

## Book Review

By Philip Cheong

### **Bringing Heaven to Earth: Chinese Silver Jewellery and Ornament in the Late Qing Dynasty**

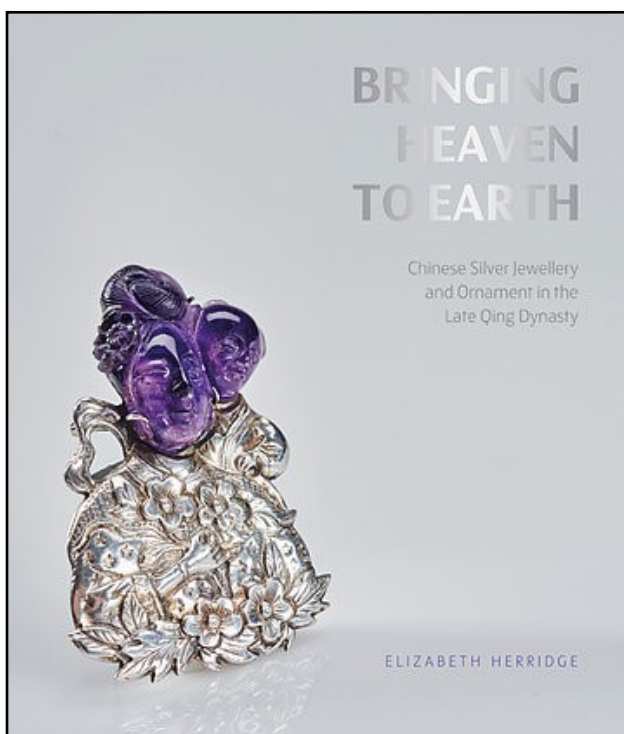
By Elizabeth Herridge with Frances Wood

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**T**his book is a catalogue of fifty pieces of late 19th and early 20th-century Chinese silver jewelry and hardstone and glass necklaces belonging to a single private collector and as such does not remotely represent the range and scope of Chinese jewelry from the era. Most of the items are export pieces which, like its porcelain counterpart, were made for a western market and does not represent Chinese taste. The collection does not aim to be an encyclopedic or representative of Chinese silver jewelry of the late Qing Dynasty and Republican period, but rather it reflects the personal taste of the individual collector collecting between the years 2004 and 2012 in the re-sale markets of North America. It is the type of material that would have been readily available in the curio shops of Hong

Kong and Singapore a half century ago and also in American stores like Gumps in San Francisco who fed the taste for exotic Asian antiques and jewelry in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Additionally, I am not wholly convinced that some of the pieces are pre-1930 in date but altogether of a more recent manufacture.

In the foreword by Dr. Frances Wood, retired Curator of the Chinese Collections at the British Library, notes that this book is a foundation for further study. This is without saying as very little has been written about Chinese silver jewelry from the Qing period, let alone any other historical periods in China's history. It is pioneering work and as such, further research will uncover more historical facts and correct and apprise the works of earlier writers including this current book. Indeed, the author, Heather Herridge in her preface has acknowledged that she had very little knowledge of Qing Dynasty jewelry before starting on the book. This reveals itself in the book and it is unfortunate, for if it is to be taken seriously in scholarly circles, the author needs to have more than a rudimentary knowledge of Chinese decorative arts and all that it implies.



Wedding bracelets



Six-dragon bracelet

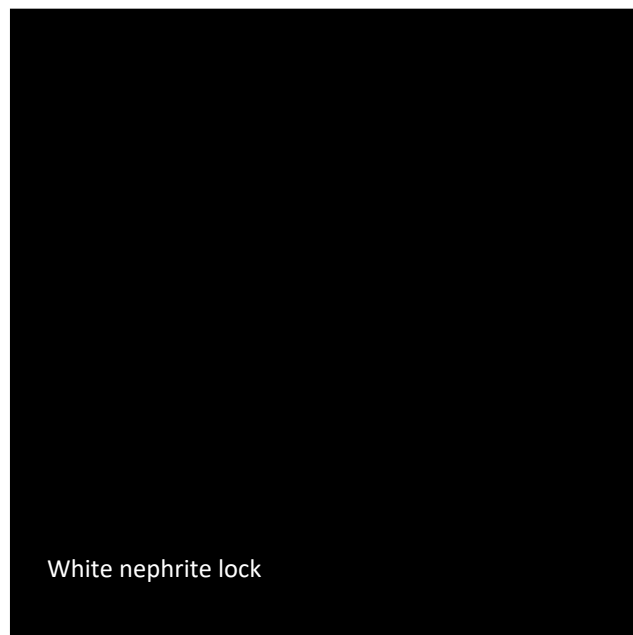
As well, a critical eye in picking out and discerning details needs further development. For example, the third entry in the book, a six-dragon bracelet, Herridge describes the dragons as being three-clawed and briefly mentions their earliest appearances in the archaic Shang Period. While appreciated in her effort to present us with the background, she fails to discuss their significance in this instance when we know that there are also four-clawed and five-clawed dragons (she writes in entry number 26, the enameled dragon bracelet that the standard depiction is a three-clawed dragon, and this shows the author's lack of acquaintance with Chinese art). However, more importantly, my issue is that she failed to realize that the dragons depicted on the bracelet are not three-clawed, but four-clawed. This reviewer cannot understand how the author could have missed counting the dragon's fourth digit. Granted that she described them as three-clawed, she should have mentioned that a three-clawed dragon signified a lowly status and she should have inform the reader that this is a deviation from the norm for this time period. Three-clawed dragons very rarely make their appearances in Chinese art post-Song Dynasty (960-1279) but are more common in Japanese art and silver during the Meiji and Showa era corresponding to the timeframe of the book's subject. In developing this critical eye, Herridge would suspect that the lingzhi fungus under the flaming pearl is simply a cloud that the artist has modeled to resemble a ruyi shape and not a lingzhi fungus. A dragon and a lingzhi is a highly unlikely combination, the more common being a deer and the lingzhi, both of which are representative of longevity.

About longevity, Herridge has an over-dependence on certain sources for her information for Chinese symbolism. She cites extensively from C.A.S. Williams' book from a 1974 edition of a work first published in 1941, *Outlines of Chinese Symbolism and Art Motifs*. This book is a great reference resource that even the reviewer has in his library. However, it does require updating and not

all the information is wholly accurate. Herridge cites Williams when she discusses the bat motif in entry 11, a white nephrite lock as symbolic of longevity and happiness except that the bat does not represent longevity but rather only happiness. The Chinese sound for bat is fu which is also a homophone for happiness and one would be hard pressed to find a bat imagery representing longevity in Chinese art. The concept of longevity is often represented by deer, lingzhi fungus, cranes, peaches, tortoises, even pine trees. This is basic Chinese Symbolism 101.

This particular entry, number 11 is fraught with too many errors and assumptions that would warrant a poor grade if this was a first-year university essay. Apart from the heavy reliance on certain references, Herridge has not fully researched the item. She claims that the Chinese characters for Fu, Lu and Shou on the front of the lock are identifying the figures on the back but instead, these Chinese characters have been configured as Fu-Shou-Lu. Unfortunately, she is wrong and if she delved further into the different representations of these characters in Chinese seal script and symbols, she would have discovered that the characters and order are indeed right (in this case because we are reading it as a Chinese reader would, it is from right to left, rendering it Fu-Lu-Shou, whereas in the west, reading it from left to right it would be Shou-Lu-Fu).

This reviewer was particularly appalled when Herridge suggested that this piece was made in southern China based on two decorative motifs on the lock – the bats and the pomegranate. She speculates that since bats are found mainly in southern China and pomegranate trees are extensively grown there that the lock could be of southern Chinese manufacture and that they could have been modelled from life. One simply cannot narrow down place of manufacture based on this as both these motifs are recognized and used as symbolic representa-



White nephrite lock



Spider brooch





Wedding necklace



Detail wedding necklace

tions of happiness and fecundity across China and by the Chinese diaspora for over a millennia.

Herridge's lack of knowledge in Chinese art and design can be seen in another of her descriptions. This time, in describing number 17, the "Wedding Necklace". She has assigned the central figure in the necklace as Guanyin holding a bottle in her hand with a rosary suspended to her left. While these objects can be associated with Guanyin, the actual figures sports a head with tight curls rather than what she describes as an elaborate headdress. Any student of Buddhist art will tell you that this figure is of a Buddha type rather than a bodhisattva, which Guanyin is. Furthermore, the author describes the background as a backdrop of tall lotus or bamboo. Again, nothing of that sort. If the author is aware of Chinese art, she would have instantly recognized it as a pine tree with the needles forming the fan-like clusters. The same goes for number 28 which depicts a carved lotus leaf, yet she describes it as a flowering five-petal lotus flower. Again, for number 13 where she misidentifies a prunus flower for a five-petal lotus and chrysanthemums as "peony flowers with their distinctive spikey foliage". I cannot take the author seriously when simple and typical flora used in Chinese art are misidentified. This begs the question, how much more is wrong. The reviewer is not even going to venture into the author's discussions of Daoism when she has not listed Mahayana Buddhism as a religious tradition in China but instead list Daoism, Confucianism, Islam and other religious traditions that the Chinese follow.

Another flaw in the book is inconsistency in the spelling and misspelt words. Generally, the Pinyin system of Romanization is used for the Chinese words and names. In using "lung" the Chinese word for dragon, the author followed the Wade-Giles system and not the Pinyin "long" spelling. Another glaring use of the

Wade-Giles system is the spelling of the Chinese capital Peking. That has ceased to be used for some time now and it is inappropriate to use Peking instead of Beijing. Someone also needs to check on the spelling of Bodhisattva as it is spelt with a double t instead of the one found in the book. In addition to spell checks, make sure that the pictures are orientated correctly and not upside down as in number 38, oval bracelet, where the Chinese characters for fu (luck), lu (prosperity), shou (longevity) and xi (happiness) are upside down. Herridge should also refrain from describing Chinese written characters as symbols as they are not. No one who is aware of East Asian culture will ever refer to Chinese characters as symbols. She needs to be consistent in using the term character which she does sometimes and sometimes not.

The author is very enthusiastic and generous in her descriptions of the quality and craftsmanship of the jewellery. While the quality of the work ranges from lower, mass produced quality to good craftsmanship, there are hardly any that this reviewer would classify as virtuoso work which the author has for a number of entries. Again, a critical eye and exposure to greater and finer examples of Chinese metalwork and hardstone carvings is a must for Herridge if she is to apply such judgements to objects. For example, she should examine the examples of 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup>-century jade carvings in the Victoria and Albert Museum, the British Museum or even the Royal Ontario Museum as she has been there in order to see good quality carvings as opposed to the mediocre ones that have been repurposed for the jewelry in the book.

On the whole, the book is lavishly illustrated but I found it challenging to read, not so much because of the language or the prose, but because there were too many basic mistakes. It shows that it is written by someone who is only superficially aware of the culture and is asking questions where answers have already been established if the author did her homework. This reviewer is also not wholly convinced that all the jewellery is antique or vintage. It was a Yin/Yang experience for me. I enjoyed looking at the pictures which no doubt would bring any student of this pioneering subject some excitement but then as I read it, my enthusiasm for it took a reversal to balance my joy.

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M.A. East Asian Studies, with a specialization in Chinese art.

He has worked in the museum field for over 27 years as a teacher, Historical Interpreter, Program Officer and Museum Coordinator with the City of Toronto.

Similarly, has volunteered at The Royal Ontario Museum in the former H.H. Mu Far Eastern Library (now the Bishop White Committee Library of East Asia) and developed public programs for the Bishop White Committee and was Chair of the Bishop White Committee for five years. Currently, he holds the position of Past-Chair of the Bishop White Committee and is Chair of the Friends of East Asia, promoting interests and financial support for the East Asian collections at the Royal Ontario Museum.