

THE ROSARY

A rosary appears early on in the great eighteenth-century novel *Dream of the Red Chamber*, when the young protagonist, Jia Baoyu, encounters the Prince of Beijing at a funeral for one of Baoyu's relatives. After chatting with the boy briefly, the graceful prince takes his leave, saying,

"Today is our first meeting, but as it was an unforeseen one, I have not come prepared with a suitable gift. All I can offer you is this rosary made of the aromatic seeds of some Indian plant. It was given me by His Imperial Majesty. I hope you will accept it as a little token of my esteem."

Baoyu took the rosary and turning back offered it respectfully to [his father] Jia Zheng, who made his son join him in formally thanking the prince for the gift.¹¹⁴

Later in the same novel, Baoyu's sister, an imperial concubine, makes a rare visit to see her family. The concubine brings with her an elaborate set of gifts for members of the family. Among the gifts to her grandmother are several *ruyi* scepters, a staff, satin, silk, a number of gold and silver medallions decorated with auspicious designs, and a rosary (of "putchuk beads").¹¹⁵

The presence today of a large number of rosaries in what was once the imperial collection (for instance, figure 8) demonstrates that in this episode, Cao Xueqin, author of the *Dream of the Red Chamber*, was quite accurate in his representation of court life: the rosary was indeed a common object in the Qing court. But beyond the basic fact of the prevalence of the object, the *meaning* of the rosary for these figures—what it was used for and what it stood for—is at first elusive. In the first instance, the prince was attending a funeral; perhaps then we are to assume that he brought the rosary to chant the name of Amitābha or some other buddha during the ceremony. Comparison with the concubine's case, however, suggests that the prince may just as likely have brought the rosary along as an ornament or as a potential gift. Baoyu's sister's gift to her grandmother is accompanied by goods with no religious connotations (silk, satin, auspicious medallions), and without suggestion that it is to be used



FIG. 8. 108-bead rosary with mother bead and reminder, from the Imperial collection. Made of "brown ivory" (*Huangqianya*). Reproduced by permission of the National Palace Museum, Taipei.

as a devotional object. All of this illustrates that in the final centuries of imperial China, the function of the rosary had, at least in some circles, drifted far from its origins in Buddhist ritual.

This is not to say that Qing Chinese did not use the rosary for devotional purposes or that those who exchanged such gifts were not aware of its liturgical function. The very word for rosary, *shuzhu*, literally, "counting beads," immediately betrays the function of the object as a de-

¹¹⁴ Chapter 15. David Hawkes, trans., *The Story of the Stone*, p. 289.

¹¹⁵ Chapter 18. *Ibid.*, p. 372.

vice for counting prayers.¹¹⁶ After citing a Tang reference to the rosary, the eminent Qing scholar Yu Yue (1821–1907) concluded a brief essay on the beads by noting, “Thus we see that there is a precedent for the practice of *people today* using beads to recite the names of buddhas.”¹¹⁷ For this nineteenth-century scholar and for scholars of Buddhism today, the primary function of the rosary is generally and quite rightly assumed to be to count recitations. This is not surprising, since rosary beads are still commonly used by practicing Chinese Buddhists for counting recitations of the name of Amitābha.

But when we look more closely at the history of the rosary in China, we find that the prince’s use of the rosary as a gift to Baoyu that was in turn given him by the emperor, the concubine’s use of the rosary as a decorative object, Yu Yue’s note on the devotional use of the object, and a number of other uses of the beads in the Qing can all be traced back to associations and functions the rosary accumulated in the long process of its introduction and assimilation into Chinese culture. I will return to the Qing at the end of this section; for now we begin with the origins of the beads in ancient India.¹¹⁸

The Rosary in Indian Buddhism

We can safely assume that the rosary came to China with Buddhism: there is no evidence of the use of prayer beads in pre-Buddhist China, and the Indian origin of the Chinese rosary is undisputed.¹¹⁹ But precisely when

¹¹⁶ In addition to the word *shuzhu*, the rosary is also often referred to in Chinese as *nianzhu*, “recitation beads,” or more rarely, *chizhu*, “beads for keeping (recitations).” The English word *rosary* derives from a Christian context in which it means either a particular set of prayers or prayer beads. In Europe, the origins of the name *rosary* are as obscure as the origins of the beads themselves. According to a legend popular in the fifteenth century, the term was coined by a monk who was in the habit of weaving together garlands of roses, which he used to adorn the Virgin Mary. These he later replaced with sets of Hail Marys. Henk van Os, *The Art of Devotion in the Later Middle Ages in Europe 1300–1500*, p. 170.

¹¹⁷ “Chizhu songfo,” by Yu Yue, in his *Chaxiangshi sanchao* 17, p. 10a (BJDG edn.).

¹¹⁸ Two studies on the rosary in Japan provide useful information on the rosary in India and China as well. See the brief overview in E. Dale Saunders, *Mudrā: A Study of Symbolic Gestures in Japanese Buddhist Sculpture*, pp. 174–7. For a more detailed discussion, see George J. Tanabe Jr., “Telling Beads: The Forms and Functions of the Buddhist Rosary in Japan” (unpublished manuscript). I am indebted to Professor Tanabe’s article for a number of the passages I cite below.

¹¹⁹ Scholars have also suggested that the rosary used in Islam (from perhaps as early as the eighth century) and in Christianity (from approximately the thirteenth century) can be traced back to India. The evidence is slight, and most writing on the subject leaves open the possibility that the beads developed independently in both Islam and Christianity. On the rosary in Islam, see A. J. Wensinck, “Subha,” p. 492, and Ignaz Goldziher, “Le rosaire dans l’Islam,” pp. 295–300. For Christianity, see Anne Winston-Allen, *Stories of the Rose: The Making of the Rosary in the Middle Ages*, pp. 111–6.

the rosary first appeared in India is difficult to determine. The monastic regulations and the *Āgamas* (generally considered among the earliest Buddhist scriptures) make no mention of prayer beads, suggesting that the rosary entered Buddhist practice several hundred years after the establishment of a Buddhist monastic order.¹²⁰ This, together with the appearance of the rosary in one piece of early brahmanic art, has in turn led some to speculate that the rosary entered Buddhism from brahmanism, but the evidence is so slim and ambiguous that the search for the ultimate origins of the Indian rosary is probably a lost cause.¹²¹

The earliest datable textual reference to the rosary in any language is the *Mu huanzi jing*, a very brief scripture said to have been translated into Chinese in the Eastern Jin (A.D. 317–420), purportedly from an Indian original.¹²² The text, literally the *Scripture of the Seeds of the Ariṣṭaka*, relates the story of a king from a troubled kingdom, wracked by bandits, disease, and famine, who comes to the Buddha for assistance, lamenting that his mind is so troubled by problems of state that he cannot practice Buddhism with a peaceful mind. The Buddha then tells the king,

If you wish to eliminate the obstacles of affliction and bad karmic consequences, you should string together one hundred and eight seeds from the *ariṣṭaka*.¹²³ Keep this with you always. Whether you walk, sit, or sleep, always concentrate your mind, not allowing it to stray as you chant (*cheng*) the words “Buddha, Dharma, Sangha,” after which you may pass one of the *ariṣṭaka* beads. In this way, gradually work your way through the *ariṣṭaka* beads. Do this ten times, twenty times, a hundred times, a thousand times, and even up to one hundred million times. If you can [chant through the

¹²⁰ Nor does iconography provide evidence for the rosary in early Buddhism. As far as I can tell, Sañci and Bharhut contain no examples of the rosary. By the seventh century, the rosary appears regularly in Hindu sculpture.

¹²¹ See Mochizuki Shinkō, *Bukkyō daijiten*, s.v. “Juzu,” pp. 2474a–7a, in which Mochizuki argues for a Brahmanic origin of the rosary on the basis of an image of what he claims is a brahman holding a rosary at Sahr-bohl. I have been unable to obtain a photograph of the image Mochizuki referred to. Works in various languages refer to the “origins of the rosary in Brahmanism,” but Mochizuki seems to be the only one to have presented any evidence for this theory, attempting to explain what is probably an unresolvable problem.

¹²² This text is not mentioned in our earliest Buddhist bibliography, the *Chu sanzang jiji*. As far as I can tell, the earliest reference to the text is in the catalog *Zhongjing mulu* (juan 3), completed in 594, where the title is listed. Hence the text may not have appeared before the sixth century. The text is quoted in Daoshi’s *Fayuan zhulin* (34, p. 551b) completed in 668. Another version of the text was purportedly translated by Amogavajra in the eighth century, lending credence to the assumption that this was a translation of an Indian original rather than a Chinese work. See Ono Genmyō, ed., *Bussō kaisetsu daijiten*, vol. 11, p. 11d.

¹²³ Identified as *Sapindus Mukurossi* in Maku Takamaro, *Butsuden no shokubutsu*; Tanabe, in his “Telling Beads,” gives “soapberry seed.”

beads] two hundred thousand times then you will feel no confusion in body or mind, nor will you be swayed by flattery. When you give up this life, you will be born in the third heaven, realm of the *yāma* gods, where your clothing and food will be supplied naturally and you will constantly abide in tranquility, joyfully practicing [Buddhism]. If you can complete a full one million [rounds of the rosary], then you will cut off all hundred and eight forms of karma. Only then will you turn your back to the stream of life and death and head toward nirvana. Forever cutting off the roots of affliction, you will thereby achieve the highest reward.¹²⁴

This early prescription for the use of the rosary tells us, first of all, that in contrast to the monastic symbols and emblems discussed above, the rosary was from very early on used by the Buddhist laity, in this case in order to gain merit by chanting the names of the “three jewels,” that is, Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. The text attributes a number of benefits to chanting. The Buddha insists that, as in other forms of Buddhist meditation, one is not to allow the mind to “stray” while chanting. The lines that follow suggest that the improved capacity for concentration developed through this practice will allow the king to think more clearly and hence to see through the deceit of unreliable advisers. On a higher level, chanting the names of the three jewels wins one a place in paradise and can even lead to nirvana, the loftiest goal of all. The scale by which this hierarchy of rewards is measured is based on the number of recitations, and the rosary is used to keep track of this all-important number. With the rosary one can know how many recitations remain before one can expect one’s mind to finally clear, or before one’s position among the gods is secure. In other texts, the rosary is variously used to keep track of recitations of spells, the names of bodhisattvas, or the names of buddhas.¹²⁵ As we will see below, however, in addition to its function as a counting device, the rosary is often assumed to have magical properties of its own. Not only did the rosary count recitations; a recitation marked with a rosary somehow counted more.

A part of what imbued the rosary with these special powers was its symbolic content. Already in this text we see one of the most enduring symbolic aspects of the rosary when the text instructs its reader to make the rosary with 108 beads, each bead representing one of the 108 afflictions. This number is repeated in dozens of descriptions of the rosary in later texts, most of which equate the number of beads with the number of

¹²⁴ *Mu huanzi jing*, T no. 786, vol. 17, p. 726a.

¹²⁵ *Jin’gangding yujia nianzhu jing*, T no. 789, vol. 17; *Da Biluzhe’na jing guangda yigui C*, T no. 851, vol. 18, p. 107c.

afflictions. Some, like the *Scripture on the Evaluation of Merits of the Rosary from the Spell Treasury of Mañjuśrī*,¹²⁶ translated from an Indian original by Yijing (635–713), provide for more flexibility, stating that if it is difficult to obtain 108 beads, one can make a rosary of half that number (54), half *that* number (27), or even of a mere 14 beads.

This concern for numbers discloses the close relationship between symbolism and sacred power. That is, the number of beads in the rosary is not simply a way of conveying information about the number of afflictions one must confront; rather, the proper number of beads is important for making the rosary effective—not just any string of beads will do. This tendency to emphasize the “efficacy” of a rosary not just for accurate accounting but for its magical power comes to the fore in discussions of the way rosaries were made and the stuff they were made of. Ritual texts, for instance, place particular importance on the act of consecrating or empowering (*jiachi*) the beads. This is usually done by chanting a special spell over the beads before their first use.¹²⁷ An Indian text translated into Chinese in the Song goes into the process of making the rosary in great detail, stipulating that once one has selected a potential tree as a source of beads for a rosary, one should first sleep beneath the tree and examine one’s dreams before going ahead with its manufacture. Further, once the beads have been selected, they must be strung together by a virgin and then sacralized with a spell.¹²⁸

Buddhist texts allow for use of various substances, in addition to the *aristaka*, when making a rosary. The text translated by Yijing lists nine substances, including iron, pearl, coral, crystal, and the seeds of a bodhi tree. These are arranged from least effective (iron) to most effective (seeds from a bodhi tree).¹²⁹ As the bodhi tree was the tree under which the Buddha achieved enlightenment, it is understandable that a rosary made of its seeds was considered supremely potent. The logic behind the hierarchical

¹²⁶ *Manshushili zhouzangzhong jiaoliang shuzhu gongde jing*, T no. 787, vol. 17. A different version of the same text was translated by Baosiwei, T no. 788.

¹²⁷ For instance, *Putichang suoshuo yizi dinglun wang jing* T no. 950, vol. 19, p. 202a–b; *Bai san’gai dafodingwang zuisheng wubi dawei de jin’gang wu’ai dadaochang tuoluoni niansong fayao*, T no. 975, vol. 19, p. 400c.

¹²⁸ See the chapter on rosaries in Tianxizai’s, *Da fangguang pusazang Wenshushili genben yigui jing*, T no. 1191, vol. 20, pp. 873a–4a.

¹²⁹ *Jiaoliang shuzhu gongde jing*, T no. 788, vol. 17, p. 727. A similar list is given in the *Jin’gangding yujia nianzhu jing*, T no. 789, vol. 17, p. 727, translated by Amoghavajra (Ch. Bukong). George Tanabe notes that the bodhi tree does not produce seeds large enough to be used for a rosary, and that usually the seeds used in a “Bodhi-seed rosary” are in fact from the Bodhici tree that grows in the Himalayan mountain region. See Tanabe, “Telling Beads.”

placement of elements like coral, crystal, and pearl is less apparent, and relates, perhaps, to their availability in medieval India, or perhaps to the perceived purity of the various substances.

Tantric texts (in which rosaries frequently appear) at times prescribe different types of rosaries for different rituals (crystal for the “ritual of faith and love”; *aristaka* for the “ritual of wrath”), or for different categories of deities (seeds of a bodhi tree for deities of the “Buddha family,” lotus seeds for deities belonging to the “lotus family,” etc.).¹³⁰ Other Indian texts describe in detail the care one must take in selecting beads and making a proper rosary. The *Scripture of the Symposium of Dhāraṇīs*, for instance, advises:

The Buddha said that one who wishes to make a rosary with the marks of the Dharma (*faxiang shuzhu*) should first call upon the services of a bead craftsman. Regardless of the price, the beads must be of good quality. If they are precious gems, they must never have been used for another purpose. Each bead must be clear inside and out, without crack or blemish. They should be round, clean, and sparkling. You may choose whichever size you wish.

Again, the attention to the quality of the beads and the proscriptions against using beads that had been previously used for another (presumably profane) purpose points to the special nature of the rosary as the powerful accoutrement of the ritual adept, distinguishing it from common jewelry and the tools of the accountant. The text goes on to describe a ritual of purification the bead maker must undergo, and concludes by explaining how the bead maker should supply a bead of gold for the mother bead (*muzhu*)—the large bead that marks the center point of the rosary. This is an important part of the rosary, since it alerts users that they have gone through the ring of beads once. The same text also prescribes making a “reminder” (*jizi*)—a tail of ten beads, attached to the mother bead—again to remind users that they have made one round of the rosary (figure 8).¹³¹ Elsewhere, the mother bead is explained symbolically as representing Amitābha, while the string that hold the beads together represents Avalokiteśvara, and the remaining beads, the “fruits of the bodhisattva.” When counting through the rosary, one is not to pass over the

¹³⁰ For the use of different beads for different rituals, see *Da beikongzhi jin'gang da jiaowang yigui jing* (Skt. *Hevajra[dākinijālasambara]tantra*) 5, T no. 892, vol. 18, p. 601a, trans. by Dharmapāla (Ch. Fahu) in the eleventh century (mentioned by the eleventh-century Japanese pilgrim Jōjin in his *San Tendai Godaisan ki* 1.4b, vol. 115, p. 147). For recommendations of different beads for different deities, see *Zhufo jingjie shezhenshi jing* C, T no. 868, vol. 18, p. 281c, trans. by Prajñā (Ch. Banruo) in the late eighth century, as well as T no. 866, vol. 18, pp. 248a–b; and T no. 894, vol. 18, p. 701a. On the notion of categories or “families” of deities, see Snellgrove, *Indo-Tibetan Buddhism*, pp. 189–98.

¹³¹ *Tuoluoni ji jing* 2, T no. 901, vol. 18, p. 803a–b.

mother bead—a serious infraction—but is instead to reverse the direction of counting once the mother bead is reached.¹³² In this reference to the mother bead “representing” Avalokiteśvara, and the injunction that one is not to pass over this bead, we see more clearly that the rosary was imbued with divine power that needed to be carefully attended to, for to pass over Avalokiteśvara’s bead was to insult the bodhisattva himself.

In short, like the stupas, relics, and icons discussed in chapter 1, the beads themselves were thought to contain sacred power. At the very least, this notion laid the groundwork for the eventual use of the rosary as a talisman, and, while I have found no evidence directly pointing to this use in ancient India, it seems likely that the rosary was used as a talisman by some ancient Indians to fend off hostility and danger. We come close to this idea in a passage in the *Merits of the Rosary*, mentioned above, which states that even if one is incapable of chanting the names of the buddhas or *dhāraṇīs*, one can garner the same amount of merit simply by carrying the rosary on one’s person.

Naturally enough, use of the rosary brings with it the rewards of recitation. The three most famous texts devoted specifically to the rosary all extol the value of chanting with the rosary for gaining merit and purifying oneself of faults.¹³³ The *Rosary from the Spell Treasury of Mañjuśrī* notes vaguely that the rosary brings benefit to oneself and others, and that through recitation with the rosary one can be born in one of “the various Pure Lands.” As we have seen, the *Scripture of the Seeds of the Aristaka* similarly lists birth in a heaven as one of the rewards for practicing with the rosary. Other texts describe the use of the rosary in rituals that induce fertility in barren women or make charmed water to cure disease.¹³⁴

In these last two instances, the one who is to hold the rosary is not the woman seeking a child or a sick man seeking a cure; it is instead the monk who orchestrates the ritual. The texts tell us little about whether such lay figures used the rosary, much less how they perceived it. Nevertheless, the presence of a layman at the center of our earliest datable description of the rosary alerts us to the possibility of widespread use of the rosary among Buddhist laypeople already in ancient India.¹³⁵

¹³² See *Jin'gangding yujia nianzhu jing*, p. 727c, translated by Amoghavajra. The passage is quoted in *Jin'gangding jing yizi dinglunwang yujia yiqieshichu niansong chengfo yigui*, T no. 957, vol. 19, p. 325b.

¹³³ The *Mu huanzi jing*, the *Jiaoliang shuzhu gongde jing*, and the *Jin'gangding yujia nianzhu jing*.

¹³⁴ The first is from the *Tuoluoni ji jing* 4, p. 819a–b, the second from the *Yiqie rulai wusenisha zuisheng zongchi jing*, trans. in the Song by Fahu, T no. 978, vol. 19, p. 408b.

¹³⁵ Similarly, in the absence of archaeological evidence, it is difficult to determine what materials actual rosaries were made of and, more importantly, just how widespread use of the rosary was. A compilation of texts translated into Chinese in the eighth century by Amoghavajra specifically states that for a ritual described in the text, “One does not resort

In sum, Indian Buddhist texts translated into Chinese in the early medieval period reflect the belief that the repetition of certain magical words and phrases brought great benefits, ranging from increased powers of concentration to rebirth in a paradise, or even attainment of nirvana. The rosary was used by monastic and lay alike for keeping track of the number of these recitations. But more than this, the rosary was also given symbolic as well as magical significance that increased the power of recitation. The relationship here between symbolism and magical power is particularly important. The 108 beads of the rosary, symbolizing the 108 afflictions, did more than convey information—it was more than a reminder to the adepts of the precise number of their potential problems. Precise symbolic criteria were necessary for the ritual of recitation to work.

*The Introduction of the Rosary to China:
Fourth to Tenth Centuries*

The earliest reference to the rosary in China is the same *Scripture of the Seeds of the Ariṣṭaka*, mentioned above, translated in the Eastern Jin (A.D. 317–420). At roughly the same time, during the Northern Wei (386–534), an image of a bodhisattva with a rosary dangling from his hand was chiseled in stone in a cave in what is now Gansu, at Mount Maiji.¹³⁶ While a number of texts translated into Chinese in the following centuries mention rosaries, before the Tang, references to Chinese people using rosaries or prescribing their use are scarce.¹³⁷ Iconography also presents a problem in that, while bodhisattvas are frequently depicted adorned with various sorts of beaded necklaces, it is at times difficult to determine if any of these were used as rosaries. Further, because most such images are positioned with their backs to the cave wall, very rarely is it possible to count beads draped around the neck—a useful method for separating rosaries from other types of necklaces. But strings of beads dangling from a figure's hand, which are clearly rosaries, can be found from the Northern Zhou (557–81) at Binglingsi, and from the Sui (581–618) at Mo-gaoku in Dunhuang, and at Tuoshan in Shandong.

to setting a limit [to the number of incantations] by counting one's beads," indicating that at least by this time the rosary was so common that if a ritual did not call for the rosary, it was necessary to specifically proscribe its use. See *Jin'gangding jing yujia shibahui zhigui*, T no. 869, vol. 18; English translation by Rolf W. Giebel, "The *Chin-kang-ting ching yü-ch'ieh shih-pa-hui chih-kuei*: An Annotated Translation," p. 198.

¹³⁶ In Cave 23. See Tianshui Maijishan Shikuyishu Yanjiusuo, ed., *Chūgoku sekkutsu: Bakusekisan sekkutsu*, pl. 65.

¹³⁷ In fact, I have yet to find a single pre-Tang textual reference to the use of the rosary in China.

In the Tang we begin to get richer evidence for the use of the rosary both in texts and in Buddhist art. Perhaps the rosary experienced a sudden growth in popularity at this time. It is just as likely, however, that the scarcity of evidence for the rosary from previous periods is the result of the relative scarcity of evidence on monastic life in general and private devotional life in particular. Prayers repeated quietly at home by anonymous laymen, or droned in a monastery by humble monks, were not the stuff of monumental sculpture. Hence, perhaps we should see continuity rather than innovation in a relief from 629 depicting a monk holding a rosary prominently in his left hand, and bearing the inscription "bhikṣu monk Xiushan of the Zhenhai Monastery (figure 9)."¹³⁸ It is likely that monks like this one marked recitations with rosaries centuries earlier. Certainly by the seventh century the practice was common. The small individual stupas at Baoshan in Henan provide us with a number of seventh-century statues of monks and nuns with rosaries in hand.¹³⁹ The importance of the rosary in the lay image of the monk is reflected in a poem by Zhang Ji (c. 776–c. 829), dedicated to a monk, which ends with the line "I often hear from within his sleeves the sound of the rosary secretly fingered."¹⁴⁰ On a more concrete level, in a discussion of monastic property in an influential work on the monastic regulations, Daoxuan felt it necessary to determine the proper classification of the rosary, indicating that the rosary was a common part of a monk's equipment.¹⁴¹ And the rosary appears in assorted Tang stories, such as an episode in the biography of the eighth-century monk Wuzhuo, who offers his rosary to a mysterious old man he encounters in the mountain mists of Wutai.¹⁴²

It was at this time, in the Tang, that the position of the rosary as an emblem for the monk became firmly entrenched in the Chinese imagination. Two rather crude examples illustrate this point well. The first is a prose-poem by the Tang figure Bai Xingjian, younger brother of the famous poet Bai Juyi. The final lines of the poem—a lampoon of the sexual lives of monks and nuns—note suggestively, "The Buddha Law does not relieve [the nuns] of their thoughts, and they finger more than rosaries."¹⁴³ The

¹³⁸ In the Honolulu Academy of Arts. See Jin, *Zhongguo lidai jinian foxiang tudian*, pl. 251.

¹³⁹ See Baoshan, stupa no. 77, and Lanfeng, stupa nos. 38, 42, and 47 in Henansheng gudai jianzhu baohu yanjiusuo, *Baoshan Lingquansi*.

¹⁴⁰ *Quan Tang shi* 384, p. 4325.

¹⁴¹ *Sifenlü shanfan buque xingshichao* C1, p. 115b; in the Song, Yuanzhao takes up the classification of the rosary as monastic property in more detail. *Sifenlü xingshichao zichi ji*, T no. 1805, vol. 40, p. 375a.

¹⁴² *Song gaoseng zhuan*, 20, p. 836c.

¹⁴³ "Tian di yinyang jiao huan da le fu" in *Shuangmei jing'an congshu*, ed., Ye Dehui (1903 edn.) 1, p. 7b. I translated this passage slightly differently in *The Eminent Monk*, p. 20. It was also at this time that the rosary was established as a common iconographic



FIG. 9. Arhat, 629. Honolulu Academy of Arts, Gift of Mrs. Charles M. Cooke, 1928 (2608). Reproduced by permission of the Honolulu Academy of Arts.

other example is from a collection of anecdotes compiled in the Song, but which probably dates back to the late Tang. The story relates that when the eminent monk Guanxiu was riding alongside the prominent Daoist Du Guangting, Guanxiu's horse relieved itself on the road. Du, noting the balls of manure, turned to Guanxiu and joked, "Master, Master, your rosary fell on the ground." Guanxiu replied, "It is not a rosary; the horse

feature of the arhat (*luohan*). Images of arhats holding rosaries appear at the Kanjing Monastery at Longmen. See *Longmen shiku diaosu*, pl. 197, in *Zhongguo meishu quanji bianji weiyuanhui*, ed., *Zhongguo meishu quanji* 2, vol. 11.

is 'returning its cinnabar,'" a reference to Daoist alchemy in which cinnabar was a common ingredient.¹⁴⁴ Humor reveals widely held associations with rare precision; it is only because the authors of such pieces could assume that their readers would make associations between particular objects and their owners (the rosary and the Buddhist monk, cinnabar and the Daoist adept), and that these associations commonly evoked images of solemn piety, that the jokes worked.

In the Tang we also begin to get references to the rosary by leading Chinese monks. The *Further Biographies of Eminent Monks*, compiled in the early part of the seventh century, mentions a rosary in passing in a biography of a monk who lived at the end of the Sui.¹⁴⁵ Huizhao (fl. 710) notes in a commentary on a ritual text that the rosaries used in the ritual symbolize good fortune and wisdom.¹⁴⁶ In a study of the *Diamond Sutra*, Kuiji (632–82) notes that one of the "five improper ways for a monk to sustain himself" (*wu xieming*) is through ostentatious piety, "for example by chanting the rosary when sitting or standing" in public.¹⁴⁷ For monastic piety to be authentic, it had to be discreet. Rosaries, it seems, were to be kept in one's room or up one's sleeve. Feixi (fl. 742) went a step further, recommending against the rosary altogether. He writes: "Among men of the world, most make rosaries of crystal, vajra-seeds, bodhi-seeds, or *aristaka*. I use the inhaling and exhaling of my breath as my rosary. I chant the names of the buddhas in accordance with my breath. This is a very reliable method."¹⁴⁸ Such references tell us that by this time the rosary was so common among Chinese monks that some found its use crass and superficial. It is likely, though, that such monks were exceptions, so familiar with Buddhist liturgy that they felt comfortable introducing choice innovations.

The first great champion of the rosary in China was the charismatic monk Daochuo (562–645). An important figure in the history of Pure Land practice in China, Daochuo was known for encouraging his followers to chant aloud the name of Amitābha. His biography in the *Further Biographies of Eminent Monks* describes his tireless promotion of the rosary as follows:

Daochuo encouraged others when chanting the name of Amitābha Buddha to use objects such as sesame seeds to keep track of the number of recitations. With each recitation of the name one was to move one seed. In this

¹⁴⁴ *Wudaishi bu*, by Tao Yue (SKQS edn.) 1, p. 14a.

¹⁴⁵ *Xu gaoseng zhuan* 29, p. 698c19, biography of Huiyuan.

¹⁴⁶ *Shiyimian shenzhou xinjing yishu*, T no. 1802, vol. 39, p. 1009b.

¹⁴⁷ *Jin'gang banruo jing zanshu* A, T no. 1700, vol. 33, p. 126b. Ironically, when the Japanese pilgrim Jōjin visited China in the eleventh century, he observed a statue of Kuiji, depicted holding a rosary. *San Tendai Godaisan ki* 3, p. 57a.

¹⁴⁸ *Nianfo sanmei baowang lun*, T no. 1967, vol. 47, p. 138c.

way one can keep account of the recitations until one has filled millions of bushels. . . . In addition, one year [Daochuo] took to stringing together seeds from the *muluan*¹⁴⁹ as a method of counting. He gave these to the “four assemblies” [monks, nuns, laywomen, and laymen] and told them to chant.¹⁵⁰

The reference here to the “four assemblies” is important because it suggests, once again, that use of the rosary was not limited to the “two assemblies” of monks and nuns, but extended to the other “two assemblies” of laymen and laywomen. The practice of using the rosary to chant the name of Amitābha, rather than, say, the three jewels as in the *Scripture of the Seeds of the Ariṣṭaka*, eventually became the norm.

The Buddhist canon, concerned primarily with translations of Indian texts and the ruminations of eminent monks, provides notoriously little information on the devotional life of lay Chinese Buddhists. Official sources like the Dynastic Histories, on the other hand, colored by the general disinterest of their compilers in Buddhism, do little to fill in this gap. In the case of the rosary, the problem is compounded by the fact that, as several of the references I cite above disclose, the rosary was closely associated with *private* devotion. And what was true for monks (the monk in Zhang Ji’s poem chants with his rosary “secretly,” while Kuiji criticizes monks who finger their beads in public) was equally true for laypeople. Nevertheless, scattered references slip through even sources such as these, revealing that Buddhist devotion was a part of the lives of laypeople during the Tang, and that the rosary played a role in this devotion. The official biography of the eunuch Li Fuguo (d. 762), one of the most powerful figures at Suzong’s court, notes that Li was known both for his adept political machinations and for his Buddhist devotion. The biography states that Li “did not eat meat or unclean foods. He often conducted himself like a monk. Whenever he had a leisure moment, his hands would reach for a rosary. Everyone believed that this was a mark of goodness.”¹⁵¹ The phrase “conducted himself like a monk” seems to indicate that the rosary was seen chiefly as an emblem of the monk at this time, and not necessarily associated with Buddhist devotion more generally.

Other anecdotal evidence suggests, however, that use of the rosary by Tang laypeople was fairly widespread. For example, the *Queshi*, a Tang collection of anecdotes, contains a reference to a certain Layman Wang, clearly of more humble status than Li Fuguo. A devout Buddhist, Layman Wang “always held a rosary and chanted the names of the buddhas.”¹⁵²

¹⁴⁹ *Koelrevelia paniculata*.

¹⁵⁰ *Xu gaoseng zhuan* 20, p. 594a. Daochuo’s only extant work, the *An le xing*, contains no references to the rosary.

¹⁵¹ *Jiu Tang shu*, 134, p. 4759.

¹⁵² *Que shi*, by Gao Yanxiu (BJDG edn.) B, p. 11b. The story is quoted in the *Taiping guangji* 84, p. 542. This is the story alluded to in the passage by Yu Yue cited above.

Similarly, the *Song Biographies of Eminent Monks* refers at one point to the prominent figure Wei Gao (746–806), saying, “In his later years, Wei Gao became a particularly devout Buddhist, always carrying a rosary about with him, and chanting the names of the buddhas. He even taught a parrot that he raised to chant scriptures.”¹⁵³

Images of laypeople with rosaries in pre-Song China are as rare as textual references to lay use of the rosary during the period. Again, this stems most likely from the association of the rosary with private devotion. Most of the images we have of lay Buddhists in medieval China are depicted together with others (usually donors who contributed to the art work in which they appear) in an act of public devotion. One exception is from Baoshan, where a seventh-century layman and laywoman are depicted holding rosaries.¹⁵⁴ A tenth-century drawing from Dunhuang provides us with another rare glimpse of a lay use of the rosary (figure 10) that was surely more common in real life than painting and sculpture might lead us to believe.

Thus far the history of the rosary follows a predictable path. Monks used the rosary in their personal devotions to keep track of recitations of names of buddhas or spells. Once introduced to China, Chinese monks used the rosary in their devotions, to the extent that it became a basic component of the monk’s personal belongings and an emblem of the monastic life. Further, from very early on, whether in scripture, commentary, or in more public forms of proselytizing, monks encouraged laypeople to use the rosary when practicing recitation, including recitations of the three jewels of the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha, and, with Daochuo, including as well recitation of the name of Amitābha. At the same time, monks invested the rosary with symbolism, assigning meanings to the number of beads, the material used to make the beads, the mother bead that divided the rosary, the cord that strings the rosary together, and so forth. As time wore on, however, the rosary acquired additional uses, beyond its origins as a devotional tool.

Nondevotional Uses of the Rosary: Tenth to Seventeenth Centuries

One of the ways monks used the rosary was as a gift. To celebrate the occasion of a baby prince, whom the emperor had pledged would become a monk, having reached his first full month, the great Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang submitted a flowery letter together with a long list of gifts that included “one religious robe, an incense burner together with a table to

¹⁵³ *Song gaoseng zhuan* 19, p. 830c.

¹⁵⁴ Henansheng gudai jianzhu baohu yanjiuso, ed., *Baoshan Lingquansi*, Baoshan, no. 83; Lanfeng, no. 48.



FIG. 10. Layman with rosary. Ink drawing from Dunhuang, early to mid-tenth century. Stein Painting 158 (detail). Reproduced by permission of the British Museum.

place it on for burning incense, a bathing jug, a reading shelf, a rosary, a staff with pewter rings, and a vessel containing bathing powder—all articles used by a monk—to express my personal exultation.”¹⁵⁵ The key to understanding the symbolic significance of the gift comes in the last line, where Xuanzang notes that all of his gifts are “articles used by a

¹⁵⁵ *Da Ciensi sanzang fashi zhuan* p. 272b; Li Rongxi, *A Biography of the Tripitika Master*, p. 305.

monk.” Here, then, the rosary is a gift from one monk to another (potential) monk, the baby prince. More often, however, the rosary is given from monk to layman, and is a symbol not of a shared monastic identity or even of devotion but is instead a token of friendship. In 838, during his pilgrimage to China, the Japanese monk Ennin met with a high official, who visited the monastery where he was staying. Eight days after the meeting, Ennin wrote in his diary, “We wrote a letter of thanks to the Minister of State for coming to the monastery and inquiring after us. We also gave him a few things—two rosaries of rock crystal, six knives decorated with silver, twenty assorted brushes, and three conch shells.”¹⁵⁶ The Buddhist content of these gifts is not immediately apparent. Conch shells and knives were used in some Buddhist rituals, but there is nothing specifically Buddhist about “twenty assorted brushes,” and one doubts whether a minister of state would have much use for equipment employed in complex Tantric rituals. Lumped together as it is with secular objects, the “rosaries of rock crystal” seem not to have been given for devotional purposes, or even for vaguer associations with Buddhist doctrine. Rather, like the fancy knives, brushes, and exotic shells, they were given primarily for their aesthetic appeal.

Just before his death, Amoghavajra, an eighth-century monk with connections much grander than those of Ennin, submitted to the throne “a rosary made of the seeds of a bodhi tree and crystal beads.”¹⁵⁷ Again there is no indication that the emperor was expected to use the rosary to chant, although this possibility cannot be ruled out. Because monks were expected to keep a distance between themselves and material wealth—if only symbolically—they had only limited options when deciding on gifts to prominent figures. The rosary, made of exotic Indian wood or crystal, expertly carved, yet still carrying associations of pious devotion, was the perfect solution.¹⁵⁸ There is no indication that monks saw anything wrong with this. We hear no cries of “defilement” or “profanation” of what, in a private devotional context, was a sacred object charged with specifically Buddhist symbolism.

In these cases, even if the symbolism of the rosary has shifted from the elimination of afflictions to a token of friendship or respect, and even if it is removed from its devotional context, because it was the gift of a

¹⁵⁶ *Nittō gubō junrei gyōki* 1, p. 65; Reischauer, *Ennin's Diary*, p. 50.

¹⁵⁷ *Song gaoseng zhuan* 1, p. 713b.

¹⁵⁸ Other examples of monks giving and receiving rosaries can be found in various sources. The Song work *Meng liang lu*, for instance, records that the tenth-century monk Yongming Yanshou received a gift of golden thread for a *kāṣāya* and a purple, rock-crystal rosary from admirers of his in Korea. *Meng liang lu*, by Wu Zimu, in *Dongjing menghua lu wai sizhong* 17, p. 277. Jōjin mentions gifts of rosaries repeatedly in his eleventh-century travelogue. *San Tendai Godaisanki*, pp. 7b, 12b, 14a, 18b, 19b, 21a, 31a, 37a, 143a.

monk, the rosary still maintained some associations with monks and Buddhism, however faint. Other sources, however, indicate that at times the rosary could not be contained by even these nebulous parameters. In a collection of anecdotes, the Tang writer Feng Zhi tells the story of a brilliant disciple of the Tang official and religious aficionado Fang Guan (697–763).

Fang Cilü (a.k.a. Fang Guan) had a disciple named Jintu. When Jintu was twelve years old, Cilü questioned him about some matters in Ge Hong's transcendent writings (*xianlu*). The boy kept track with a crystal rosary, which he went through twice. He went through approximately two hundred items, chanting them fluently without stopping. Cilü rewarded him with a peony pear.¹⁵⁹

Here the rosary is used to keep track not of recitations of the name of a buddha but for recalling the Daoist writings of Ge Hong. Note that in the story the boy went through the rosary twice, making for “approximately two hundred items,” indicating that the rosary may well have been composed of the traditional 108 beads. Yet there is not even a hint of Buddhism in the anecdote. The passage calls to mind another of Feng Zhi's works, entitled *Jishi zhu*, meaning “Beads for Remembering Things,” so called because, as Feng explains in the work, when he was a young student, he would count the beads on a beaded curtain in his house to keep track of what he had learned. In other words, although probably aware of the Buddhist origins of the rosary, for Feng and the figures in his anecdote, the rosary could be used as a memory device without Buddhist connotations or any sense that the object was a sanctified, holy conduit for devotion.

Similarly, the influential Northern Song thinker Cheng Yi (1033–1107), who recommended controlling one's desires through reflection, also offered advice on how to overcome an excess of reflection when trying to get to sleep. He gave a rosary to the prominent Song writer Shao Bowen, who suffered from insomnia, “just so that he could use it to count, in the same way the Daoists count their breaths.”¹⁶⁰ Apparently, Cheng used the rosary as a device for lulling himself to sleep—the Song equivalent of counting sheep. The key phrase here is “just so that he could use it to count.” In other words, Cheng had stripped the rosary of its Buddhist symbolism and concomitant sacred power, appropriating it for a thoroughly mundane purpose. Perhaps there is a parallel between Cheng's attempt to reduce excessive thinking and counting to concentrate the

¹⁵⁹ “Shuiyu shuzhu” in *Yunxian zaji* (SBCK edn.) 1, p. 4a. Feng is quoting from an earlier, no longer extant book, titled *Tongzi tongshen ji*.

¹⁶⁰ “Chengzi zhi shu: san” in *Zhubi yulei*, 97, pp. 2491–2.

mind—as in the case of the king whom the Buddha encouraged to chant with a rosary. But in place of achieving nirvana, Cheng simply wants to get some sleep. We are here a long way from the rosary of Buddhist scriptures.

A hundred years later, Lu You (1125–1210), describing the customs of a southern, non-Han people, wrote that “[b]efore a male takes a wife, he wears golden chicken feathers in his hair; before a female marries, she hangs a rosary of seashells around her neck.”¹⁶¹ The reference to seashells—unheard of in Buddhist descriptions of the rosary—suggests that these necklaces bore no relation to Buddhist rosaries, and that for Lu You, “rosary” (*shuzhu*) was simply another word for necklace. Residents of the Southern Song capital at Hangzhou seem to have used the word just as loosely. In his account of Hangzhou, Song writer Wu Zimu lists various goods sold in the city's markets, at one point mentioning the merchants “along the sides of the streets hawking all manner of food for children,” including baked biscuits, sugarcane, bitter sticks, lotus meat, and rosaries.¹⁶² We can only guess what exactly is meant by “rosary” here—perhaps some sort of candied fruit strung together in a ring. Regardless of the exact nature of the object, here we are far removed from the reverential, symbolically charged environment of Buddhist ritual texts or the pious sermons of evangelical monks promoting Pure Land practice.

With the appearance of a body of literature on connoisseurship in the Ming, this tendency to treat the rosary as an amusing aesthetic object comes into clearer focus. Wen Zhenheng (1585–1645), in his *Treatise on Superfluous Things* (*Zhangwu zhi*)—a compendium of pronouncements on how a cultivated gentleman should tastefully select objects for his home—discusses the proper assessment of studios, flowers, ornamental rocks, painting, furniture, and so on.¹⁶³ In a section on “vessels and utensils,” which includes discussion of lamps, mirrors, incense burners, lutes, and pillows, Wen gives the following description of the standards by which he judges rosaries:

The most valuable type of rosary is made with vajra seeds,¹⁶⁴ ornate and delicate. For a “reminder”¹⁶⁵ one should use a “Demon-subduing Vajra” made in the Song, or one of the “five offerings” made of jade.¹⁶⁶ Other substances

¹⁶¹ *Laoxuean biji* 4, p. 22, in *Lu Fanguang quanji*.

¹⁶² “Zhu se za huo,” *Meng liang lu*, p. 245.

¹⁶³ Craig Clunas discusses this treatise at length in his *Superfluous Things: Material Culture and Social Status in Early Modern China*.

¹⁶⁴ *Jin'gangzi*. I have been unable to determine precisely what type of beads these were.

¹⁶⁵ *Zongji*, that is, a string of beads or other objects, extending from the mother bead, to remind one that one has gone around the ring once (above referred to as *jizi*).

¹⁶⁶ The five offerings (*wu gongyang*) are incense paste, flowers, incense, foodstuffs, and lamps.

such as skull bone, "dragon rock," jade, agate, amber, gold-amber, crystal, coral, and tridacna are all vulgar. Aloeswood or *qienan* aromatic wood can both be used. Substances that should be carefully avoided include Hangzhou bodhi seeds and perfumed wood (*guanxiang*).¹⁶⁷

If we want to trace the sources for Wen's ideas about the rosary, rather than look to Buddhist scriptures, we must turn instead to writings in a similar style by other Ming connoisseurs.¹⁶⁸ Certainly Wen's preference for "vajra" seeds finds support in Buddhist scriptures, but the crystal and coral he disparages are both extolled in Buddhist scriptures, which say nothing about aloeswood or *qienan* aromatic wood. Unlike the ritual texts discussed above, the key distinction in Wen's assessment is not between numinous and mundane, much less between this or that deity or this or that ritual; the key distinction is instead between vulgar and elegant, categories of the Ming connoisseur that have nothing to do with Buddhism or religious values.¹⁶⁹ In the same vein, Wen cautions that certain substances are to "be avoided" (*ji*) for aesthetic rather than doctrinal or liturgical reasons.

In short, while monks and laypeople in the Ming continued to use the rosary for devotional purposes, at least some Ming literati at the same time approached the beads from an entirely different perspective. It may be going too far to say that they assigned different *symbolic* meaning to the rosary, but they certainly assigned it a different set of values. For a clear example of a community that did specifically assign new symbolic, or emblematic, meanings to the rosary, we turn briefly to the use of the rosary in the Qing court.

The Rosary at the Qing Court

One of the differences between paintings of court life in the Ming and in the Qing is the use by Qing royalty and certain Qing high officials of necklaces, which, on closer inspection, turn out to be rosaries, made up of 108

¹⁶⁷ *Zhangwuzhi jiaozhu*, Chen Zhi and Yang Chaobo, eds., 7, p. 288.

¹⁶⁸ In fact, most of what Wen says about the rosary is taken directly from the *Kaopan yushi* by Tu Long (1542–1605). See "Shuzhu," in *Kaopan yushi* (CSJC edn.) 4, p. 85. For a discussion on the relationship between Wen and Tu's texts, see Clunas, *Superfluous Things*, pp. 28–31.

¹⁶⁹ On the distinction between elegant and vulgar in Wen's work, see Clunas, *Superfluous Things*, pp. 82–3. Of course a familiarity and respect for the religious function of the rosary does not necessarily preclude an aesthetic appreciation of the beads as well. The Tang monk Jiaoran, for instance, composed a "Song to a Crystal Rosary" ("Shuijing shuzhu ge") in which he praises the beauty of the crystal beads "shimmering like the sun." Nonetheless, unlike the passage in Wen's work, Jiaoran's poem hinges on references to recitation of the names of the buddhas, nonattachment, emptiness, and other distinctly Buddhist concerns. (See *Quan Tang shi* 821, p. 9265). Marked by an exclusive concern with aesthetic matters, Wen's comments betray a clear break with the Buddhist tradition.

beads. The earliest example of a Qing court figure wearing a rosary seems to be an official portrait of the young Kangxi emperor (r. 1662–1722). But the connection between the rosary and the Qing imperial family probably goes back even further. A Qing collection of anecdotes reports that Nurhaci (1559–1626), consolidator of Manchu power and grandfather of the first emperor of the Qing, was known to count recitations with a rosary. This use of the rosary in the private devotions of members of the imperial family, it has been suggested, may be the origin of the practice of wearing rosaries at court.¹⁷⁰ Another scholar has proposed that the rosary came to the Qing court under the influence of Tibetan and Mongolian monks.¹⁷¹ Indeed, we even have a court painting of one Qing emperor, Yongzheng, dressed as a lama, holding a rosary.¹⁷² Nonetheless, while various sorts of rosaries continued to be used by members of the Qing court, the most visible type of rosary was used primarily not as a device for counting recitations but as a marker of social distinction, and soon became associated with an entirely new set of symbols. As a part of the meticulously regulated restrictions regarding court clothing, a set of regulations was also developed for rosaries, known as "court beads" (*chaozhu*). The emperor, for instance, was the only one at court permitted to wear a single rosary made of "Eastern Pearls," a highly valued kind of pearl produced in a particular section of northeastern China. The emperor's rosary, like those of other members of the court, was to have 108 beads, revealing the origins of the beads in the Buddhist rosary (figure 11). Compendiums of court ritual go on to describe regulations concerning the color of the thread running through the beads, the larger beads used to separate the smaller beads (here called "Buddha heads" [*fotou*]), the strings of beads called reminders (*jimian*), originally used to keep track of the number of recitations, and an innovation known as the "back cloud" (*beiyun*), a string of beads attached to the rosary running down from the back of the neck, which served to balance the weight of the beads hanging down the front.

The empress was permitted to wear a rosary made up of "Eastern Pearls" as well, but only in conjunction with two crossing rosaries made of coral. As a part of her court attire, the "Imperial Honored Consort" (the most esteemed secondary wife of the emperor) was allowed three rosaries, one to be made of amber and two of coral, while concubines were to wear one coral rosary with two amber ones. Lesser figures, while forbidden use of eastern pearls or any other type of pearl, were allowed to wear rosaries made of coral, agate, ivory, amber, and a number of other precious gems. In addition to the type of gem used for the beads, specific

¹⁷⁰ Wang Yuning, *Qingdai Manzu fushi*, p. 135.

¹⁷¹ Schuyler V. R. Cammann, "Ch'ing Dynasty 'Mandarin Chains,'" pp. 25–9.

¹⁷² See Nie Chongzheng, ed., *Qingdai gongting huihua*, pl. 18.13.



FIG. 11. Emperor Yongzheng. Reproduced by permission of the National Palace Museum, Beijing.

regulations were laid down concerning the color of the thread. The right to wear court beads at all was a privilege granted only to select members of an elite group; only civil officials of the fifth rank and above, or military officials of the fourth rank and above, were permitted to wear rosaries at court.¹⁷³ Distinctions were further made between male and female, with men wearing rosaries with two “reminder” strings on the right and one on the left, and women wearing two on the left and one on the right.¹⁷⁴ The assignment of men to the right and women to the left is a ritual convention going back to pre-Han times. More specific symbolic associations were also made, asserting that the four large “Buddha head” beads represent the four seasons, and that the three remembrance strings stand for the three highest officers of state (*santai*).¹⁷⁵

In addition to these large, 108-beaded “Court Bead” rosaries, many smaller, equally ornate hand-held rosaries from the Qing court survive as well.¹⁷⁶ The type of material used in these smaller rosaries—usually precious gems—and the meticulous craftsmanship of their design and execution indicate that they were admired as aesthetic objects. Nonetheless, it is possible that they were regularly used for keeping track of Buddhist recitations as well. The larger, court bead rosaries, on the other hand, are at times so ornate and complex, with multiple strings of beads hanging off the central strand to which were attached gems in various sizes, that they could have been used for recitation only with great difficulty. In Qing court beads, the reminders are no longer attached to the mother bead, but extend instead from the right and left sides of the string of beads, toward the top. Apparently, they were no longer used to keep track of the number of turns a devotee had taken around the rosary.¹⁷⁷ Although Qing figures were aware of the Buddhist origins and function of the rosary, they had clearly appropriated the rosary for very different purposes. At court the rosary was no longer an emblem for the Buddhist layman, much less the monk; it was an emblem of political status. Court ritual specialists went to great lengths to buttress the power of the rosary as a political emblem by making scrupulous distinctions between the rosary of the emperor, the empress, civil officials, military officials, and so on. At the same

¹⁷³ *Qingchao wenxian tongkao* 141, “Wangli” 17, p. 6074; *Qing huidian* 29, “Li bu,” p. 242.

¹⁷⁴ Wang Yunying, *Qingdai Manzu fushi*, p. 136. Judging by Qing paintings and photographs, in practice this regulation seems largely to have been ignored.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁶ For examples see Guoli Gugong Bowuyuan Bianji Weiyuanhui, ed., *Qingdai fushi zhanlan tulu*, pp. 133–43.

¹⁷⁷ In some Tibetan rosaries the reminder strings are also positioned on the side, supporting the theory that the Qing court beads originated in Tibet. See Lois Sherr Dubin, *The History of Beads*, pl. 70.

time, these same figures further strengthened the emblematic power of the rosary by ascribing to it various symbolic meanings, tying the rosary and its owner to a broader cosmology in a way that had little to do with Buddhism.

Over the long course of the history of the Buddhist rosary, the efforts of monks to define the rosary as a ritual implement met with mixed results. On the one hand, the rosary remains an important device in Buddhist recitation for monks, nuns, and laypeople to this day. Particularly noteworthy is the resistance to change of the number of 108 beads, which runs through references to the beads from the earliest texts through the Qing manuals of court etiquette. On the other hand, we have also seen that the monastic symbolism of the rosary was not strong enough to freeze its meaning. When Ming connoisseurs discussed criteria for the most tasteful, elegant rosaries, they felt no compunction in ignoring the Buddhist meaning of the beads altogether. Similarly, when ritual specialists at the Qing court adopted the rosary as an emblem of court rank, they made no mention of Buddhist recitation and did not hesitate to redefine the significance of the beads for their own purposes. Yet, to say that the rosary had a life of its own would be misleading. There was no primal significance to the rosary that continually asserted itself, despite attempts by others to change it. The beads by themselves mean nothing; it is only through the efforts of various social groups—be they monks, connoisseurs, or emperors—to invest the beads with meaning that they become significant. Consequently, when the rosary moved from one group to another, its meaning changed from a sacred devotional object imbued with precise symbolic content, to an aesthetically correct curio, to a specific ranking in a neatly defined bureaucratic hierarchy.