

A Study on the Clock and Watch Collection of Qianlong Emperor During Qing Dynasty

Lei Jin^{1*}

¹ Department of Geography, History and Philosophy, Pablo de Olavide University, Seville, Spain

Email Address

ljin@upo.es (Lei Jin)

*Correspondence: ljin@upo.es

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Abstract:

The Qianlong emperor was a clock and watch collector. During his sixty-year reign, the number of clocks and watches at court increased considerably, and his personal tastes and needs were deeply reflected in the characteristics of these collections. Based on historical sources and the current Palace Museum watch collection, this article explains the access to the Qing Palace clock and watch collection during the Qianlong period, the daily management of the collection, then analyses and examines the characteristics of the Qianlong Emperor's taste in collecting and the reasons behind it.

Keywords:

Clocks and Watch, Collection, Qianlong Emperor, Qing Dynasty

1. Introduction

The Qianlong Emperor was not only a very famous emperor in Chinese history, but also a poet, collector and connoisseur. During the 60-year reign of the Qianlong emperor (1736-1795), the collection of watches and clocks in the Qing dynasty grew considerably in number and in sophistication and splendour as never before. His era is considered to be the most glorious in the history of Chinese watch collecting. To this day, the majority of the Qing dynasty clocks in the Palace Museum are also preserved from the Qianlong period. An examination of these exquisite horological objects reveals that they were far more aesthetic than practical, and the pieces also largely reveal distinctive features that distinguish them from Western collections, clearly influenced by the tastes and needs of the Qianlong emperor himself.

2. Materials and Sources

The aim is to learn more about the Qianlong Emperor's watch collection and to analyse its aesthetic and historical significance. In the course of this research, it was necessary to rely on a large number of historical archives. The majority of the documentation for this article was sourced from the First Historical Archives of China in Beijing, as well as its collated publications. The archives used include, but are not limited to, the imperial edicts (zhu pi zou zhe), tribute lists, and the archives of the Imperial Household Department (nei wu fu). At the same time, the vast physical

collections of the Palace Museum are also an important research resource for this paper. The Palace Museum is currently open to the public both online and offline, and has published a number of books of its collection.

3. Source of the Palace Collection

3.1. Palace Procurement

Guangzhou was the most important port for Chinese and Western trade in the 18th century, and the main route for Western watches and clocks to enter China. When searching the Qing imperial archives, we can easily find records of the Qianlong emperor requesting Guangdong officials to buy clocks, watches and rare foreign objects. For example, in the vermilion-approved imperial decrees of 1758 and 1759, the Qianlong emperor asked Li Shiyao, the governor of Guangdong and Guangxi Provinces (*liang guang zong du*), to purchase Western musical clocks and agreed that Li would keep the rest of the money for the next purchase. [1] During the Qing dynasty, a large proportion of the court's expenditure was spent on the purchase of court supplies by officials stationed in various localities. The Canton Customs Supervision (*yue hai guan jian du*), for example, was not only responsible for managing the taxation of the Customs, but also for purchasing rare items for the court. The Imperial Household Department provided a certain amount of money each year for Guangdong officials to purchase goods, and the Canton Customs Supervision then purchased overseas watches and curiosities from foreign merchants through Hong merchants according to the Qianlong Emperor's preferences. In the process, the Hong merchants often had to advance their own payments, and the officials often deducted funds. [2,3] This somehow bred corruption and graft among officials.

3.2. Tributes

Tribute was also one of the main ways in which the Qianlong emperor acquired clocks and watches. Tributes were paid by foreigners, as well as local officials and other nobles. In contrast to Western scholars who are accustomed to thinking of 'tribute' as a system of trade, the Qing rulers saw tribute as a way of expressing submission and loyalty on behalf of their officials and other nations. [4,5] When Macartney visited China, for example, he brought with him a large number of English-made gifts, including clocks and watches, but the Qianlong emperor did not seem to have been too pleased with these gifts and considered his own collection to be more luxurious. [6] When Chinese officials presented personal tributes of watches and clocks, they used their own money rather than public funds. For tributes that pleased the Qianlong Emperor, he would express his appreciation and even allocate funds for officials to continue buying similar goods. For unsatisfactory tributes, he would simply show that he was critical and dismissed some unsatisfactory gifts. [7]

3.3. Court Made

The clockmaking bureau (*zuo zhong chu*) at the court would also customise clocks for Qianlong according to his tastes. During the Qianlong period, there were three main types of artisans in the clockmaking bureau: foreign missionaries, recruited craftsmen, and clockmaking eunuchs. [8] Serving the court was a common tactic used by Western missionaries to preach in China. For the Western watchmakers at court, their skills in watchmaking were used to better serve the spread of the Gospel and to win the favour of the Qing emperor by making and repairing clocks and watches in

exchange for relaxing restrictions on missionary activities. To the Chinese emperor, these Western watchmakers were indeed skilled craftsmen, and the emperor's attitude towards them was not very different from that of the Chinese craftsmen. [9]

3.4. Guangzhou and Suzhou Made

With the development of trade with the West and the increase in domestic demand, the watch industry in Guangzhou also developed rapidly during this period. In addition, in the economically developed regions of the south of the Yangtze River, such as Suzhou, Nanjing and Yangzhou, watchmaking also gradually emerged. Many of the watches currently in the Palace's collection are the products of these 'Guang' and 'Su' manufactures. [10]

3.5. Confiscation

Some imported luxury goods would have become the personal possessions of officials during the Qianlong period out of emulation of the emperor's taste and more direct contact with merchants than the court. Cases of corruption were particularly frequent during the Qianlong reign, and when dealing with the property of criminally corrupt officials, the Qianlong emperor would have requested that they be sent to the Imperial Household Department for disposal if they were present.

4. Collection Management and Daily Use of Clocks and Watches

The most common function of clocks was to keep time, and in the Qing court they had long since replaced traditional Chinese timekeeping as the most basic, practical and convenient tool for keeping time at court. But it is clear that for the Qianlong Emperor, the ornamental aspect of clocks and watches appealed to him even more. The Qianlong Emperor liked to display a large number of magnificent clocks and watches in various parts of his palaces, and they were so densely packed that it was not uncommon to find many of them in one palace. For example, in the Yangxin Hall, where the emperor's daily office was located, there were eight self-timing clocks. [11] Also at festivals, clocks were temporarily added to the palace where they were celebrated to show the importance attached to the festival.

All these clocks and watches were maintained and calibrated by the appropriate staff on a daily basis, and for those that were broken or *no longer favoured by the emperor, they were given by the Casting Furnace Bureau (zhu lu chu)* to be broken down and melted out of gold and copper, or the discarded clocks were simply handed over to the Chongwen Gate to be sold. These operations, known in Qing dynasty histories as 'destruction and change', probably occurred since the fiftieth year of the Qianlong reign (1785). [12]

It is worth noting that the Qianlong emperor not only loved to collect magnificent clocks and watches himself, but also liked to give them as gifts to subjects he considered meritorious, or to his favourite imperial clansmen, concubines or servants, as a means of enlisting people's support. There are many special records of these rewards in the Qing archives.

5. Collection Management and Daily Use of Clocks and Watches

5.1. The Qianlong Emperor had an Extremely Large Collection of Clocks and Watches

There is no direct documentation of the exact number of items in the collection, but some routine maintenance data suggests that the palace clock collection was extremely large during the Qianlong period, with at least several hundred items. And these are just the seat clocks that required maintenance; the number of other pocket watches in the category is impossible to estimate. After the devastation of war and the upheavals of history, there are still nearly a thousand pieces of Qing dynasty clocks in the Palace Museum's collection. [13]

5.1. There is a Great Variety of Style Types Among the Clocks and Watches

The current collection of the Palace Museum includes a very large number of eighteenth-century clocks from England or made by English craftsmen. The English clocks and watches are very finely crafted, mostly in the form of gilt-bronze frames, European classical architecture, churches, pagodas, and various animal forms, with brightly coloured surfaces inlaid with glass and precious stones. The internal structure has many mechanical designs and, in addition to keeping time, makes full use of the clockwork system, fitted with moving figurines and birds, etc. (Figure 1) Besides, there are also some French and Swiss clocks in the Qing Palace. In addition, the clocks and watches produced by the Imperial Clockmaking Bureau of the Qing dynasty and those made in Guangzhou also show a more aesthetic interest and character. These clocks and watches of various shapes and sizes reflect many attempts at cultural exchange and fusion between China and the West. (Figure 2, Figure 3)



Figure 1. *Gilded Copper Chariot Chiming Clock Pulled by an Elephant, Height 70 cm, width 136 cm, depth 55 cm, 18th century, British made.*



Figure 2. *Black Lacquer and Painted Tower Clock Decorated with Eight Immortals Presenting Birthday Gifts, Height 185 cm, width 102 cm, depth 72 cm, Qianlong period, Qing Imperial Clockmaking Bureau made.*



Figure 3. *Gilded Copper Three Stars of Fortune Clock, Height 89 cm, width 41 cm, depth 33 cm, Qianlong period, Guangzhou made.*

5.2. The Clocks and Watches in the Qianlong Emperor's Collection were Extremely Luxurious, and Were Far More Ornamental and Interesting than Practical

Whether the clocks were tributed to him by his ministers or made by the Qing dynasty's own clockmaking service, the final examiner was the Qianlong emperor himself, whose requirements for clocks were clear and strict. In the extensive archives of the Qing dynasty we often find him rejecting unsatisfactory pieces and even reprimanding tributes and buyers. Every clock and watch that came to the court was therefore required to be perfected, in all aspects of its form, whether carved, cast, inlaid, gilded, painted, etc., by the best craftsmen, and with exquisite materials, with clocks inlaid with pearls, diamonds, jade and other coloured stones. At the same time, the Qianlong emperor liked clocks with interesting features, such as birds that sang on time, little people that wrote, and the recreation of some natural environments, etc. which led to the addition of many mechanical changes to the clocks and watches. In his later years, the Qianlong emperor became even more obsessed with these novelties, which scholars of the time summed up as "only aesthetically decorated, not practical, almost suspiciously odd and clever." [14]

6 Conclusions

The Qianlong period was a period of great prosperity in Chinese history for watch collecting and the development of watchmaking, a situation that was closely linked to the Qianlong emperor's own hobby. Qianlong was very well educated and, like his grandfather, had a great interest in novelties from the West. He loved art, for calligraphy, painting, relics, and anything that was interesting. His own self-confidence and possessive nature can also be seen in his collecting hobbies.

At the same time, the 18th century was also a period of significant growth in trade between Britain and China. Due to the Industrial Revolution, British colonial activities and maritime trade became increasingly active and their watchmaking industry developed rapidly during this time. The trade with Guangzhou also leading to the development of local watchmaking in the city. The diversity of manufacturing techniques and aesthetic skills provided the Qianlong emperor with a wide range of options.

Furthermore, the Qianlong's achievement of a large collection of watches was closely related to the economic and social characteristics of the time. Unlike his industrious and frugal father Yongzheng, Qianlong Emperor inherited a wealthy fortune from his grandfather and father, and during his sixty-year reign, China enjoyed a strong state, a prosperous economy, relative social stability and few wars on the frontiers, allowing society to accumulate wealth. With the growth of the court's financial resources, material conditions were provided for the Qianlong Emperor to pursue a life of luxury and enjoyment. At the same time, as the forbidden city, other imperial palaces and gardens were expanded and altered, he needed more clocks and watches for decoration.

Always fond of demonstrating his ability to rule by various means, the Qianlong emperor believed that a large palace collection was the tangible expression of a peaceful and prosperous world, and the clock and watch collection was his way of expressing this political language. The lavish, varied and expensive collections he left behind amply confirm this claim.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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