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A Symbol in Mass Production: Ruyi Images in the Inner and Outer Cities Under the Qianlong Reign

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Qianlong's predilection for the Chinese auspicious symbol ruyi was satisfied by court artists and echoed in the country at large by the mass production of the New Year Picture workshops. This imperial cult manifests Qianlong's authority on the country and the Han subjects' recognition of the Manchu emperor.

The meaning of a symbol seems not as difficult to decipher when we ponder over how a specific symbolism is widely disseminated and readily adopted among a sufficiently large population. Ostensibly always a collective unconsciousness, the popularisation of a symbol can be pioneered by a single person who is greatly admired in a certain group, and such symbolism can be thoroughly developed through the group's emulation. The story of ruyi (如意) and the Qianlong Emperor (r. 1736-1795) of the Qing dynasty serves as a paradigm to prove this point. As the last dynasty of imperial China, the Qing was founded by the Manchus, who never numbered more than two per cent of the population (Vollmer 14). This essay sets out to investigate how Qianlong's predilection for ruyi became an imperial cult that was satisfied by court artists of the Ruyi guan and was further echoed in the country at large by the mass production of ruyi by Han Chinese artisans of the New Year Picture (nianhua 年画) workshops, resulting in a thriving trade in these artefacts. With the lingering sensitivity and tension between Han Chinese and the Manchus, the ruyi image stands for a symbolism of imperial power, and its repetition and imitation reveals the authority that Qianlong stamped on the country.

As one of the most discussed art patrons throughout the history of imperial China, Qianlong's enormous art collections nowadays constitute almost the entire corpus of the Palace Museum in Beijing and the National Palace Museum in Taipei (Clunas 81; Holzwarth 41). Among all the imperial treasures, Qianlong had a particular liking for ruyi sceptres (Fang 165; Rawson 361). Despite a few innovative varieties, a ruyi is basically composed of a slender and slightly curved handle and a medallion end resembling a lingzhi fungus (灵芝). The Palace Museum in Beijing alone houses about 3000 ruyi from the Qing dynasty, ranging in size from ten centimetres to eighty; they are made of precious metal, wood, jade and fencai porcelain (fig. 1), and embedded, sometimes very heavily with, pearls, rubies, lapis lazuli, turquoise and so forth (Liu et al. 34, 38). Literally, ruyi means 'as you wish,' thus in Han Chinese culture it had been bestowed with the auspicious symbolism of good fortune upon households, a long and healthy life (Fang 164), 'professional and social success' upon individuals, and happiness for newly-married couples (Eberhard 258; Wu 55). However, the origin and use of ruyi has continued to baffle historians and scholars: was it a Chinese invention or imported

from Buddhism (Fang 164; Liu et al. 13)? Was it a symbol of phallic power (Fang 164; Williams 239) or of 'Buddha and his doctrines' (Williams 238)? Was it initially a backscratcher as the excavated examples suggested (Fang 164; Liu et al. 13), a tool for 'pointing the way' and self-defense as the 13th century archaeologist Zhao Xihu argued (qtd. in Davidson 239; Williams 238), or was it used to show authority and attitude in discussion (Davidson 240-247; Liu et al. 15-18)?

Despite a multitude of problems to be unravelled, Qianlong was mainly concerned with ruyi imagery's evident and singular literary meaning, and he dramatically reversed its decline in popularity from the Song dynasty onwards (Liu et al. 27) by incorporating it in all forms of court art. Most prominent of these efforts are his own portraits where ruyi pervades as a witness to the significant moments in the life of its owner. In Prince Hongli Practising Calligraphy on a Banana Leaf (弘历圆形古装行乐图), the young prince Hongli -- Qianlong's birth name used before ascending the throne -- is practising calligraphy on a banana leaf, while the ruyi keeps him company during the demanding and rigorous education in the Hanlin Academy (Kahn 118,146). The Spring's Peaceful Message depicts a scene where Yongzheng is handing over 'a sprig of flowering apricot' to his fourth son Hongli (Kahn 85), typifying 'transmission of power' (The Three Emperors 435). On the table nearby, again placed unmistakably, is a ruyi. A 'transcendent and universal ruler' as he was (Crossley 224), Qianlong actually presented himself under different guises: a scholar in philosophical contemplation, surrounded by his possessions (The Three Emperors 439), a connoisseur appreciating paintings in his extravagant garden (fig. 2), and even a Daoist deity searching for lingzhi demonstrating his 'internally satisfied and externally omnipotent mien' (Crossley 224). Portraits were regarded by the Qing Emperors as a way to 'document and celebrate events in the imperial domain' (Naquin 321), and glorify themselves and the state (Wen qtd. in Stuart 66; She qtd. in Elliott and Shambaugh 33). Stuart claims that, '[e]very image had to be approved by the Emperor in draft form to obtain his authorisation before completion' (66), therefore these portraits of Qianlong corroborate his close companionship with ruyi and his willingness or even command that this object should be integrated into his majestic likeness. Indeed, whatever façade Qianlong put on in his portraits, a ruyi is always within reach as Qianlong himself declared in his poem: [e]verywhere around the seat, ruyi is always set there ('处处座之旁， 率陈如意常', qtd. in Liu et al., my translation) – one of his eighty-seven poems on ruyi that collected in The Collection of Qianlong's Poems and Essays (Qing Gaozong yuzhi shiwenji 清高宗御制诗文集) (Liu et al. 200).

Apart from the complete shape of ruyi, its lingzhi fungus end which promised immortality according to Daoism (Fang 113; Liu Yang 252; Rawson 358) as an art motif was also frequently employed as a border design (Fang 165; Williams 239) as found on the porcelain, the furniture (fig. 3), wax paper (fig. 4), as well as the Manchu harnessIts most noticeable appearance is on the Emperor's robe (fig. 5), whose designs were distinct from Han costumes and flaunted the Manchus' nomadic heritage (Zheng 9) and a royal pride in ruling over the vast territory (Stuart 66; Vollmer 14): in the centre, dragons, long an emblem of imperial authority (Fang 119; Vollmer 14) in Chinese culture, soar against the expanse of the Heavens imbued with lingzhi shaped clouds; the 'diagonal bands and

billows' in the hem constitute the lishui (立水; standing water) border crowned with lingzhi-shaped sprays, symbolising the 'universal ocean surrounding the earth' (Vollmer 33). Compared to his ancestors, the bands and billows on Qianlong's robe extend longer, and hence more resemble the shape of a ruyi sceptre (to compare, see Zheng). Imperial robes like this one were manufactured by nearly three thousands officials and workers in the Forbidden City to satisfy the fastidious Qianlong (Zheng 6-7), and the patterns of ruyi emphatically displayed his special liking.

The flourish of ruyi images within the Forbidden City was made possible by Qianlong's ardent support for various art studios, where the best artists worked exclusively under the Imperial Household (Naquin 323). One of them is the Ruyi guan (如意馆) inaugurated in 1736 under Qianlong's edict (Holzwarth 44; Nie 79; Wood 62), providing space for 'painters, jade-carvers, mount-makers and other artisans' selected from the East and the West (Nie 79; Sullivan 250). The naming of this place might not have been a mere coincidence, for this choice manifested Qianlong's predilection for ruyi, and suggested that the quality and meaning of ruyi could express Qianlong's ideal in art as well as empire. 'As you wish'—the repetition of ruyi images in court art completely resulted from Qianlong's personal liking and his active orders to revive this Chinese symbol in various ways. Moreover, by conferring on court painters a new title 'painters' (huahuaren 画画人) as opposed to the former 'southern artisans' (nanjiang 南匠), Qianlong even significantly advanced their long-held position both at court and in Chinese art hierarchy. Indeed 'as you wish' – Qianlong's ability of repeating the Chinese symbol ruyi flaunted his mandate from Heaven to possess Chinese culture and reign over the whole empire.

As an emperor of Manchu background, an ethnic minority that had long been considered as 'barbarian' by the Han Chinese, Qianlong exerted himself to assimilate into Chinese culture throughout his life. Though very conscious of maintaining the Manchu identity (Rawski 29), Qianlong not only dedicated himself to the Chinese Classics (Crossley 224; Kahn 119), but also nursed intense interest and admiration for Chinese history, culture and art (Kahn 127; Rawson 272; Sullivan 245). Furthermore, it was Neo-Confucianism that the Manchus advocated as the state foundation (Rawski 29), and it undoubtedly expedited the consolidation of the Outer City. From portraits with ruyi above, Qianlong was without exception in the Han attire boasting his almost omnipotent capacity and power. In figure 6, he is even depicted as celebrating the Spring Festival – again a Han Chinese custom – with his Manchu offspring. Qianlong was a great admirer of the ancient Chinese Emperor Taizong of the Tang dynasty (唐太宗) (r. 627-649) (Kahn 127) and also considered himself as a 'preserver and restorer of the Chinese cultural heritage' (Rawson 275). Ruyi is only a small part of his grand project that he was absolutely capable of execution.

The repetition of ruyi images promoted by Qianlong's enthusiasm inspired a nationwide resurgence of the image, the predilection being emulated and the symbol being imitated both in the Inner City and the Outer City. In the imperial court, ruyi became a favoured decoration and gift (Liu et al. 33, 55; Fang 164). Especially during festivals, 'empress and imperial concubines all hurried to buy

ruyi at jewelry market, and instantly ruyi was as expensive as many cities,' as recorded in the Qinggongci (清宫词), an anthology of poems on the court life during the Qing dynasty ('椒房都趋珠宝市， 一时如意价连城', Wu et al. 50, my translation). In the Outer City, where the Han Chinese subjects lived, ruyi images also appeared frequently on the New Year Pictures in the country at large, joining hands with various gods, deities, children and even menshen (门神; door gods) (see Feng 22 vols).With the advance in printing technique in the Song dynasty, New Year Pictures had been made widely available to the public as an inexpensive commodity (Clunas 181; Laing 4; Feng 1; Wang 7; Po and Johnson 10); hanging New Year Pictures in a household, as an ancient tradition with a cult origin, became a popular practice to express ordinary people's yearning for a better year (Feng 1; Wang 7). In contrast to the Ruyi guan production system, peasant entrepreneurs organised the manufacture of New Year Pictures over an extensive printing operation supported by local villages, and sold them both retail and wholesale (Feng vol.taohuawu: 509-525; vol.yangliuqing 560, Flath 25). When New Year Picture workshops all over the state simultaneously put ruyi images into mass production, a clear signal was sent out – ruyi appeal radiated from the Inner City to the Outer City during the Qing dynasty.

Among all the auspicious emblems, the 'Three Star Gods of Fu, Lu and Shou' (Fu Lu Shou Sanxing 福禄寿三星) was an art motif already common in New Year Pictures from the Ming dynasty (Fong 159; Po and Johnson 124) and went through conspicuous modification in the Qing. Though the three gods were respectively assigned their names, they altogether formed one comprehensive auspice (Feng vol.taohuawu 176), which could be covered by the meaning of fu (福). 'The Great Plan' section of The Book of History (尚书・洪范) states that, '[t]here are five fu elements: longevity, wealth, health and safety, possessing virtue, and life-long triumph through the civil service examinations' ('五福 一曰寿 二曰富 三曰康宁 四曰攸好德 五曰考终命', qtd. in Ciyuan 2283, my translation). Maybe that is why Fu Xing (福星) is depicted as the tallest and flanked by Lu (禄) and Shou (寿), which respectively denote 'emolument' and 'longevity' in Chinese (Feng 176; Po and Johnson 124). Moreover, the iconography from the Ming dynasty (fig. 7) laid much emphasis on the fifth element, as the name of Lu specifically refers to the emolument of an official (Ciyuan 2281), and Fu Xing wears the costume of a high ranking minister (Feng 176; Po and Johnson 124) with a tablet called hu (笏) in the crook of his arm, as observed by court officials in reality. Before the officials attended the conference with the emperor and other ministers, they inscribed their proposals on the hu in advance as a memorandum (Ciyuan 2348). This New Year Picture confirms the significance of the civil service examinations in public opinion and the high social position scholar officials enjoyed from the fourth century in China (Flath 59-60). In fact, as a primary means to be elevated as social elite, the civil service examinations lasting for several centuries up until the early 20th century 'represented the focal point through which state interests, family strategies, and individual hopes and aspirations were directed' (Elman 10). However, in the Qing dynasty, ruyi was finally brought to the surface of Fu Lu Shou motif. In the hanging embroidery manufactured in the Qianlong period, a small ruyi is tentatively revealed in a child's hand (fig. 8), while in another New Year Picture, a conspicuous ruyi not only took the place of

hu, but also finds its position in the centre of the composition (fig. 9). As a matter of fact, still in use until the Ming dynasty (Zha 102), the hu was abolished under the Manchu rule (Ciyuan 2348), thus what filled the absence of hu became a question of what represented the status of the scholar official and the ultimate success for Han Chinese in the Outer City.

The surviving motif of Fu Lu Shou already reveals the unwavering confidence in civil examinations and aspiration to serve the court among the Han Chinese under the Manchu rule. The reason why it was ruyi that replaced hu should not be oversimplified as it is a traditional Chinese symbol; rather, it was a collective choice made by the Chinese subjects who must have learned Qianlong's predilection and nevertheless adopted it to embody all their auspicious wishes. Though both the Kangxi and Yongzheng Emperors had issued Sacred Edicts to reiterate the supreme social status of scholar officials (Flath 59-60), it was not until the Qianlong reign that Han bureaucrats were able to gain momentum over the 'imperial power of bannermen and princes' (Rawski 24). Moreover, Qianlong, as Kahn maintains, had the 'ability and desire to discover, select, and use ministers of high talent' (172), and Qianlong asserted that, in the case of those with superior talent, he was to approach them with the respect that he would show a teacher, provide them with generous salaries or emoluments, trust them with sincerity, and concentrate their abilities in suitable posts (qtd. in Kahn 178). Nevertheless, due to his habitual insecurity of being a foreign emperor, Qianlong carried out indiscriminate persecution of intellectuals and purgation of literary works that showed any sign of anti-Manchu sentiments or nostalgia for the past Ming dynasty ruled by the Han Chinese. The Literary Inquisition (1776-1782) was so notorious that it remained an indelible stain on Qianlong's rulership. However, the imitation of ruyi images and the its mass production in New Year Pictures suggests that it actually did not detract too much popular confidence in and longing for examination success and official prestige under Qianlong's reign, since the targets of prosecution were usually established scholars (Rawski 33) rather than the commoners themselves. Therefore, the number of civil service examinees nevertheless grew steadily until the nineteenth century (Naquin 416) and the Outer City 'continued to produce noted scholars and officials' under the Qianlong reign (Naquin 414). Moreover, like the ring-giver King Hrothgar in Beowulf, Qianlong was very generous in giving out ruyi as a reward to outstanding officials (Liu et al. 55), which possibly facilitated ruyi's replacement of the hu held by Fu Xing.

An Emperor of great longevity, Qianlong's accomplishment during his sixty years' rulership was far-reaching and admirable as witnessed by his subjects. Of course it was a hard-won enterprise. Naquin noted that Qianlong was '[an] attentive administrator who worked long hours, read his voluminous correspondence, conferred regularly with officials, and [was] deeply involved in the worlds of the Banner aristocracy and state bureaucracy' (306), while Rawski also acclaimed him as 'conscientious and diligent' and 'applying [himself] consistently to the task of rulership'(25). Moreover, Qianlong's military conquests were so glorious that he regarded himself as 'the ruler of five peoples: the Manchus, Mongols, Tibetans, Uighurs and Chinese' (Rawski 33). Jade ruyi with the finest carving (Sullivan 272) all over the Palace marked his pacification of Khotan in 1759 (Clunas 83; Rawski 159), which later became the main source of jade for the state (Clunas 83; Liu et al. 136). As a

matter of fact, all the luxuries created from the Ruyi guan mirrored the riches of the state treasury – the government revenues of 1766 almost doubled the figures for 1652 and were 56 percent greater than the figures for 1682 (Rawski 35). Unlike the court painters who toiled away to please the Qianlong Emperor, peasant artisans felt 'little obligation to reproduce orthodox messages,' as long as their pictures proved popular and profitable (Flath 58). The mass production of New Year Pictures with ruyi images indicates its warm reception among the Han Chinese in the Outer City. As a traditional Chinese symbol blessed with auspicious meanings, ruyi was happily adopted in festive New Year Pictures to express people's outlook on the better life that benefited from the increased proceeds from agriculture and household handicrafts over the eighteenth century (Lavely 731). On the other hand, as a symbol favoured and revived by the Qianlong Emperor, ruyi not only became a repetitive motif in court art but also developed into a nationwide fashion that was readily imitated by the Han Chinese. Without the abolishment of hu under the new Manchu dynasty or without Qianlong's predilection for ruyi, it would be impossible to see such a flourish of 'Fu Xing holding ruyi' motif in New Year Pictures. The imperial cult of ruyi was pioneered by the Manchu emperor Qianlong, and the repetition and imitation of the image exposed the general acceptance and recognition of Qianlong's imperial power. Under unsolicited commissions, New Year Picture workshops every year printed large amounts of ruyi images and sold them all over the country, in spite of their different locations and artistic styles. Moreover, New Year Pictures from Taohuawu (桃花坞) in Suzhou (苏州) depicted Qianlong's southern tours (Feng vol. taohuawu 46); artisans from Yangliuqing (杨柳青) in Tianjin (天津) imitated perspective and bright colours from court painters in the Ruyi guan (Wang 121). As Qianlong himself believed, 'the ruler's influence and power are such that the people will follow his desires as the shadow follows the body' (qtd. in Kahn 178), the story of the ruyi along with all the myths about him became what Kahn calls Qianlong's 'personal stamp on the style of the age' (261).

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