Introduction

Ancient records on decorative gold are missing, so it is difficult to sketch the outlines of its development. Sifting through reports of the excavation of gold jewellery, it is not difficult to discover that gold jewellery made a late appearance, beginning in the Xia–Shang period and continuing through to the Qing dynasty. Gold jewellery had different functions in different regions, was worked in a multiplicity of ways and came in a plethora of forms and styles. Some forms were unique and others emerged as a result of cultural interaction, whereby the best features of some traditions were adopted and their shortcomings were discarded.

Adopting an overview of the laws governing advances in the culture of decorative gold over more than 4000 years, we can discern four major areas representing several developmental stages: the culture of gold jewellery of the northern steppe nomadic tribes; the culture of gold jewellery of the Huaxia tribes practising agriculture based respectively on millet and paddy rice in the Yellow and Yangtze river valleys; the culture of gold jewellery of the agricultural nomads working the red earth of the southwestern plateau; and the culture of gold jewellery of the imperial rulers of the Central Plains. Throughout their histories, these four cultures were in a flux of collision, interaction, synthesis, transmission and innovation, resulting in the production of items ranging from gold leaf, repoussé and gold moulding, to welded gold beading, filigree, drawn work, inlay and gold and silver plating.

These four major areas were determined by multiple material and cultural objective conditions, including environment, climate, production and materials, which simultaneously encouraged the formation and development of the geographically limited realms of the cultures of decorative gold. The evolutionary development over more than 4000 years of the ancient Chinese culture of gold jewellery was inevitably determined and propelled by the movements in these areas of the cultures of gold jewellery; the minor cultures of gold jewellery; gold artisanship; gold plating techniques; and baodianzhuang inlay.
Area 1: The Culture of Gold Jewellery of the Northern Steppe Nomadic Tribes
(Xia–Shang—Southern and Northern Dynasties: 2200 BCE–CE 907)

The northern steppe nomadic tribes include the ancient Chinese Rong-Di tribes of the north, the Yi tribes of the northeast and the Qiang tribes of the northwest, as well as different later groupings, for example the Xiongnu, Tujue, Donghu, Xianbei, Sushen, Gaogouli (Koguryo) and Bohai (Parhae), whose range of activities extended far beyond the northern boundary of today’s People’s Republic of China and the ancient Great Wall, eastwards as far as the Pacific littoral and westwards to the Caspian Sea. These tribes relied on cattle and sheep herding, so that meat and dairy products were a vital element in their diet; in temperament these peoples were fierce and adventurous. Across the steppe which they inhabited, archaeologists have, over the past fifty years, unearthed gold jewellery ranging in age from the Xia–Shang period (2200–1100 BCE) to the end of the Tang dynasty (907).

The jewellery from the early period comprises gold thread, gold sheet and strings of coloured stones, with gold jewellery that was either cast or inset with precious stones making a later appearance. In the late period gold jewellery was produced using many intricate handicrafts including welded gold beading, attached filigree, woven filigree and the inlay of precious stones. Gold jewellery comprising gold wire, gold sheet and strings of coloured stones has been unearthed in Gansu, Qinghai, Xinjiang, Shaanxi and Shanxi, as well as in the environs of Beijing, and it ranges in age from the Xia–Shang to the end of the prehistoric steppe period (2200–1100 BCE) and continues down to as late as the Western Zhou (11th century–771 BCE). Important discoveries include: gold earrings and a gold nose guard (biyin) (1) unearthed from the Siba culture cemetery at Huoshagou in Yumen, Gansu province; gold ear ornaments (2), gold peach-shaped decorative pieces (3) and gold “shells” (4) from the Kayue culture cemetery at Shangsunjiangzai in Tongxiang county, Qinghai province; and gold ear ornaments of the bronze age period from grave no. 325 at the ancient Tianbei cemetery site in Hami, Xinjiang. These finds all reflect the rough and pure archaic style and technical characteristics of the gold wire and sheet jewellery produced on the northwestern steppe.
The gold hairpin (5) and gold armbands (6) unearthed from a Shang grave at Liujiahe in Pinggu county, Beijing, show technical influences derived from bronze casting. The gold hairpin was, in fact, cast and at its front section there is a tenon, showing that there was once a non-gold piece with a mortise at the front. From either end of the gold armband, horse-hoof shaped gold pendants hang, similar to the Siba culture gold ear ornaments and the nose guard (biyin) from Huoashaogou, but the workmanship is finer, enabling us to distinguish between the pure steppe of gold jewellery cultures of the northwest and north that possibly came about because of the meeting of the Shang bronze cultures and the cultures of the steppe. These two items of gold jewellery were possibly products of the Shang bronze culture, but the proximity to the workmanship and styles of the gold jewellery of the northern grasslands provides evidence of the impact and synthesis of the steppe gold jewellery culture and the agricultural jewellery culture.

We can also observe the emergence among the Shang dynasty gold ear ornaments (7) and the gold bow-shaped decorations (8) unearthed at the Taohuazhuang site in Shilou, Shanxi province, of the craftmanship for producing gold necklaces threaded through turquoise and the working of gold sheet as jewellery. There is a striking similarity in the crafting of the two types of Shang dynasty gold jewellery seen in the objects from the Taohuazhuang site and a gold ear ornament and gold bow-shaped decorative item unearthed at the Xiyangxian site in Chunhua, Xianyang municipality, Shaanxi province. It was not an accident that there is this similarity in items of gold jewellery unearthed at sites not too distant from each other, and there must have been a close spatio-temporal connection within the different cultures, which is something we must take note of and incorporate in our studies.

The gold “shells” (4) unearthed from grave no. 455 (M455) at the Shangsunjiazhai site in Qinghai were obviously beaten and shaped in imitation of the cowrie shells from the South China Sea used as a mode of exchange in Shang–Yin society, demonstrating that the Shang had trading and cultural connections with societies as remote as those of the nomadic tribes of Qinghai. From the bronze dagger graves of Liaoxi gold deer-shaped and tiger-shaped decorative items (9) belonging to the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods have been unearthed. These items of gold jewellery, which were cast and have knobs welded to their dorsal surfaces to accommodate a cord, are classified as belonging to the Donghu people.

The Donghu people were positioned between the Xiongnu tribes and the state of Yan, and they were thoroughly imbued with the style of the grasslands. After this, gold wire and leaf craftsmanship would be replaced by casting inlay techniques, which constitute the gold jewellery culture of the Xiongnu. Representative works of the latter are the bird finial of the Warring States royal crown (10), the tiger and bird motif decoration of the gold plaque with coloured stones (11), and the pair of ear ornaments made of gold and turquoise with welded beading (12), all unearthed at Aluchaideng in the Hangjin Banner in Ordos, Inner Mongolia. However, a gold plaque decorated with exotic beast motifs and a gold plaque with a rampant beast beaded from a Xiongnu grave of the Warring States period at the Xigoupan site in Zhunggar Banner reveal Scythian cultural elements.

Warring States Xiongnu gold working already encompassed the new technologies of welded gold beading and coloured stone inlay, demonstrating that Xiongnu gold jewellery culture had become the backbone element and central strength in the gold jewellery cultures of the northern grasslands. In the Western Han dynasty, Xiongnu gold jewellery culture began to synthesise elements of Western Han jade culture and metal crafts, as can be seen from a Western Han gold belt buckle decorated with a recumbent sheep, a gold plaque showing tiger in combat (15), and an agate necklace and gold and jade head ornaments (16), all unearthed at the Zhunggar Xigoupan site, which effectively demonstrate that Western Han period Xiongnu gold working had either absorbed Western Han jade culture and metal working or that the two cultures of decorative gold were interacting.

In this context it is worth noting the similarities between a gold plaque decorated with an illustration of an exotic beast goring a tiger (14) unearthed from tomb M1 at the Goubei no. 1 terrace at the Jiaohe (Yarkoto) site in Turfan, Xinjiang, and the gold plaque decorated with exotic beast motifs and the Warring States gold plaque with a beast and that with a standing beast (13) unearthed from a Xiongnu grave of the Warring States period at the
10 Warring States–Xiongnu. Bird finial of gold royal crown. JQ, 1, 25

11 Warring States–Xiongnu. Gold plaque with inset coloured stones and tiger and bird motifs. JQ, 1, 18

12 Warring States–Xiongnu. Gold ear ornaments with turquoise and applied beading. JQ, 1, 21

13 Warring States–Xiongnu. Gold plaque with standing beast. JQ, 1, 20

14 Han–Xiongnu. Gold plaque depicting beast goring tiger. JQ, 1, 67

15 Western Han. Gold plaque with tiger goring boar. JQ, 1, 55
16 Western Han-Xiongnu. Agate necklace and gold and jade head ornaments. JQ, 1, 56

17 Han. Gold plaque depicting wolf goring ox. JQ, 1, 70

18 Northern Wei-Xianbei Tuoba. Gold ring with standing ram and inset turquoise. JQ, 1, 85

19 Northern Dynasties. Gold crown ornament with ox head (left). Gold triangular crown ornament with deer head (right). JQ, 1, 87

20 Northern Dynasties. Gold decorative item depicting kneeling horse. JQ, 1, 89
Zhunggar Xigoupan site. All show striking representations of the mythical griffin and all are fashioned from hammered gold leaf, but the forms and the method of repoussé show a divergence, demonstrating that the same griffin motif was being interpreted differently by the eastern and western Xiongnu.

A gold plaque illustrated with a wolf going an ox (17) unearthed in Qilian county in Haibei prefecture, Qinghai province, is a major cast gold ornament produced by the Xiongnu of the Qilian mountains and it has a total weight of 365 g, making it a rare and almost unique treasure.

The Xianbei people constitute a branch of the Dongbu (Tungusic) peoples who were named for the Dahinggan (or Xianbei) mountains which they originally inhabited. The gold jewellery culture of the Xianbei can be classified into the two divisions of the Xianbei people, that of the Tuoba and of the Murong, and examples of this art have been unearthed at a number of sites straddling the eastern, central and western stretches of the northern grasslands extending across Inner Mongolia: Tongliao city, Horqin Left Middle Banner and Horqin Right Middle Banner; Ulaan Qab League, Liangcheng county and Chahar Right Rear Banner; Darhan Muminggan United Banner; Hohhot city, Tumd Left Banner and Horinger county; and Baotou city, Tumd Right Banner. Most Xianbei decorative gold is imbued with the stylistic drift of the northern grassland cultures, as is firmly shown by such examples as a gold plaque decorated with two rams and five discs, a gold ring decorated with a standing ram motif and inset with turquoise, a gold ring decorated with a standing ram motif and inset with turquoise (18), a gold tri-

angular headress ornament with a deer’s head (19, right), a gold ox head ornament (19, left), a gold decorative item with a kneeling horse (20), a gold plaque with a human face (21), and a gold decorative piece with a supernatural beast.

At the same time archaeologists have unearthed a gold seal with a beast-shaped knob inscribed “jinwuwan gui Yihou” (Jinwuwan accepts allegiance to Marquis Yi), another gold seal with a beast-shaped knob inscribed “Jinxianbei gui Yihou” (Jinxianbei accepts allegiance to Marquis Yi), and gold belt decorations with bixie (protective beast) motifs, which were seals and decorative objects conferred on rulers of the grasslands by political authorities of the Central Plains region. The Tuoba Xianbei moved south to fill a political vacuum and held sway as far as Shanxi and Henan, but after establishing the Northern Wei dynasty they were rapidly acculturated by the Chinese, and the elements of grasslands gold jewellery culture gradually disappeared.

The Murong branch of the Xianbei established in succession the Former and Latter Yan polities, spanning the period from 286 to 410, in the area which is today Hebei, Shandong, Shanxi, Henan and southern Liaoning provinces, and, later, the Northern Yan (409–436) after Feng Ba usurped the Latter Yan. Examples of Former Yan decorative gold include a gold buyao crown ornament resembling a flowering tree (22), a gold openwork waist plate (dang) with a design of four phoénixes, a string of gold ornaments resembling a bush, and a gold ring with inlaid precious stones (23). Gold objects that are part of the same tradition of Murong Xianbei gold decorative objects were unearthed from the tomb of the Northern Yan aristocrat Feng Sufu, Duke of Liaoxi, including a gold waist plaque with a Buddha image (24), a gold dang with a fuchan cicada motif (25), and a gold buyao headdress ornament (26).
The *byyao* crown was a type of decorative headdress of the Yan dynasties found throughout the northern areas of Shanxi and Hebei, where it was worn by the Murong, Tuoba and Han ethnic groups, demonstrating the strength of regionalism and shared customs. At the same time this royal headdress culture reflects the interaction in decorative gold over a period of one hundred and fifty years between the Central Plains and of the three Yan dynasties (Former, Latter and Northern) in northern China, eastern Hebei and southwestern Liaoning, and a minor area of Murong Xianbei decorative gold can be defined.

In October 1997, at the Boma site located 90 km southwest of Zhaosu in the Ili-Kazak Autonomous Prefecture of Xinjiang a group of gold and silver objects that seemed foreign was unearthed. Representative pieces included a gold mask set with rubies (27), a gold cup inlaid with agate and set with a tiger handle, a gold lidded jar set with rubies and bearing a *buxianghua* (honeysuckle) design (28), the remains of a gold sword scabbard inset with rubies, and a gold ring inlaid with rubies (29). The gold and silver objects from Boma had a style that suggested Hellenistic influence and they were quite different from the decorative gold of the grasslands described above. The area that is today the Ili-Kazak Autonomous Prefecture was historically part of the territory of the Western Turks (Tujue) and so these objects have been defined as objects of the Western Turks and have been dated to the period 552–603, but the view that they could be as late as the Chuigong period (685–688) reign of the Tang dynasty cannot be dismissed. The excavation of these two groups of gold and silver objects demonstrates that in northern Xinjiang there was once a rich and distinctive minor area occupied by Western Turk decorative gold.

The cultures of decorative gold, as well as that of gold and silver articles, of the tribes of the northern grasslands endured for more than two thousand years, and it was characterised by the emergence and maturation of a variety of fine gold-working crafts, ranging from the use of gold wire, gold foil and turquoise and gold necklaces to casting, repoussé, deep inlay and gold carving, that in artistry and style were forthright and strong, clearly express-
ing the unique character of steppe life. Outside the minor area represented by the decorative gold of the Western Turks, the culture of gold decoration of the ancient Di and Qiang peoples stands at the head of the succession of mainstream gold cultures belonging in turn to the Xiongnu, Donghu, Xianbei and Tujue peoples, and at the same time minor areas of differing size make their appearance. In the eastern areas a minor area of Sushen and Gaogouli decorative gold can be posited, but too few objects have been unearthed to warrant description of it as a gold culture, and so we set it aside for the present and only examine its more mature later phase.

Area 2: The Culture of Gold Jewellery of the Huaxia Millet and Rice Farmers of the Yellow and Yangtze River Valleys
(Xia–Warring States: 2200–220 BCE)

The farmers of the Yellow and Yangtze river valleys established rich food supplies including cereals, vegetables and meat that sustained the development of a civilisation that produced a system of production based on slave-owning, a written language and a nation state capable of producing large quantities of sophisticated bronze implements, weapons and vessels. The Bronze Age created material wealth and a highly developed culture that gave rise to three slave-owning dynasties—the Xia, Shang and Zhou, but this unfortunately provided the material condi-
tions that attracted invasion and looting by the northern nomadic tribes who moved south. The territory of these dynasties encompassed fifteen provinces (Shaanxi, Gansu, Ningxia, Qinghai, Shanxi, Hebei, Liaoning, Shandong, Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Anhui, Jiangxi, Fujian, Henan and Hubei) of present-day China, as well as more remote, outlying areas. The administrative centre of these dynasties was in turn located in the west (Erlitou) and north (Anyang–Yinxu) of Henan, and then the capital moved to two locations in Shaanxi (Li and Hao). The gold of these three dynasties was less impressive than their jade and bronze; not only did it make a later appearance, but it was used within narrower confines. However, it attained admirably high standards of workmanship and its intricacy surpassed the gold crafts of the northern grasslands, resulting in the creation of an alternative culture of fine gold craftsmanship that was distinctively different from that of the north.

The earliest gold objects discovered in this area were decorative items made from different types of gold leaf unearthed from royal tombs at Yinxu. These were mostly casings designed to enhance aesthetically the objects they enclose, but the presence of decorative gold is yet to be studied. The oldest truly attested decorative objects found to date are no earlier than the Western Zhou and these are gold bronze ornaments unearthed from tomb M8 at the Jin marquis cemetery in Beizhao village, Quwo, Qucun in Shanxi and from tomb M2001 at the Guo state cemetery in Sanmenxia, Henan province. Fifteen objects were found at the former site, comprising one sharp triangular pendant, one tiger-head shaped decorative item, five bow-shaped hoops, six twisted strand hoops, one rectangular shaped piece and one twisted strand rectangular piece (30). These objects totalled 459.3 g in weight. At the latter site twelve gold objects were found and these comprised seven hoops with large holes and decorated with two raised concentric circles, one gold object with an angular hole and decorated with two raised concentric circles, three gold beast masks and one hanging leaf-shaped gold ornament with an openwork acute angle, triangular marking. The objects total 433.25 g (31) and all were cast in moulds and carved, in much the same way as bronze objects were made. From this we know that this early gold crafting had not yet broken free from the working of bronze and had not developed unique characteristics.

In 770 BCE, King Ping moved east to Luoyang, initiating the Spring and Autumn period during which the five major states (Qi, Song, Jin, Qin and Chu) struggled for supremacy. These states, as well as Wu and Yue, each had distinctive cultures of decorative gold, as did the many smaller states that tended to produce gold objects reflecting their relative positioning in the feudal hierarchy. Overall, in the Spring and Autumn, there were upwards of one thousand feudatory states and the decorative gold from all of them gleamed like stars in the midnight firmament spreading light throughout the sky. The gold objects unearthed by archaeologists can only clarify what decorative gold objects were owned by which of the overlords of the five major states. For example, from tomb M1 of the Duke of Qin in Fengxiang a gold belt hook decorated with a duck’s head (32) was unearthed, together with a gold dog. From the remains of the ancestral temple of the
Spring and Autumn period gold handicrafts had already entered a new stage where attached filigree with inlay turquoise could be accomplished, and the crucial step had been partly taken to escape the influence of bronze casting.

In the Warring States period, the economic, cultural and military development of different regions underwent major advances, as represented by the progression of the following seven powerful feudal states: Qin, Chu, Yan, Qi, Han, Zhao and Wei. The rulers of these states ambitiously struggled to achieve supremacy, and they invoked the name of the emperor in their struggle, known in Chinese history as the “battle of seven hegemons to become the overlord”. At this time the gold cultures of the various states were in direct competition with that of the Zhou royal household, and at least seven minor cultural areas formed as well as many ancillary cultures. The representative remains of the old articles from this period also fall into a division between north and south. The gold belt hooks, cups, lidded bowls and transformed dragon design covers unearthed from the tomb of the Marquis Yi of Zeng in Suixian county, Hubei province, were without exception funerary objects that were cast in moulds, shedding light on the opulence and luxury of the period, as well as demonstrating that gold craftsmanship had not yet broken away from the technology of bronze casting. The state of Zeng was a dependency of the Chu cultural system, and the wealth of gold objects buried with Marquis Yi after his death is a reflection of the quantity of gold in the possession of the small ancillary states of the period.

The gold objects found in the tomb of the king of Zhongshan in Pingshan county, Hebei province, included a gold zun vessel, a gold xīn sword hilt and a gold hubcap. The gold zun was both a decorative and a functional item as the foot of the staff of a bronze dagger-axe (34); we can see that within the cast three silver flanges were inset, as well as dragon wings and eyes. The pupils of the eyes inset with blue glass represent a newly flourishing technology indicating that the royal workshops which produced decorative gold had reached a high level where they now handled gold and silver inlay work so that more comprehensive aesthetic criteria could be fulfilled. The silver belt hook inlaid with a gold phoenix motif is similar to the gold zun, but also different, in that silver forms the base for inlaying the gold phoenix design. The art of setting gold in silver was a unique Huaxia gold-working technology; it is not seen in the decorative gold culture of the northern grasslands, nor does it appear often in Western gold.

A gold belt hook with a beast head motif unearthed from a Western Han tomb at Sanlidun in Lianshui county, Jiangsu province, has a gold purity close to 94%, and this gold item was produced by casting, carving and inlay, then two silver corners were welded to it. Not only was the mould casting and carving of this belt hook of the finest workmanship but two silver horns were then welded to the head of the animal. This gold and silver craftsmanship, which can be described as “painting a dragon and then giving it eyes”, was possibly a complex craft that flourished in many of the small states of this period. In conclusion, it is astounding how the silversmiths and goldsmiths of this period were able to utilise so skilfully the scarce supplies of gold and silver available to them and
devise methods of using it in designs that defy our imagination and represent constant innovation that dazzles us today.

The craftsmanship used by the Huaxia people to produce gold items can be described as having advanced in five major steps which made use of five different methods of working with gold:

Step 1) The items enclosed in gold foil that were unearthed from the tombs of Shang kings extended the range of expression used to encase objects and showed that craftsmen had mastered the ability to beat gold into thin foil and shape it using a hammer. This is the oldest and purest method of working gold as a decorative material, but gold wire had not yet made its appearance.

Step 2) Gold artisans of the state of Qin could produce gui- and petal-shaped gold items that featured relief and repressed lines that were beaten into gold sheets, and to the present day this provides the earliest Chinese examples of gold “repoussé” work in which the designs were produced by hammering.

Step 3) Gold objects were cast in moulds like bronze items and then carved and polished. In shape, these were round, rectangular or pointed triangular. The designs were similar to those that were applied to bronze objects at the time and they were quite unlike the moulding and inlay work of the northern grasslands gold artisan.

Step 4) In the Spring and Autumn period the technique of wirework and inlaid turquoise, both mould-cast and not mould-cast, made its appearance.

Step 5) In the Warring States period gold-silver inlay crafts appear, with both gold set in silver, and silver set in gold. These composite metalworking crafts both made their first appearance in the Warring States.

Scholars find it difficult to explain why to the present day the only decorative gold of the Three Dynasties to have been found are gold belt hooks and belt ornaments. No gold decorative items to be worn in the hair, on the ears, fingers and wrists, around the neck or at the chest have been found. This would lead us to conclude that gold was not used for bodily decoration by the Huaxia peoples in this period, which may be intimately connected with their traditional reverence for jade. This was the time when an ethnoculture surrounding jade was at its highest flourishing; it was maintained that “the true gentleman likens himself to jade and for no reason can jade be removed from the body”. The gaze of rulers and aristocrats had not yet turned to gold and there was no acknowledgement of the aesthetic role that gold could play in enhancing physical beauty. Decorative gold for personal wear comprised only belt hooks and decorations that could be mounted on leather. This shows that the Huaxia people worshipped jade and not gold, but Laozi does point out that wealth was measured in both “gold and jade” (jinyu) at this time, but there are no records of people wearing “gold and jade” ornaments. This is consistent with the fact that few personal decorative items made of gold have been unearthed by archaeologists. Moreover, if the character “jin” in Laozi is interpreted as indicating bronze or copper rather than gold, as many scholars maintain, then we have virtually no contemporary textual references to gold.

However, it should be pointed out that the concept of great wealth in China has been reflected perennially in the phrase “guarding halls filled with gold and jade”, but it would seem that only the emperors of the Han dynasty were so extravagant that they lived up to the reality of this phrase. Han dynasty historical texts record emperors lavishing gifts ranging from several tens of kilos of gold to more than 20,000 kilos of gold on meritorious officials, but the verity or source of such wealth remains a mystery today.

Area 3: The Culture of Gold Jewellery of the Agricultural Nomads of the Southwestern Red Earth Plateau
(Shang—Southern and Northern Dynasties: 1300 BCE–CE 589)

The area on which southwestern China sits has, following its collision with the area of India, risen as mountains—the Himalayas, Tangula mountains of the Xikang-Tibetan plateau, Kunlun mountains, Bayankala mountains, Qilian mountains and Minshan mountains, which soar to tremendous heights and extend as far as the eye can see with their year-round snows. They kept this region isolated, and only at several select points on the plains and in mountain valleys did interaction and contact take place between the steppe nomads and the Huaxia peoples. Contact was limited, developed slowly and took place at a later time, but a unique craftsmanship for producing decorative gold made its appearance. Important ethnic groups of this region are the various Qiang and Yi groups referred to as the Ba, Shu, Dian and Yelang, the Yi of the southwest who live today in the cold red earth plateau regions of Sichuan, Guizhou, Yunnan, Tibet and Guangxi. Their gold-working crafts and culture come, however, from the moist and rainy fertile plains.

The earliest gold objects found in this area were ancient Shu objects roughly contemporary with the reign of King Wuding of the Shang-Yin dynasty (13th century BCE) unearthed at the Guangan—Sanxingdui site in Sichuan. These objects include bronze masks covered with gold leaf; bronze figures with gold masks, gold staffs, gold tiger-shaped decorative items, gold masks, and gold hooked fish-shaped items and gold zhang sceptre-shaped decorative items. These items are all either encased in gold or are beaten from sheet gold. The gold staff (35) was made by wrapping gold foil impressed with raised fish designs and while it is not a gold ornament it was used in the land of Yufu, literally meaning “swimming fish”, to signify royal authority which shows that gold was highly valued. The site of Jinsha village within Chengdu municipality was another site of ancient Shu which is later in date than the Sanxingdui site of Yufu. It has been diligently and sys-
tematically excavated in recent years and has revealed an unimaginable wealth of gold objects. Excavated to date at Jinsha are: a gold mask; a gold belt with an illustration depicting fishing with bow and arrow; a gold bird’s head pattern belt; a gold decorative item showing four birds circling the sun; a gold frog-shaped item; and a gold trumpet-shaped object. None of the pieces are gold jewellery, but the workmanship is like that at Sanxingdui, and all the objects have been made by repoussé or carving.

Only the object decorated with birds circling the sun (36) is made from gold foil using the openwork technique; it is round and the openwork depicts the long talons and curved bodies of the birds in flight. Forming a hachured pattern, the design conveys the movement of the birds and its excavators designated it “a solar disc”. None of the gold objects found at the Jinsha site to date was an item of jewellery, but the ongoing scientific excavation of the site might eventually reveal this class of object.

The ancient state of Dian emerged in the area around Dianchi lake on the Kunming plain of Yunnan in the Warring States period and it continued until the time of Emperor Wudi of the Han dynasty. A large number of gold objects have been unearthed from graves of the ancient state of Dian, such as gold sword scabbards, battle-axe shaped pieces, bijia (arm guards), pincers, hair claps, hairpins, hair slides, scissor-shaped plaques, lozenge-shaped plaques, round plaques, animal-shaped items, calabash drops, hexagonal oval-shaped buttons, round buttons, jixin (chicken-heart shaped) buttons, cicada-shaped buttons, four- and five-petal buttons, co-joint circular buttons, sheets, jue-shaped (segment-shaped) pieces, stringed beads and silver inlaid items. There is no doubt that these were gold decorative objects and jewellery of the ancient state of Dian. Not only was there a wide variety of types of gold, but large quantities were also used. One polished gold arm guard (37) was 415 g in weight, showing that Dian had been rich in gold resources.

The methods used to work gold were precise, and they comprised gold wire, gold leaf, mould casting, repoussé, inlay and carving. The shapes and decoration differed from that used by neighbouring cultures and exemplified a rich and pure style unique to the Dian royal clan. Of the objects, the gold hair claps, hairpins and hair slides, as well as the various types of gold buttons, beads and the arm guards were items of personal decoration worn by members of the Dian royal household, but they were of plain design and not ostentatious, even though large amounts of gold were used to make them.

We know little about the decorative gold of the Yelong, the Southwestern Yi and the Tubo, and that must wait until more examples of these traditions are excavated.
The three major areas of Chinese decorative gold described above extended for one or two millennia, during which period they mutually coexisted, shaped, assimilated and synthesised each other, to form eventually a unified culture of gold jewellery of the rulers of China. As new ethnic groups arose, they brought about the collisions of areas. This particular area of imperial gold emerges with Emperor Qin Shihuang and continues until the collapse of the Manchu Qing dynasty.

In 221 BCE the Qin king, Ying Zheng, unified the country when he conquered Qi, the last remaining rival state, and proclaimed himself China’s first emperor, Qin Shihuang. China had entered a new age in which emperors directly ruled the entire country with a high-level concentration of power. Although Qin Shihuang adopted progressive measures, such as standardising language and measures, in unifying the nation, he also “burned books and buried scholars”, and undertook massive building projects. The latter included the construction of an impressive palace for himself called Epang Palace, which depleted the energies of his people, as well as the treasury, and exhausted the nation to the point where a massive insurrection became inevitable. A peasant rebel army led by Liu Bang overthrew the Qin dynasty and established the mighty Han Empire. After an initial period of rule in accordance with Taoist principles, the nation gradually recovered strength, new policies were adopted and good relations with the Xiongnu were established.

By the time of Emperor Wu Di, Confucian teachings prevailed, the nation was governed in accordance with solid civilian principles, military power was exerted in the interests of foreign policy and the Xiongnu were defeated. They no longer constituted a powerful enemy force in the north, having been brought under the Han sway. This provided a wonderful historic opportunity for the introduction of northern Xiongnu gold and the export of jade culture. Material evidence of this is provided by gold, jade and agate head ornaments and necklaces (16) unearthed at the Xigoupan site in Zhuanggar Banner, Ordos, Inner Mongolia. These include a gold dragon and tiger ear ornament that demonstrates how the Western Han art of producing openwork jade pieces with dragon and tiger motifs was incorporated in the gold-working repertoire of the Xiongnu so that gold and jade ear pendants became part of bridal dress.

The collision and interaction of the two major areas representing the gold-working traditions of the nomads of the grasslands and of the Huaxia agriculturists gave rise to the production of synthesised masterpieces by the Xiongnu visionary artists skilled in depicting scenes of animal combat and by the court goldsmiths of the Central Plains. This type of masterpiece blending Western Han and Xiongnu decorative gold cultures can also be seen in a gold decorative plaque depicting a tiger and boar in combat (15) which was also unearthed at Xigoupan. This was no random masterpiece, but the inevitable product of the synthesis that came about when these northern and southern areas of gold working collided within the context of a unified imperial culture of decorative gold.

Gold objects and jewellery of the Western Han period have been unearthed in Liaoning, Hebei, Shaanxi, Jiangsu, Guangdong and Guanxi, and they include “horse hoof gold” (matijin), “unicorn foot gold” (linzhijin), gold medicinal needles, gold inlaid stoves with applied filigree, gold seals with animal-shaped knobs including a hunting cheetah and a gold dragon seal inscribed “Wen Di xing xi” (Executive seal of Emperor Wen), a gold duck’s head belt hook and a hand chain of gold lozenge-shaped beads. Although the “unicorn foot gold” (38) and the “horse hoof gold” (39) were not decorative gold, they were also not regular gold specie. They were first produced in 95 BCE when Emperor Wu Di sought to “harmonise the auspicious elements” by renaming gold as “unicorn feet” and “horse’s hooves”, and then casting gold in these shapes to use as funerary gifts from the Western Han imperial household to be buried in the tomb of King Huai of Zhongsan, Liu Xiu. Around the rim of the lid of the “unicorn foot”, gold wire was welded to form two connected petal shapes; the cover of the “horse hoof” gold was carved to resemble two rows of pearls enclosing an inlay gold flower and on its lower side a row of gold beads enclose a small gold petal. The workmanship is exquisite and regular, and the work is redolent with auspicious significance.

A Western Han gold stove (40) unearthed at Hujiakou-
cun village within the Chang’an city site in the northern suburbs of Xi’an was shaped by welding sheets of gold and then coiling gold wire to form the chimney. Gold coiled wire and gold beads were then welded to the surface of the brazier and turquoise was inlaid. Two flanged gold sheets were then attached before the mouth of the stove. This is a rare work produced by Western Han goldsmiths and it is an extremely valuable example testifying to the artistry of Western Han gold craftsmen.

Large quantities of decorative gold of the Eastern Han, Wei, Jin and Southern and Northern Dynasties have been unearthed, ranging in location and encompassing Wuwei in Gansu, Guyuan in Ningxia, Xi’an in Shaanxi, Dingzhou in Hebei, Luoyang in Henan, Hanjiang in Jiangsu, Hefei in Anhui, Wenzhou in Zhejiang, Yidu and Dangyang in Hubei, and Changsha and Changde in Hunan.

Eleven fine gold decorative items serve to reflect the pulse of development and the technical levels attained by the imperial goldsmiths producing fine artworks over the more than five hundred years from the Eastern Han dynasty (25–220) through to the Southern and Northern Dynasties (420–589): gold crown floral decorations (41); a gold tianlu guardian beast with applied filigree and inlaid rubies; a gold bixie guardian beast with applied filigree and inlaid rubies (42); a jade triple sheng (hair ornament); a gold hat ornament bearing the inscription “yi zisun” (meaning, “may you have many sons and grandsons”); gold decorative pieces; gold openwork floral beads (43); a gold belt buckle with inlaid turquoise depicting a chi dragon and a tiger; a gold waist plate with a cicada motif;
and a pair of gold earrings inlaid with turquoise. Decorative items made from gold filigree include a gold rope-like chain, a gold filigree linked chain (44) and a gold hair clasp. All show the most exquisite and delicate filigree workmanship that is at once both artful and enchanting.

Gold wire repoussé objects include a gold hair clasp, and an example of gold wire carving is provided by a gold chain beaded hand bracelet. Gold jewellery made from gold foil and plate include a gold choker, and we also have a gold plate (sheet) welded to form a gold circlet and a gold jue. Outside the scope of these items of decorative jewellery are decorative objects that depict a gold bixie, lion and paired fish.

The most finely wrought gold decorative item of jewellery of this period is a belt hook of gold with a turquoise inlay (45) that belonged to Liu Hong of the Western Jin who served as General of Lingnan and Duke of Xuancheng. This item deploys all the techniques for the fine working of gold to produce the gold belt hook which has as its central motif a dragon and tiger that are the offspring of nine dragons. This piece not only reflects the special characteristics of delicacy that characterised the techniques of the goldsmiths serving the Western Jin emperors, but the original artistic conception that imbued their original work. This piece warrants description as a masterpiece combining the many techniques of the ancient Chinese goldsmith.

From the above unearthed gold decorative items we can see that Western gems had entered the Han–Jin goldsmith’s repertoire of lay techniques and that inlaying gold had become part of royal gold craftsmanship, taking its place beside the traditional inlay material which was turquoise and impelling the gold artisan into the new realm of gem inlay. Henceforth, Sui, Tang, Song, Yuan, Ming and Qing goldsmiths inevitably moved in the direction of this innovative craft in decorative gold.

The eight centuries or so of the Sui, Tang, Song and Yuan dynasties, from 581 to 1368, saw the dramatic entry of decorative silver, and its use in particular in the production of silver vessels. Silver teapots, cups, plates and bowls were produced as wine vessels for clients ranging from the imperial court to the taverns serving commoners. This background provided goldsmiths with an even greater scope for development, as they produced items for beautification and adornment of the heads and hands of women from the milieu of the imperial court, the aristocracy, high officialdom, the rich merchants and the wealthy.

There have been two major excavations of Sui–Tang decorative gold jewellery. One is the tomb of Li Jingxun, an aristocratic relative of the imperial family, whose tomb is dated to the 4th year (608) of the Daye reign of the Sui dynasty. From this tomb archaeologists unearthed a gold necklace with inlaid gems (46) and a gold bracelet set with pearls (47) that possibly came to China by a maritime trade route. The gems set in the gold necklace were lapis lazuli and caruli, both of which are coloured stones, as well as white and blue pearls. There were no rubies or sapphires. The finely wrought gold chain could have been
imported from Persia.

The other major excavation was the tomb of Duo Jiao, a highly decorated official of the imperial Tang bodyguard, which was dated to the 1st year (627) of the Zhen-guan period of the Tang dynasty. From this tomb archaeologists unearthed a complete set of suspended gold belt ornaments called diexie (or tieshe), that featured jade handles, gold leaf, gem inlay and pearls (48, 49), as well as a jade square-handled container set with precious stones (gems) and pearls. The craftsmanship used to produce these inlaid gold objects was termed “baodianzhang” (“precious casings”) or “naozhuang” (“riotous settings”) in the Tang dynasty, and this constituted a handicraft at the im-
perial palace workshops where it was possibly a specialisation among master goldsmiths. It was a craft not open to commoners and it could only be practised within the confines of the imperial ateliers. However, we know from unearthed decorative gold objects that by the time of the Ming dynasty this handicraft had spread to vernacular craftsmen.

In addition to these gold objects, archaeologists have unearthed gold hair clasps, a gold comb decorated with a lotus motif, a gold comb holder, gold belt decorations, a gold knife handle with lozenge motifs with attached gold filigree and a lion fashioned from gold. A number of gold objects belong to the Tubo (or Tuyuhun) period of the Tang dynasty—a gold figurine with attached filigree and inlaid ruby (50), a gold plaque with attached filigree and inlaid with turquoise (51), a square gold enamel plaque with attached filigree (52) and a gold enamelled and stepped plaque with attached filigree. All these gold items
demonstrate the existence of a minor area that represents the Tubo–Tuyuhun culture of decorative gold, which warrants our attention because this culture produced the first example of gold with attached filigree and enamelled work in the form of this gold enamelled plaque with attached filigree.

The decline in central government authority at the end of the Tang dynasty saw the emergence of regional political, economic and military power, and as the state became increasingly weak, the leaders of minority ethnic groups that were the nomadic peoples inhabiting the grasslands of the northeast, northwest and southwest of the nation, such as the Tubo (Tuyuhun), Huie (Uyghurs), Gaogouli (Koguryo) and Bohai, led uprisings against the central authority of the Tang and established independent feudal states in the borderlands. They necessarily had their own cultures of decorative gold and these formed minor areas around the periphery of the imperial culture of decorative gold. With the advent of the Song dynasty, the Central Plains were unified, and while these border polities continued to exist or were replaced by other borderland polities, the Five Dynasties and the Song represented central government authority and the mainstream and major area of the gold culture of the imperial rulers.

At the same time the surrounding minor areas continued to exist and they reflected the decorative gold cultures of the rulers of the local states. This situation can also be described as representing the existence within the major area formed by the Tang–Song royal culture of decorative gold of a multiplicity of different gold cultures. The gold culture of the Western Turks described above as forming part of the grassland nomadic gold cultures persisted as an ongoing and important minor area of decorative gold culture coexisting with Tang imperial gold. From the gold objects that have been unearthed we know that the Song culture of imperial decorative gold coexisted with areas representing the gold cultures of Khotan in the Western region, the Tangut Xixia, the Nanzhao kingdom of the Muong, the Bai household of Dali, the Khitan Liao dynasty and the Jurchen Jin dynasty.

We know that Song dynasty imperial gold was produced in the palace workshops called Wensi Yuan, but today no gold workshops produced in Wensi Yuan are extant. More than forty examples of Song dynasty gold have been published to date, and these include gold hairpins, gold hair clasps, gold bracelets, gold wawa ("dolls"), gold lion pendants, gold makara amulets, gold dragons and gold belt ornaments. The most common items are gold hairpins and hair clasps. Most importantly, the art of working gold made many advances in this period and it was commonly used for a number of larger fine pieces such as hairpins and hair clasps, but no examples of baodianzhuang inlay craftsmanship have been found to date.

In artistic style, Song gold pieces are far removed from the imperial style that conferred elegance on the wealthy and they are closer to everyday life, their purity and intimacy more in tune with the vernacular. Gold craftsmen very possibly sought to provide commercially marketed gold objects to be worn by wealthy women. As with jade, a category of gold objects appeared that were also worn by commoners, and this marks a revolution in the history of the development of Chinese decorative gold culture. In the later Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties, the essential conditions were created for vernacular and imperial decorative gold and gold jewellery to advance in tandem.

Although an abundance of gold and silver objects of the Liao Khitan have been unearthed, items of gold jewellery remain rare. A number of gold items have been unearthed in Liaoning, Inner Mongolia and Hebei: a gold makara-shaped hairpin, gold phoenix hair clip, gold makara-shaped ear ornaments, gold phoenix-shaped ear decorations, a gold shield-shaped ring, gold carved prunus blossom-shaped bracelet, gold bracelet with a spray of blossoms, gold beads, a gold casket with an openwork lotus, a gold casket with eight-connected arcs, a gold needle case with a carved blossom, gold belt ornaments, a gold qibizhen and a gold suijue, two objects which hung from belts. In terms of artistry, no fine gold jewellery has been discovered to date. Gold ornaments with a rich ethnic flavour of the Khitan people include a gold makara-shaped ear decoration (53) which has close connections with Khitan religious beliefs expressing the Buddhist principles of compassion, universal salvation for all sentient beings and self-sacrifice. Two unique Khitan objects made of gold were suspended from the belt: the qibizhen, which resembles a bronze theodolite weight, and the suijue, which is like a small eight-sided bottle.

When the grave of the Liao dynasty Chengu Princess was excavated, she was found to be wearing a small gold casket with eight-connected arcs which hung from the right side of her waist, and, at her left waist, a gold casket with an openwork lotus (54) and a gold needle case with a carved blossom were suspended. These objects are all regarded as signifiers of rank and status. The shapes, designs and workmanship of these objects have no particular ethnic character. The gold belt plaques (kua) worn by the Chengu Princess include designs in repoussé work and carving of various motifs including riverine landscapes, steep cliffs beside a river, auspicious clouds and soaring dragons (55). These plaques are shaped like gui with rounded ends; the two at the centre are the highest, while those to either side are of descending height. The kua were the finest gold objects unearthed from the Chengu Princess’s tomb and were indicators of her social rank when she was alive.

The gold handicrafts of the Xixia, Jin and Nanzhao–Dali states were all comparatively advanced but, because very few items of these cultures are extant, the ethnic characteristics of these objects are not sufficiently distinctive, and the craftsmanship is fairly ordinary, we are not yet able to provide an adequate description of these traditions.

The reason why baodianzhuang inlay saw another major phase of development after the Song dynasty is perhaps related to Genghis Khan’s western campaigns. In the Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties, baodianzhuang gold jewellery was purchased and worn by empresses, aristocrats and the rich. The seven items of gold jewellery worn by rich women have all been excavated: headaddresses, head ornaments, ear drops, hairpins, hair ornaments, hair slides and perfume sachets. However, no jewellery worn by empresses and aristocrats has been seen, only four fine gold hairpins with the original inlay missing which were all unearthed in Longgang village, Xinhe township, Linfeng, Hunan province. The finest worked gold pieces were composite floral arrangements (56) used to make a baidan (palely or almond) pattern (57) that seem to include Islamic
cultural elements whereas other jewellery items were commercial products. The large cache of gold jewellery unearthed in Longgang is believed to have been buried by a gold shop.

The full set of gold head ornaments worn by women from wealthy households in the Yuan dynasty can be seen in a set of seven objects (58) unearthed from a Yuan grave at Zhoujiazhuang in Hubei province, which comprises: two gold hairpins, two gold hair slides, two gold hair ornaments and a gold comb-back, which weighed a total of 82.2 g and which was originally inlaid with precious stones, though now missing. The two gold hairpin-shaped decorative pieces were of different dimensions and they could not have been placed symmetrically in the hair. Their workmanship and shape were basically the same as those unearthed in Longgang village. A gold carved floral hairpin unearthed at Guangyilong in Chayouzhong Banner, Xilingol League, Inner Mongolia, is similar to the gold hairpin unearthed at Zhoujiazhuang. The two objects might not have been produced at the same place or in nearby areas, but these gold floral clasps could also have both come from the same gold shop in Longgang village in Linfeng, Hunan province, or they could reflect the spread of gold craftsmanship and styles from the Jing-Chu region to outlying areas.

The culture of decorative gold of the Ming emperors and princes is basically understood by us today. It represents an intensification of the role of gems in gold ornaments and the addition of the lustre of gems to the aura of wealth represented by gold. This is the salient characteristic of the Ming imperial culture of gold, and it entails the extension and popularisation of the Tang notion of baodianzhuang inlay, creating a widespread interest in jewellery for its lustre. Representative of this trend are six items of decorative gold consisting of triple bands of gold encased gems unearthed from the early Ming tomb of the Liangzhuang prince and his consort. This composite craftsmanship combining gold and gems is an example of the earlier nooozhuang inlay craft applied to composite pieces made of gold and jade later universally applied to the decoration of belts worn by emperors and princes.

The quantity and beauty of baodianzhuang inlay gold articles unearthed from the tomb of the Wanli Emperor were unprecedented, and this is best seen in the pearls and precious stones that adorn the items of jewellery worn by the emperor and his consort. In conformity with established tradition, the crowns worn by the emperor and empress were plain and merely decorated with jade and pearls, not gems, but the crown (termed wusha yishan guan) worn at court gatherings by the Wanli Emperor was adorned with gems. After his death, the Wanli Emperor wore a crown of this type which at its pinnacle was decorated with a gold dragon inlaid with fourteen cat’s eyes, topaz, sapphires and rubies. The case holding this crown contained another crown of the same type which featured a pearl encrusted gold dragon in which twenty gems were still inset when unearthed. The base of the gold crown of the Wanli Emperor (59) was woven from fine gold mesh that had been coiled and welded, and this is the largest, heaviest and most exquisitely sumptuous masterpiece of gold mesh manufacture unearthed to date.

The phoenix crown of the empress differed from the emperor’s crown in that most of the surface ground was set with gems. Two empresses were interred at Dingling mausoleum and between them they possessed four phoenix crowns. The nine-dragon and nine-phoenix crown of the Xiaoduan Empress was set with 115 precious stones (rubies and sapphires), 4414 pearls and her six-dragon and three-phoenix crown (60) was set with 128 precious stones (rubies and sapphires) and 5449 pearls. The crowns
Ming, Wanli Emperor. Gold crown. JQ, 3, 246

Ming, Xiaoduan Empress. Gold six-dragon and three-phoenix crown. DL, 2, Pl. 4
of the Xiaojing Empress were also sumptuous; her three dragon and two phoenix crowns were inset with seventy-five gems (rubies and topaz) and 3424 pearls; her twelve dragon and nine phoenix crowns were set with 121 gems (rubies, sapphires, topaz and emeralds), eighteen tiny rubies and 3588 pearls.

During his lifetime the Wanli Emperor had two types of boodianzhuang inlay belts, one was the dalu belt, the other “the precious belt” (baodaí). Into the dalu belt (61) were inset twenty emeralds, ninety-one garnets and rubies. There are fourteen gold “precious belts” set with gems and pearls. Each features a large central ruby that caused the entire belt to look dazzling. There is one extant belt in which precious stones were inset to form the character for “heart” (xin) (62). Moreover, the gold hairpins, hair slides, ear drops and belt hooks designed for imperial use were almost all inlaid with pearls and gems. Of the fifty-six unearthed gold hairpins, for example, as many as forty-four were inlaid with pearls and gems, and of them fourteen were each set with three cat’s eyes (63), and the finest of these fulfilled the highest traditional aesthetic criteria of lustre and reflection.

The Ming princes of the realm, encompassing those who bore the surname of the imperial household and those who did not, were enfeoffed throughout the country, and they too lived sumptuous lives of luxury and wore lavish gold headgear set with precious stones. Such pearl- and gem-encrusted princely headgear has been unearthed by archaeologists at many sites: the Ming tomb at Dongsicun village, Haidian, Beijing; the tomb of Xu Pu and his wife in the family cemetery of Xu Da at Bancang, Taiipingmen, Nanjing; the Ming tomb in Wukongcun, Qingyang, Jiangyin; the Ming tombs at the Zhongbiaochang (Watch and Clock Factory) in Huangshan and in Fengyang, both in Anhui province; the tomb of the Yi-zhuang Prince, Zhu Houye, in Nancheng, Jiangxi; the tomb of Wang Bolu in Xunxian county, Henan; the joint tomb of the Liangzhuang Prince and his consort in Zhongxiang, Hubei; the Ming tomb of Liu Nianjing in Qichun county, Henan; the Laosicheng Ming tomb in Yongshun county, Xiangxi, Hunan province; the joint burial of Mu Song and his wife at Wangjiaying, Yinggong county, Yunnan province; the Ming tomb at Dongzikou, Heping township, Chengdu; the Ming tomb in the Gaop-
the same time they upheld the original religion of their Manchu forebears. The religion, customs and culture of the Manchu rulers assimilated the decorative gold culture of the Ming imperial rulers, creating the rich and unique decorative gold culture of the Qing imperial rulers.

Put simply, Manchu culture with its equestrian traditions, Lamaist beliefs and dress conventions determined that the decorative gold objects of the Qing emperors and princes represented fine gold working traditions in which the inlay of dongzhu pearls, turquoise, coral and lapis lazuli predominated. Dongzhu pearls were produced in the Songhua Jiang (Ussuri) river, located in the northeastern homeland of the Manchu people, hence the name dongzhu, meaning “eastern pearls”. The Qing imperial household had a special affection for these pearls and ranked them in five grades, the foremost of which could only be worn by the emperor and empress, signifying the reverence with which the precious item was regarded. Examples are a finial on a gold court headdress (65) which is inlaid with ten dongzhu all of the top grade, and a large ruby is set at the tip of the piece. The winter court headdress of the empress (66) has a peak with three pearl-encrusted bands forming ten phoenix motifs shaped from gold wire. The three phoenixes at the top of the headdress are set with three large dongzhu pearls of the second class and seventeen regular pearls; into the seven phoenix shapes that surround the crown are set sixty-three dongzhu pearls of the second class, 147 small regular pearls and seven cat’s eyes. From a bird on the headdress hang copious strings of dongzhu and regular pearls setting off a gold encrusted peach-shaped decorative piece ending in a spray of peach-blossoms formed from semi-precious stones.

The chaozhu (literally, “court pearls”) was the term for a stringed piece of jewellery that conformed to Qing ritual wear, and it was the most important type of jewellery that
was inspired by Buddhist rosaries. The dongzhu pearl necklace of the chaozhu type (67) was made from 108 dongzhu pearls, and it also contains coral, amethysts, lapis lazuli, tourmaline and jadeite, as well as rubies and sapphires. It is important to note that only one ruby and one sapphire were used at the ends of the tassels, and this shows that within the rules governing court dress the Qing imperial house did not accord gems the same reverence that was shown for dongzhu pearls, reflecting the Manchu concepts that guided the Qing rulers. An example of a chaozhu necklace composed of rubies (68) is first seen in the Daoguang reign period, and it was a tributary gift presented to the court by a high official from Yunnan in the 11th year (1831) of the Daoguang reign. The rules that governed the crowns and chaozhu court necklaces were similarly observed in the decoration of the ear ornaments worn by the empress and concubines, and there were restrictions on the use of gems, so that we find few gems used in decorative items and jewellery such as hair-slides, liusu hair ornaments (popularly called tiaozi), hairpins, amulets, bracelets and rings.

An example of a hairpin with inlaid gems is a piece in the shape of a dragonfly (69). The body of the dragonfly is shaped from extremely fine gold wire and each wing is set with five rubies. Each of the dragonfly’s antennae holds a pearl, the feet and tail feature diancui (“kingfisher feather”) inlay and the silver stalks conveyed the auspicious message that the “mighty Qing empire remains at peace” (Da Qing anding). A gold bracelet set with pearls and bearing a design of paired dragons playing with a pearl (70) had been fashioned using the techniques of snipping, filigree, drawn-work and carving. Between the heads of the two dragons, a large pearl is inlaid, and the dragon’s eyes are also set with pearls. This piece was probably made in the middle or late Qing period, and it features exquisite workmanship and has the obvious style of fine decorative gold produced for the palace.

In the Qing dynasty vernacular gold with inlaid jewels was produced in the large cities of Beijing, Suzhou, Nanjing, Hangzhou and Guangzhou, as well as by silversmiths and goldsmiths working in establishments in medium-sized and smaller cities and towns. In the mid-Qing dynasty, Guangzhou was the most flourishing of these centres, and it drew on Western techniques, which resulted in a unique composite Cantonese-foreign style of gold craftsmanship. Most probably by the late Qing period, Shanghai came to the forefront, drawing on the existing traditions and producing something that was unique. In the old collections of gold items in the Qing palaces there were a number of gold rings inlaid with precious stones that bore the marks of vernacular gold shops. The inlay craftsmanship, modelling, decoration, motifs and designs were all innovative and different from those
Qing, Xianfeng Emperor. Court necklace with dongzhu pearls. GT, Pl. 82

Qing. Daoguang 11th year (1831). Court necklace with rubies. GT, Pl. 86

Qing. Gold filigree dragonfly hairpin with inlaid gems. GT, Pl. 129
used to produce traditional pieces, which suggests that these rings were the commercial products of gold shops in Guangzhou, Shanghai and Beijing. A gold ring set with a diamond in the imperial collection is probably a foreign piece that was either purchased by the court or presented as a gift in the period from the end of the Qing to 1924 when high quality and desirable gold items were produced by gold shops in the metropolises of Shanghai, Guangzhou, Beijing and Tianjin.

The decorative gold culture of the Qing emperors and empresses extended throughout China and its influence reached to the Mongols, Tibetans and Uyghurs, as well as to the decorative gold and silver of the ethnic groups of central and southern China, including the Tong, Miao, Bai, Yi and Dai peoples. The imperial decorative gold was accepted in differing degrees, but it was unable to displace these local traditions, and so each of these ethnic groups maintained their relatively independent silver and gold jewellery traditions, which form a minor area relative to the major area of the imperial decorative gold culture. These eight ethnic traditions of gold craft endured for a long period and at times they overlapped and interacted with the other three major areas of China’s decorative gold traditions. All these traditions were in constant movement and were interrelated with necessity.

The history and remains of the four major areas that delineate the Chinese development of decorative gold lead us to conclude that:

The earliest Chinese decorative gold appears in the Xia dynasty on the area occupied by the northern steppe nomads, whose craftsmanship encompassed the use of gold wire and gold foil in repoussé and carving, as well as jewel inlay, welded beading, drawn-work, filigree, gem inlay and mesh. By the end of the Warring States period this area had disappeared, given way and been absorbed within the area of imperial Chinese gold culture.

Under the influence of the resplendent bronze culture and its crafts, the farming Huaxia peoples of China’s two major river valleys, those of the Yellow and Yangtze rivers formed a culture of gold that arose independently and mastered the techniques from gold foil, moulding, repoussé and carving to drawn-work, inlay (coloured stone), inlay (gold and silver) and beading, laying a solid basis for the area of imperial Chinese gold.

The hunters of the plateaux of the southwest created a comparatively late culture of decorative gold that under the closed conditions in which it appeared did not make the transition from gold foil, wire, sheet, moulding and carving to develop the finer crafts of gold working. The area on which this gold culture was positioned suffered repeated buffering from the much stronger area occupied by Chinese imperial gold, and so it fell into decline although it maintained a limited gold culture catering to local rulers.

The jostling of these three major areas helped create and delineate the major and central area occupied by the culture of Chinese imperial decorative gold. This major cultural tradition saw the discarding of gold moulding in favour of techniques of drawn gold, filigree, mesh and gem inlay, which attained unprecedented levels. The interplay of gold and gems brought a dazzling lustre to this culture, and the development of various forms of repoussé and carving also attained levels of refinement that were not previously known. From the time when gem inlay and gold beading first made their entry in the Sui–Tang period and resulted in the new age of craftsmanship called baodianzhuang or nanzhuang inlay, the northern nomads continued to make incursions southwards into the Central Plains but their cultures of decorative gold were unable to displace the culture of imperial gold which had first emerged in the Qin–Han period, although the entry of the Mongols and Manchus did effect innovations in directions and trends within the culture of imperial gold. These latter steppe influences were effectively assimilated and only in the periphery of the northern borderlands can we see the decorative gold culture of the grasslands retain its traditions.

Minor areas represented by the decorative gold traditions of the Turks, Gaoqouli, Bohai, Khitan Liao, Tangut Xixia, Jurgen Jin, Nanzhao and Dali saw a brief flowering of these different traditions, but they were rapidly assimilated or discarded by the imperial Chinese gold culture. Qing imperial gold represents the last phase of this culture and it moved from a Manchu gold working tradition that featured the triumph of a tradition of the inlay of dongzhu pearls supplemented by the inlay of pearls, turquoise, coral, lapis lazuli, cat’s eyes, tourmaline, topaz and gems, with the ancillary crafts of gold beading, applied filigree and inlay. The gold culture dominated by the crafts associated with setting gems in gold flourished and developed in Guangzhou, Shanghai and Beijing. The four major areas and the many minor areas occupied by gold cultures were discrete and unique, yet through their constant collisions and movements some areas disappeared from the picture while an overall synthesis was also attained, even though independent traditions continued to survive and develop.
Abbreviated Titles


Full Listing


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