Mengfu Bathing Horses
Height 16.3 cm, width 23.5 cm, depth 6 cm
Palace Museum Collection, Beijing

This jade boulder is sculpted in the style of a painting by a renowned painter from a previous dynasty, thus offering new sources for motifs applied in the private production of Suzhou jade objects during the late Qianlong period. This jade mountain was modelled after the famous Yuan dynasty artist, Zhao Mengfu’s handscroll, entitled Bathing Horses.

“Jade artisans from the alleyways of Wu have felt they were wrong. The mallard and fish lu (vase), the zhaofu square yi (wine vessel) and dragon tail gong (cup) are all modelled after ancient designs from the three dynasties (Xia, Shang and Zhou). That is to say the like of paintings such as Spring Dawn Over the Elixir Terrace, those of Mount Qixia and illustrated magnificent landscapes modelled after ancient styles are far from tasteless.”

“Lately, numerous jade articles from Wuzhong have been imitations of ancient objects or paintings and are rather decent objects for appreciation. Although they were made for commercial purposes, fine materials are not wasted on tasteless design and the craftsmanship is also desirable.”

“The Zhuanzhu Lane of Suzhou is where jade artisans gather. Recently, the artisans have, for the most part, learnt to imitate objects of the three dynasties in which the styles and forms are archaic and elegant. Otherwise they carve pieces with the themes of famous landscapes, largely reducing tasteless designs.”

All of these statements indicate that the fashion for jade ware imitating ancient vessels or conveying the spirit of paintings had been well established. After appeasing aesthetic conflict and removing vulgar designs, Suzhou jades artisans regained recognition from the Qianlong emperor.

The Qianlong emperor delivered numerous messages regarding the types of jade ware and the aesthetics he favoured by commenting on jade works of art from Suzhou. These messages meant application of court style on private Suzhou jade production, thus resolving the aesthetic conflict between the court and the private jade market. The artistic standards of the old and elegant that the Qianlong emperor had long advocated were finally realised. Jade ware production in Suzhou began a trend of greater diversification.

II. The Acceptance and Rejection of Tribute

The Qianlong reign was the Qing dynasty’s heyday for tributary gifts presented by individuals. This was a striking feature of the reign. Not only were many people paying tributes for various reasons, but an all-encompassing variety of tributary gifts were received. An increasing number of valuable treasures included gold, jade, antiques and works of art. Tribute from officials became the court’s main channel for the acquisition of treasures and rare objects. It was due to these factors that officials incorporated an increasingly commercialised element into the act of tribute. The procurement of high-end tributary gifts was conducted through commercial transactions which, to a certain degree, attributed to the growth in prosperity of high-end markets dealing in works of art and antiques. This, in turn, led to different methods for tribute acquisition. During the Qianlong reign, an intriguing rental system for tributary gifts emerged whereby selected items could be “sent to the court for a rental fee”.

21 Hongli, “Ti He Tian Yu Shi Shi Cang Shu Tu”, Yu Zhi Shi Wu Ji, scroll 90.
23 Hongli, “Ti He Tian Yu Gu Shan Tu”, Yu Zhi Shi Wu Ji, scroll 98.
24 Qing Gao Zong Shi Lu, scroll 1458, August of the fifty-ninth year of the Qianlong reign (1784).
This February 14th entry from the forty-fifth year of the Qianlong reign records that the Qianlong emperor appreciated and accepted up to ninety-six tributary gifts from Zhu Xiaochun. Since ninety-four of the gifts were made from jade, this demonstrates that jade ware accounted for a considerably large portion of all tributes from officials.

It is worth noting that jade wares were an indispensable, large portion of tributary gifts from court officials, and sometimes even accounted for over half the amount of all tribute presented (14). One obvious fact is that jade wares were presented by officials from all across the empire. Since the locations for producing jade ware were limited during the Qianlong reign, where did provincial officials situated in areas without local production acquire jade for tribute? Did tributary jade ware share a common source?

Relevant archival records indicate that Suzhou was the crucial supply and production base where officials from all around the empire purchased tributary jade ware for the court. In the forty-third year of the Qianlong reign (1778), the case where “Gao Pu purchased jade for private use” shocked both the court and the rest of the empire. The great vassal, Gao Pu, stationed in the Yarkent Khanate, had purchased jade stones, sent from Xinjiang to the mainland, through a family member. He also collaborated with merchants to have the material made into objects in Suzhou. He then sold them privately and made up to twelve thousand taels in silver. The reason given for Gao Pu’s relative, Li Fu, to go to Suzhou was “to handle tributary matters”, 25

In the edict of this case, the Qianlong emperor mentioned that, “Gao Pu was merely a vice minister, and it was not required of his position to present tribute. Why did he send someone to purchase jade ware from Suzhou? Furthermore, not only should Gao Pu not have sent someone to purchase tribute in Suzhou, but none of the Manchurian and Han nobility or even the grand vassals should do this. Even Gao Jin, who is the Governor General of the two Yangtze provinces, should not purchase tributary objects in Suzhou.”26 This indicates that it was widely known that provincial officials purchased jade ware in Suzhou. What Gao Pu did by sending a relative to purchase tributary jade ware in Suzhou may have been a common approach adopted by officials at the time (15). In the forty-fifth year of the Qianlong reign (1780), an investigation into embezzlement by Li Shiyao, Director General of Yungui, revealed that Li Shiyao had also consigned an official in charge of official correspondence and daily affairs named Sun Yungong to purchase tributary gifts in Suzhou. In the three consignments given to Sun Yungong, he purchased articles including jade ware, porcelain and dragon robes for Li Shiyao. This illustrates that the jade objects Li Shiyao presented to the court were also
acquired by sending someone to Suzhou to purchase them. The testimony given by Tu Shen, the Magistrate of Shizong county, concerning the two boxes of jade objects he brought from Yunnan to Suzhou for Li Shiyao must have been a rather typical occurrence. He said, “I am the Magistrate of Shizong county of Yunnan province, I received a document for me to send to the Ministry as an introduction. Just as I was about to embark, Director General Li handed me two boxes of jade wares in person. He said that the boxes contained articles of jade barely decent enough to be presented to the court. Since he had an agent, Sun Yungong, who was based in Suzhou to handle this at the time, he told me to give these two boxes of jade wares to Sun Yungong in order for him to return them to the shops along the way.”

Obviously, these two boxes of jade articles were made in the Suzhou shops before Li Shiyao’s agent, responsible for handling matters regarding tributary gifts, purchased them. They were delivered to Yunnan to undergo checks on their suitability for presentation at court. They were then transported back to the shops in Suzhou from where they originally came. The ability to return items demonstrates the relationship between the presenters of tributary gifts, the jade artisan and the seller. By looking at this case, we learn that the jade wares Li Shiyao presented to the Qianlong emperor originated in Suzhou (16).

The two aforementioned examples, one from Xinjiang in the northwest and the other from Yunnan in the southwest, reveal that Suzhou acted as the supply centre of tributary jade ware for various locations, even those at the distant frontiers of the empire.

Judging from archival records, only a portion of tributary jade ware presented by officials was favoured and accepted by the Qianlong emperor. A considerable number of tributary jade was rejected. The financial burden would have been too great if officials had to keep all that was rejected, especially when the quantity of presented jade objects increased. It was against this backdrop that the “rental system for tributary jade ware” evolved. Officials planning to pay tribute to the emperor had to place a certain amount of deposit to rent tributary objects from retailers. If their tribute gifts were accepted, they paid for them at a price that had been previously agreed; otherwise, the gifts were returned, and a small amount was paid as the rental fee. It is highly probable that this was the scenario for the aforementioned case involving the Director General of Yungui, Li Shiyao, who returned unqualified jade articles to the jade stores in Suzhou. The “rental system for tributary jade ware” phenomenon was not only a measure adopted by the proprietors of Suzhou jade stores in order to increase their client base and competitiveness. It was also an inevitable response to the rising trend of officials presenting jade wares as tributary gifts that were turned down by the Qianlong emperor.

To a certain degree, the Qianlong emperor’s acceptance or rejection of jade wares presented by officials created a very close relationship between private businesses in jade production in Suzhou, the Qianlong emperor and his court. From the Qianlong emperor’s perspective, he could directly express his preferences through the act of acceptance or rejection, an effective approach to influencing jade production in Suzhou. During the investigation into Gao Pu privately selling jade stones in the forty-third year of the Qianlong reign (1778), it was discovered that the asking price for a jade ruyi sceptre reached as high as four thousand liang in silver. The Qianlong emperor was shocked by this and felt that the reason for a jade ruyi sceptre reaching such a high price related to its destination. High-ranking officials, such as Civil and Military Governors, were among those who presented jade ruyi sceptres to the court. This motivated jade merchants to make unusual objects for greater profit. Merchants took the opportunity to pay tribute in order to raise market prices. In order to pay tribute, these high-ranking officials did not mind spending heavily on obtaining tributary gifts. Consequently, an imperial edict was issued forbidding the presentation of any ruyi sceptre made entirely of jade as a tributary gift.
Occasionally, the Qianlong emperor’s requests for tributary jade ware were straightforward. The most typical example is the following edict issued to officials in Suzhou and Yangzhou in the fifty-ninth year of the Qianlong reign (1794):

“Recently, objects presented from the states of Su and Yang, have been primarily adorned with openwork. The jade plates, bowls and censers are all particularly pointless. Plates and bowls are made for holding liquids and censers and tripod ding vessels must be able to contain ash in order for incense to burn. Now that they are all carved with openwork, what use do they have? This is all because untrustworthy craftsmen from these places have made such useless objects in order to make a substantial profit, and those who are senseless fall for this, either by spending a fortune purchasing these objects or renting them for presentation to the court. I have never accepted articles of this sort. Although they are rejected and returned, wicked merchants have already made a huge profit and thus never learnt their lesson. Even in the Hujiang area—which refers to the southern face of Tian Shan (Celestial Mountains—in modern day Xinjiang)—such a style began to be imitated, leading to the waste of entire pieces of raw material. Therefore, an edict was issued to the salt and weaving administrations in Yangzhou and Suzhou so that they would strictly conform in banning unscrupulous craftsmen from continuing established openwork. Explicit instructions should also be given to ensure that this is understood by all concerned in order to stop such wrongdoing and return to purity and simplicity.”

If we refer to the aforementioned statement, it is clear that the subject of this edict was addressing the new style led by Suzhou at the time. The Qianlong emperor adamantly rejected this type of jade ware and put the blame directly on jade artisans and merchants. Through this approach, we can see that the Qianlong emperor tried...
to acquire jade works of art to his taste by influencing the production of jade ware in Suzhou through his acceptance and rejection of tributary jade ware.

Officials who paid tribute could gauge the court and emperor’s preferences through consequent actions. Every official paying tribute hoped their choices would gain appreciation by the emperor, motivated in particular by the hope of paving a smooth career path. On numerous occasions, the Qianlong emperor did not give specific reasons for his acceptance or rejection. This is because the act in itself was reason enough for the emperor. His final decision could only be foreseen by those who examined and considered various, integrated aspects of the entire process from jade production through to tributary custom, which existed before the emperor made final judgment. In any case, the Qianlong emperor’s predilection for certain types of jade articles manifested itself explicitly in his reaction to presented tribute (17, 18, 19). It was taken note of and forwarded on by the officials involved. An appropriate creative vision then had to be realised by jade artisans in order for the emperor’s indirect influence to take effect.

In order to maintain a stable customer base and maximum economic return, producers and merchants of Suzhou jade made every effort to ensure their wares were selected as tribute to the emperor. Therefore, they paid a great deal of attention to court taste and demand. Court style jade ware became their best template. An example of their swift response to court taste can be seen in an incident personally involving the Qianlong emperor. On one occasion, a relatively large Khotan jade stone was delivered from Xinjiang. Because of its irregular shape, it was quite rare. The Qianlong emperor personally reviewed and finalised the design proposal and had a jade artisan in the imperial atelier carve it after a Han dynasty (206 BC–AD 220) guōng wine vessel in the shape of a dragon’s tail that was in the court’s collection. The Qianlong emperor deemed the finished product elegant and was rather pleased with it. The jade dragon-tailed wine vessel thus became the subject of
the emperor's various poems. What no one expected was that, before long, a Suzhou jade craftsman sold another dragon-tailed wine vessel that looked identical to the one already in the court's possession. It was sold to an official and presented to the emperor, who lamented over this incident upon presentation. There is no way for us to know through what channel the Suzhou jade artisan obtained the design drafts for this dragon-tailed wine vessel, but this incident reflects the indirect, yet close, relationship of Suzhou and the court in terms of jade ware production.

The emperor, officials and jade artisans mentioned above, were linked together through the payment of tributary jade wares; all influenced the trajectory of private jade ware production in Suzhou from their own respective angles.

III. Conclusion

During the Qianlong reign of the Qing dynasty, carving of jade ware in Suzhou can be divided into the court and private sectors. For jade production at court, the Qianlong emperor and the court were able directly to control jade artisans from Suzhou who worked in the imperial workshop without deviation. The Qianlong emperor directly participated as a designer in the process of jade ware production.

For Suzhou's private jade ware production, the Qianlong emperor played more of a regulatory role. The emperor expressed his opinion regarding the types of jade ware and aesthetics he was fond of through personal commentary in order to resolve the aesthetic conflict between court taste and that of the private sector. Meanwhile, he also guided creative direction for Suzhou's private jade production through the acceptance and rejection of tributary gifts from provincial officials. This imposed a great degree of economic leverage that could not be ignored.

Such regulatory measures adopted by the Qianlong emperor created a close relationship between Suzhou and the court in terms of workmanship, and, to a certain degree, promoted the prosperity of Suzhou jade ware production. An unparalleled period in history, demonstrated through the Qianlong court's glorious collection of jade, was created simultaneously.

Hongli, “Ti He Tian Yu Long Wei Gong”, Ya Zhi Shi Wu Ji, scroll 92.