

Analysis of the Palace Museum's Copper-Body Cloisonné Enamel Inlaid Glass Gourd-Shaped Hanging Lantern

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Abstract

The Qing dynasty court lanterns in the Palace Museum's collection, as exemplary examples of Qing dynasty court lighting, epitomize the ritual function and artistic value of traditional Chinese lanterns. This article systematically examines the copper-body cloisonné enamel gourd-shaped hanging lanterns through visual analysis, textual, and craftsmanship research. The distinctive features of Qing dynasty court lanterns are revealed from the perspectives of function, color, pattern, and structure, revealing their significance in material selection, craftsmanship innovation, cultural symbolism, and ritual practice. Lanterns are not only a physical vehicle for imperial life but also reflect the complex integration of imperial symbols, folk beliefs, and cross-cultural technology. This article uses the copper-body cloisonné enamel inlaid glass gourd-shaped hanging lantern as a case study to further demonstrate its exemplary craftsmanship and cultural symbolism. Beyond its historical value, this study discusses the cultural significance of the Qing-dynasty lantern and its implications for future museum practices and heritage interpretation. The findings contribute to broader discussions on heritage studies, design innovation, and cross-cultural exchange.

Keywords: Palace Museum, Qing dynasty court, Court lanterns, Copper-body cloisonné enamel, Gourd culture, Traditional Chinese pattern, Auspicious symbol

Introduction

Lanterns are an integral part of traditional Chinese material culture. They serve not only as a source of illumination but also carry symbolic meanings of ritual and culture. Qing dynasty court lanterns are exquisitely crafted, made of rare materials, and intricately crafted. Decorated with auspicious motifs, they symbolize imperial authority and solemn rituals.

The Palace Museum houses a collection of numerous Qing dynasty court lanterns, widely used in New Year celebrations, birthday banquets, and daily palace displays, reflecting the institutionalization of court etiquette and aesthetics. Among them, the copper-body cloisonné enamel inlaid glass gourd-shaped hanging lantern is particularly representative. Its gourd shape, "good luck" design, and Fenghuang pattern symbolize prosperity and good fortune, while the copper-body cloisonné enamel inlaid glass

craftsmanship embodies the fusion of Chinese symbolism and Western craftsmanship during the Kangxi period.

This study takes this lantern as a case study and combines methods such as textual research, shape research, craft history research, comparative analysis and field observation to explore its historical origins, craftsmanship, cultural significance, and ritual functions, to reveal its dual significance as a political symbol consolidating the legitimacy of the empire and a cultural symbol rooted in folk beliefs, and provide new ideas for the protection of cultural relics and museum display.

Literature review

In recent years, research on Qing dynasty palace lanterns has resulted in the accumulation of considerable knowledge. Researchers at the Palace Museum have

conducted multifaceted discussions from the perspectives of ritual function, craftsmanship, and cultural symbolism. Yingying (2021) points out that Qing dynasty palace lanterns are not only lighting fixtures but also an important part of royal rituals and festivals. Their auspicious patterns and shapes play a key role in symbolizing imperial power and prosperity, providing a basis for understanding the use of gourd lanterns in daily life and festivals at the palace. Han (2020) starts with the craftsmanship of corner lanterns, revealing the sophistication and complexity of the structural design and craftsmanship of Qing dynasty palace lanterns. He emphasizes the collaborative nature of carving, inlaying, and painting, echoing the complex craftsmanship embodied in copper-body cloisonné enamel inlaid glass gourd-shaped hanging lantern. Ren Wanping's (2019) restoration of the Qianqing Palace's sky lanterns and the Wanshou lanterns further illustrates the ritual function and symbolic significance of palace lanterns in imperial ceremonies, highlighting the value of combining archival and physical artifacts for the preservation of intangible cultural heritage. This work provides an important reference for comparative studies on gourd lanterns and other typical palace lanterns. Jie (2022) uses glass palace lanterns as a starting point to

explore the profound influence of the introduction of Western glass and painted techniques into China on the form and decoration of Qing dynasty lanterns, emphasizing their dual characteristics of combining Western realistic style with Chinese auspicious motifs. These studies collectively reveal the rich connotations of Qing Dynasty court lanterns in terms of etiquette, craftsmanship, and cross-cultural characteristics. However, most studies focus on typological classification or aesthetic description rather than systematic case studies that integrate form, craftsmanship, etiquette function, and symbolic meaning. This study employs a single-item study method to conduct a systematic analysis of a single lantern. Accordingly, this article focuses on the copper-body cloisonné enamel inlaid glass gourd-shaped hanging lantern, in an attempt to build on previous research to further interpret its craftsmanship and cultural symbolism, thereby providing new scholarly supplements to the study of Qing dynasty palace lanterns.

Although these previous studies tend to focus on archaeology, history, cultural relic restoration, etc., or consist of general discussions, few conduct in-depth case studies on individual cultural relics.



Figure 1 Copper-body cloisonné enamel inlaid glass gourd-shaped hanging lantern

Source: The Palace Museum

Research methodology

This study focuses on a Qing dynasty copper-body cloisonné enamel inlaid glass gourd-shaped hanging lantern in the Palace Museum collection. The following research methods are employed:

Morphological analysis

Through image analysis of existing museum artifacts, a morphological evaluation is conducted, combining appearance, dimensions, structure, and decorative features. Particular attention is paid to the lantern's overall shape, layered structure, decorative pattern distribution, and color palette, revealing the integration of formal aesthetics and ritual function.

Documentary research

References to Qing palace archives (such as the Imperial Household Department's Draft), court paintings (such as the "Hongli Lantern Festival Pleasures" and the "Kangxi Longevity Celebrations"), and the "Continuation of the History of the Imperial Palace in the Qing Dynasty" examine the use of gourd lanterns in imperial festivals, birthday celebrations, and daily displays. Analysis of archival terminology and historical records confirms the lantern's ritualistic nature and actual usage.

An analysis of copper-body cloisonné enamel and glass inlay techniques is conducted, tracing their European origins and their localization during the Qing court. Drawing on existing research on the history of craftsmanship, this study explores the exemplary significance of this lantern in terms of its material selection and complex craftsmanship, revealing the manifestation of Sino-Western cultural exchange in imperial craftsmanship.

Comparative study

This lantern is compared with other Qing dynasty imperial lamps, analyzing their similarities and differences in function, craftsmanship, and symbolic meaning. This horizontal comparison highlights the unique position of this lantern within the imperial lighting system.

Field investigation

A field investigation involved the current status of imperial lanterns at the Palace Museum.

This study's methodological framework aims to integrate physical observation, archival literature, and craft research with comparative analysis to provide a multi-dimensional interpretation of the lantern's craftsmanship and cultural symbolism.

The following case analysis applies these methods to examine the lantern in detail.

Field investigation

The Palace Museum is an ideal venue for studying traditional Chinese lanterns, housing a rich collection of historical documents that provide insights into their production and use.

A field investigation revealed that the display at Chuxiu Palace was limited. The lanterns' high position made it difficult for visitors to observe their details up close, allowing only the general structure and color to be seen. The angle at which they were hung made it difficult to clearly discern the patterns, carving techniques, and material characteristics of the lanterns. Furthermore, due to the effects of time and environmental factors, the materials used in the lanterns have oxidized to varying degrees, fading their once vibrant colors and resulting in a grayish hue that lacks the vibrant brilliance expected of Qing dynasty palace lanterns.

Due to the Palace Museum's fire safety requirements, these lantern artifacts cannot be illuminated, preventing visitors from admiring their detailed shapes and craftsmanship. This limitation means the original lighting and shadow effects of the lanterns cannot be directly displayed. Visitors can only visually observe their general structure but are unable to fully experience the cultural atmosphere.

During field research, exhibition restrictions prevented close viewing of more physical objects. Therefore, this study primarily relies on supplementary analysis from museum publications, online databases, and archival images. While this approach has its limitations, it also highlights the importance of digital display and research.



Figure 2 Chuxiu Palace

Source: Researcher

Analyzing the copper-body cloisonné enamel inlaid glass gourd-shaped hanging lantern

Appearance and structural features

The lantern, approximately 144 cm tall, is shaped like a gourd. Its upper portion features a hollowed-out lotus-patterned canopy, crowned into a peak, and decorated with phoenix heads at the four corners.

Tassels and beads hang below. The lantern's body is divided into two sections, forming a gourd-shaped polyhedron structure composed of a copper frame inlaid with glass panels. The lantern's curtain is enclosed by red silk tassels and features a square-shaped hanging plaque and a ruyi cloud-shaped ornament. The base is waisted, with a red silk tassel draped below.

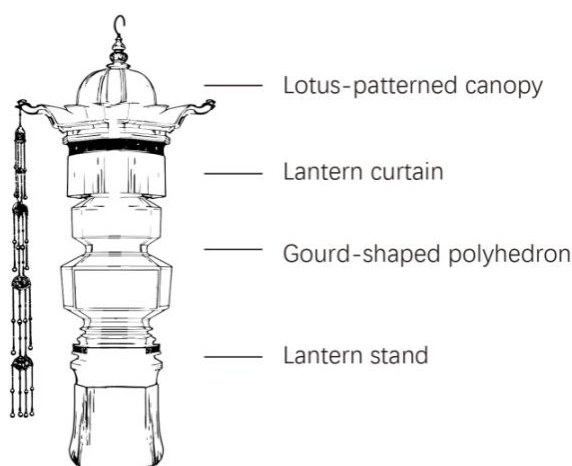


Figure 3 Copper-body cloisonné enamel inlaid glass gourd-shaped hanging lantern

Source: Researcher

Material and craftsmanship

This lantern features a copper frame, clad in painted enamel, and inlaid with stained glass. This copper-clad painted enamel technique originated in Europe. After entering the Chinese imperial court, it underwent long-term adaptation and practice, gradually achieving localization and innovative development. The

vibrant colors of painted enamel allow for the creation of intricate patterns, while the inlaid glass creates a crystal-clear visual effect. The use of this composite material not only demonstrates the exquisite craftsmanship of the Qing dynasty but also reflects the luxurious and aesthetically pleasing material choices employed in imperial artifacts.



Figure 4 Copper-body
Source: The Palace Museum

Decorative and iconic language

The canopy at the top of the lantern is primarily decorated with a colorful, entwined floral pattern, symbolizing endless prosperity and auspiciousness. The center of the lantern is shaped like a gourd. The characters “大” (meaning “big”) and “吉” (meaning “good fortune”) are painted on some of the glass panels, conveying a direct auspicious meaning and reinforcing

the symbolic connection of “gourd–fortune–great luck.” Furthermore, the canopy, tassels, and ruyi cloud motifs also carry profound cultural significance: the canopy symbolizes protection and nobility, the tassels represent unending good fortune, and the ruyi cloud motif signifies that all wishes come true. The overall decorative language seamlessly integrates ritual function with auspicious culture.

Table 1 Iconic language

Pattern Name	Pattern Image	Pattern Meaning
Painted entwined flower pattern		The flowers depicted are framed by plant branches or vines, with leaves intertwined to form four- or two-dimensional patterns, creating a unity yet revealing variety. Patterns include the entwined lotus, entwined chrysanthemum, entwined peony, and entwined baoxianghua. The lotus, a Buddhist symbol, symbolizes purity, while the entwined branches, with their uninterrupted vines, convey endless life. The entwined lotus pattern is a traditional decorative motif symbolizing auspiciousness.
Words: Da Ji		“Da ji” (大吉), a traditional auspicious word, is one of the most common and intuitive auspicious symbols in Chinese culture, expressing wishes for good fortune, prosperity, and well-being.

Pattern Name	Pattern Image	Pattern Meaning
Gourd pattern		The gourd, a homophone for “Fu Lu,” symbolizes wealth and prosperity. Since it is a herbaceous plant, its stems are called “man.” “Man” is a homophone for “wan,” meaning “million,” while “mandai” is a homophone for “wandai.” “Fu Lu” and “wandai” represent the complete “Fu Lu Shou,” making it a symbol of good fortune.
Auspicious cloud ruyi pattern		The ruyi cloud pattern, also known as lingzhi cloud, resembles the head of a Ganoderma lucidum. In ancient times, Ganoderma lucidum was considered a magical herb and a symbol of good fortune and longevity, so the heads of ruyi designs often took the form of Ganoderma lucidum heads. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, the clouds depicted in these designs often resembled a modified Ganoderma lucidum pattern, which became known as the ruyi cloud pattern or lingzhi cloud pattern.
Coin pattern		This symbolizes wealth and the attraction of fortune, while also possessing the cultural connotations of warding off disasters and promoting auspiciousness.
Fenghuang head pattern		Qing dynasty imperial lanterns often featured phoenix head designs on their canopies or hanging areas. The Fenghuang has long been a symbol of auspiciousness and nobility in traditional Chinese culture, standing alongside the dragon to symbolize “Loong and Fenghuang bringing good fortune.” In the imperial context, the Fenghuang head not only represented auspiciousness and harmony but also echoed the noble status of the empress or consorts, reflecting the ritualistic symbolism of gender and power. The display of a phoenix head on a lantern was both a beautiful display of decorative craftsmanship and a visual symbol of order and hierarchy within the imperial ceremonial space.

Pattern Name	Pattern Image	Pattern Meaning
Orange pattern		In Chinese culture, the orange is rich in auspicious meaning. The word ju (桔, orange) is homophonous with ji (吉, good fortune), making it a symbol of prosperity and good luck. It is often used in decorative arts such as vessels, textiles, and lanterns to convey wishes for “abundant blessings” and “great fortune.” As an evergreen tree with golden fruits, the orange also represents longevity, fertility, and wealth. In Qing court art, the orange motif thus serves both as an aesthetic element and as a ritual emblem of auspiciousness in imperial ornamentation.
Butterfly pattern		The butterfly pattern is a type of round flower pattern. This pattern, featuring dragons, phoenixes, flowers, chi (loong), cranes, and butterflies painted within a circular circle, was popular during the reigns of Emperors Kangxi, Yongzheng, and Qianlong of the Qing dynasty. Butterflies and flowers were often depicted together on Yongzheng famille rose porcelain, creating vibrance through rich colors and conveying auspicious blessings for a happy marriage.

Rituals and usage

Archival and visual records indicate that this style of lantern was commonly used in palace festivals and birthday celebrations. Yingying (2021) mentioned in “Lanterns illuminating the Forbidden City: A study of Qing dynasty palace lanterns” that “on February 29, the thirteenth year of Jiaqing, to inspect the damage of lamp holders such as sky lanterns and longevity lanterns in Ningshou Palace”, it is recorded that many gourd-type lanterns were hung in Ningshou Palace, and their use was juxtaposed with Wanshou lanterns and sky lanterns. It shows the importance of its ceremonial status. and the lighting system of Ningshou Palace and Qianqing Palace recorded in the “Continuation of the History of the Palace of the National Dynasty”, all of which show that gourd-style lanterns are widely used in court celebrations, festivals and daily furnishings. Furthermore, the gourd-shaped lanterns adorning the streetlight sheds depicted in the “Kangxi Wanshou Celebration Picture,” They served not only as palace lighting but also as a manifestation of imperial auspicious politics.

The Fusion of Craft and Culture

The most distinctive feature of the copper-body cloisonné enamel inlaid glass gourd-shaped lantern lies in its embodiment of Sino-Western craft fusion.

Historical research indicates that cloisonné enamel originated in the Islamic world and was introduced to China in the 13th century with the Mongol conquests. At that time, artisans from Central and West Asia were brought to the Yuan Dynasty court (Tianshu 2022) (Ya 2024). Early Chinese cloisonné enamel, referred to in historical documents as “Da Shi Yao,” retained distinct Middle Eastern stylistic characteristics before its gradual localization. By the Ming and Qing dynasties, this foreign technique had been fully integrated into the court’s craft system.

Court workshops combined the introduced enamel techniques with existing bronze-making techniques, auspicious patterns, and symbolic color systems, creating a uniquely Chinese aesthetic language. As Li (2020) points out, cloisonné enamel represents a typical example of “Sino-Western aesthetic fusion,” in which foreign materials and techniques were systematically recoded into Chinese cultural symbols.

In this lantern, the copper structure and enamel painting reveal Western influence, while the wanlian (entwined lotus), ruyi motifs, butterfly patterns, and the “great fortune” inscription highlight Chinese symbolism. The combination of the gourd image with cloisonné enamel demonstrates a creative transformation,

reflecting the court’s active role in reinterpreting foreign crafts.

This case illustrates how Qing court art achieved a synthesis of material, technique, and cultural meaning, making palace lanterns carriers of both cross-cultural significance and imperial symbolism.

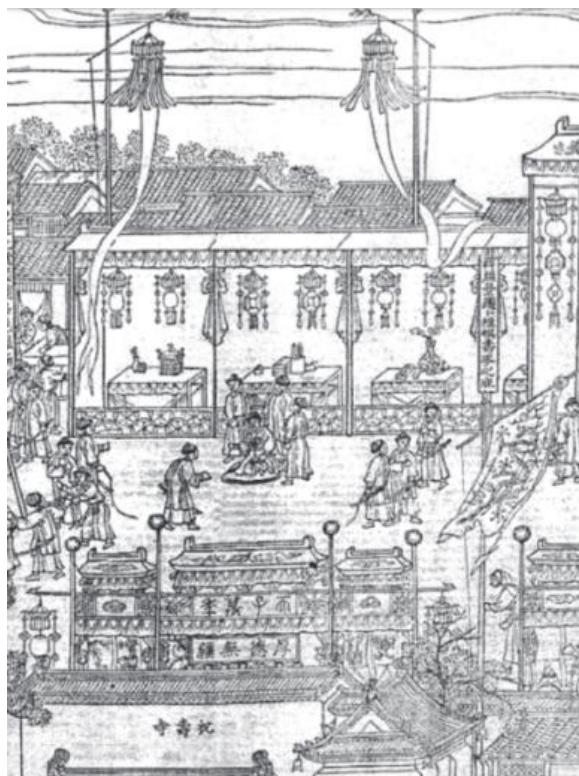


Figure 5 Image of the Kangxi emperor’s longevity celebration

Source: The Palace Museum

Comparison and discussion

Comparison with the longevity lanterns

Functionally: The longevity lantern was used to wish the emperor eternal life, emphasizing imperial longevity and dynastic stability, while the gourd lantern focused more on creating festive and auspicious atmospheres.

Craftsmanship: The longevity lantern featured loong-headed brackets and kesi silk scrolls with ornate inscriptions praising the emperor, whereas the gourd lantern employed cloisonné enamel and glass inlay, highlighting cross-cultural craftsmanship.

Symbolically: The longevity lantern embodied supreme imperial authority through loong motifs and imperial yellow, while the gourd lantern institutionalized the symbolism of “fortune and prosperity,” reflecting stronger links to popular beliefs.

Comparison with corner lanterns

Functionally: Corner lanterns primarily provided everyday illumination with a focus on practicality, while gourd lanterns were reserved for rituals and celebrations, emphasizing symbolism.

Craftsmanship: Corner lanterns were made of ox or sheep horn, assembled into functional and durable translucent panels, while the gourd lantern, in contrast, involved complex enamel and glass techniques, aimed at decorative and ceremonial effects.

Symbolism: Corner lanterns had limited symbolic meaning, reflecting practical ingenuity, whereas gourd lanterns carried a dual symbolism of auspiciousness and imperial legitimacy.

Differences from folk lanterns

Function: Folk lanterns served illumination and entertainment during festivals, creating a lively atmosphere, while the gourd lanterns also contributed to festivity but primarily functioned as a ritual and political emblem.

Craftsmanship: Folk lanterns were typically made of paper and wood, simple and inexpensive to

produce, whereas gourd lanterns employed costly materials and multiple techniques aimed at refinement and grandeur.

Symbolism: Folk lanterns conveyed common aspirations for blessings and longevity, while the gourd lanterns transformed these beliefs into institutionalized and politicized symbols of imperial power.



Figure 6 Longevity lantern

Source: The Palace Museum

Comparative Analysis and Summary

This comparison reveals that the copper-body cloisonné enamel inlaid glass gourd-shaped hanging lantern shares both commonalities and unique characteristics within the Qing dynasty court lantern system. Together with the longevity lantern, it served the imperial ritual system. It also reinforced auspicious symbolism and the complexity of its craftsmanship. Compared to the corner lantern, this lantern is more of a materialized expression of “symbolic culture.” A comparison with folk lanterns reveals the refinement, institutionalization, and politicization of court craftsmanship.

This lantern also served as a tool for displaying imperial power, concretizing the abstract concept of legitimacy into a visible ritual symbol. During major court celebrations, this lantern was exhibited alongside the longevity lantern, composing a multifaceted narrative of destiny, longevity, and auspiciousness. The integration of Western enamel techniques with traditional Chinese auspicious motifs not only symbolized aesthetic fusion but also demonstrated the Qing court’s ability to absorb foreign cultures and demonstrate universal rule. In this sense, the lantern transcended its function of illumination, becoming a medium for continuously affirming the legitimacy of Qing sovereignty and its supreme power. The copper-

body cloisonné enamel inlaid glass gourd-shaped hanging lantern is not only an important relic of the Qing dynasty court's material culture, but also a typical case

for understanding the multiple relationships between imperial power, rituals, craftsmanship, and cultural symbols.



Figure 7 Corner lantern

Source: The Palace Museum

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Figure 8 Folk square lantern

Source: Late Qing dynasty furniture display album

Conclusion

This study uses the copper-body cloisonné enamel inlaid glass gourd-shaped hanging lantern from the Palace Museum as a case study, revealing its uniqueness in form, craftsmanship, and ritual function. The gourd shape, along with auspicious symbols such as “good luck and great fortune,” creates a blessing system, while the combination of copper-based enamel and glass inlays embodies the fusion of Chinese and Western techniques and localized innovation.

In doing so, this study aligns itself with ongoing scholarly discussions in Qing material culture, ritual studies, and cross-cultural craft history. By examining how a single palace artifact embodies both political symbolism and aesthetic hybridity, the research contributes to broader debates on the ways imperial objects mediate power, meaning, and cultural transmission.

This comparative study highlights the dual nature of the gourd lantern: a political symbol reinforcing the legitimacy of imperial power and a cultural vehicle for conveying auspicious folk values. This duality offers a unique perspective for understanding the interaction between court ritual and folk tradition.

This study demonstrates the value of individual case studies of artifacts in the study of court craftsmanship, providing a paradigm for integrating material analysis with cultural and political interpretation. Practically, the study highlights the challenges of intangible cultural heritage preservation and museum display, particularly the limited visibility and lack of lighting effects observed during field research.

What distinguishes this study is its integration of morphological analysis, archival evidence, craft-historical interpretation, and comparative inquiry within a single-object framework. This methodological approach enriches scholarship on Qing court artifacts by showing how micro-level material analysis can illuminate broader cultural, political, and ideological structures.

This study also has limitations. Due to limited access to physical artifacts, some of the analysis relies on archival images and secondary sources. Future research could combine digital reconstruction and information visualization technologies, not only to recreate the lighting effects, but also to enhance public engagement and broaden the scope of cross-cultural comparison.

The copper-body cloisonné enamel inlaid glass gourd-shaped hanging lantern embodies the fusion of ritual, craftsmanship, and cultural symbolism. It is not only an indispensable material relic of Qing dynasty court life, but also a valuable case study for exploring cultural heritage, design innovation, and cross-cultural exchange.

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CRedit author statement

Duan Qianyi: Conceptualization, Writing-Original Draft, Visualization, Investigation. **Atitthep Chaetnalao:** Supervision, Writing - Review & Editing.

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