The Significance of Pearls in Premodern China

by

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Abstract

Pearls have played a significant role in the lives of the premodern Chinese people for over two thousand years, and are still very much treasured nowadays. Many general Chinese beliefs, customs, and practices surrounding pearls have been taken for granted as received knowledge, without careful examination to explain the long-lasting admiration and reverence that pearls have received in Chinese history. This thesis demonstrates that pearls were more than just gems used in jewelry making for the premodern Chinese people. It explains the reasons behind assumed knowledge such as the high prices, the perceived magical power, and the medicinal value of pearls in premodern Chinese culture in order to help us understand why pearls have enjoyed an unrivalled significance in premodern China, thus allowing us to further develop our understanding and appreciation for premodern Chinese culture as a whole.
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Chapter 1
Introduction

Pearls have been one of the most cherished gems for the Chinese for over two thousand years, authors have written to explain how they are formed; to praise the beauty; to describe the places where they are found; to mourn for those who died at sea trying to collect them; to invoke wonders for the mythical and magical power that they are said to possess; to teach and instruct about how to use them to cure ailments, but it seems that hardly anyone has tried to explain how all these factors have contributed to the great significance of pearls in ancient China. This thesis will therefore attempt to discuss how the premodern Chinese saw pearls by discussing the above factors and try to relate them to each other in order to form a theory that will hopefully answer the question why pearls were so significant in premodern Chinese culture.

It is believed that the earliest written record of pearls (zhu 珠) is found in Yu Gong 禹貢 in the Book of Xia 夏書, a.k.a. Shang Shu 尚書; thereafter, Chinese writings on pearls, concerning, describing or just mentioning them, are consistently vast in terms of both number and subject areas, indicating a great and longstanding interest in pearls. Chinese writings on pearls can indeed be found in areas including but not limited to history, geography, medicine, religion, and literature, in which they are the most frequently mentioned gems. Therefore, in order to answer the question proposed above, I will engage in this thesis as many premodern Chinese primary sources as possible, covering a selection of texts of different genres written at different times throughout Chinese history in order to discuss the different aspects concerning pearls.

1 Qu Mingdong 曲明東, “A Study of Pearl-catching in the Ming Dynasty 明朝採海珠初探,” 達縣師範高等專科學校學報 14, no.3 (May, 2004)
Pearl, being an organic gem, automatically stands out from other inorganic gems that are mined. I will therefore start by discussing what was considered to be a real pearl by the premodern Chinese, and compare their opinions to what scientists claim in the present. I will first look at where natural real pearls were found in China, then into pearl cultivation and imitation pearls. Next I will explain the methods of gathering pearls and the dangers involved in the process, and the harsh life that the pearl-fishers led. From there I will move on to a discussion of the perceived value of pearls in premodern China and how they slowly became a symbol for wealth. I will address the reasons pearl divers were not made any richer by the risk they took to collect pearls, and then describe the process through which the prices of pearls grew in trade, and offer a discussion on the obsession with pearls among the rich and royalty.

Pearls have been such a big part of Chinese culture that they were used to represent the very idea of preciousness itself. I will provide examples to show how this was the case before I attempt to explain what exact qualities of pearls have inspired the high esteem that Chinese people had for them. Pearls were also believed to possess certain magical powers, and were used in burials because they were believed to be able to preserve the dead body. Pearls were also believed to be able to guard the owner against harm and grant certain wishes when prayed to, and even played a role in Chinese Buddhism. Pearls were also used in traditional Chinese medicine, and I will end the thesis by looking into this practical use of pearls.

Pearls, being a gem significant in so many ways, have enjoyed admiration and reverence for thousands of years in premodern and modern China. There are multiple, intertwined reasons supporting such a longstanding preference. By investigating the significance of pearls in
particular, we may be able to further develop our understanding and appreciation of Chinese culture in general.
Chapter 2
The Nature of Pearls

Pearls are organic gems (i.e. formed by the biological processes of living organisms). They are produced by animals, including worms and anthropods, as well as mollusks. In an extreme case, even the kidney stones of a human being could be considered pearls. This view resonates with the opinion of the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) scholar Fang Yizhi 方以智 (1611-1671). Fang mentioned in his work Tongya 通雅 that not all pearls come from mussels; ancient, large glowing pearls that guard against dust and coldness may have come from the stomach of the fish called arowana (Scleropages formosus). He also mentions that it was the opinion of the Song (960-1279) scholar Lu Tian 陸佃 (1042-1102) that dragons hold their pearl in their chin; snakes hold theirs in their mouth; fish hold theirs in their eyes; sharks hold theirs in their skin; turtle hold theirs in their feet; and spiders hold theirs in their stomach, but none of them can compare to pearls formed within mussels. The opinion of Ming scholar Song Yingxing 宋應星 (1587-1666) differs from that of Fang, in his work Tian Gong Kai Wu 天工開物 Song states that all pearls must come from mussels, and that those who said pearls can be found in the stomach of snakes, the chin of dragons, or the skin of sharks are wrong.

Saltwater mollusks are the most common kind, but mollusks also inhabit freshwaters, and some,

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4 Ibid.
5 Fang Yizhi 方以智, Tongya 通雅, (Taipei: Taiwan Shang Wu Yin Shu Guan, 1972) - 卷四十八, 撰金石: 古有辟塵珠, 辟寒珠, 夜光照乘, 大者徑寸, 或出於龍魚異物腹中, 非獨出於蚌也。陸佃云: 龍珠在頷, 蛇珠在口, 魚珠在眼, 鰻珠在皮, 貝珠在足, 蛙珠在腹, 皆不及蚌珠。
6 Song Yingxing 宋應星, Tian Gong Kai Wu 天工開物, (Kowloon, HK: Zhonghua Shuju, 1978): 第十八卷, 琥玉篇: 凡珍珠必產蚌腹... 其云蛇腹，龍頷，鰻皮有珠者，妄也。
such as the land-snails and slugs, have evolved to survive on land.\textsuperscript{7} Mollusks are the second most diverse animal group after terrestrial insects due to their success in evolving and adapting to different environments and lifestyles, with over 100,000 living species, and at least as many extinct species as shown by fossil records.\textsuperscript{8} Mollusks include snails and slugs (gastropods or univalves); clams, mussels, scallops, and oysters (bivalves or lamellibranchs or pelecypods); octopus, squid, chambered nautilus, and extinct ammonites (cephalopods); tusk shells (scaphopods); and chitons (coat-of-mail shells); plus a few other small groups, and pearls are known to come from marine and terrestrial gastropods, marine and freshwater bivalves, cephalopods, and a variety of fossil forms.\textsuperscript{9} Not all pearl-producing mollusks come from a single family or group, pearl-producers are distributed across the entire tree of evolution, rather than on one branch, indicating that pearls are made by many different and distantly related species of mollusks.\textsuperscript{10} Pearls production can therefore be considered as a primitive character shared by all mollusks, which have a common response of producing pearls towards stimuli imposed on them by the outside environment.\textsuperscript{11}

A pearl is the lustrous, hard, and smooth rounded mass created inside mollusks, but the only pearl prized as gem quality nowadays are in mollusks that produce them with nacre (i.e. aragonite, a calcium carbonate similar to mother-of-pearl).\textsuperscript{12} The presence of nacre on the innermost shell layer of mollusks is widespread across the evolutionary tree, and, importantly, it is present in the groups originating at the root of the tree, suggesting that nacre is another

\begin{itemize}
\item[8] Ibid.
\item[9] Ibid.
\item[10] Ibid.
\end{itemize}
primitive character of mollusks lost by some over evolutionary history. Nacre, however, is not always present, and even when it is present not all nacre is identical. Little luster can be found on pearls formed in mollusks such as the edible oysters (Oystrea) or the giant clam (Tridacna) where there is almost a complete absence of crumpled corrugated laminae, hence they are of little value, undesirable, and are sometimes considered a nuisance.

When a foreign irritant like a grain of sand or a small parasite invades a mollusk, the mollusk envelopes it within a soft body part known as the mantle (tissue between the shell and the body that lines within the shell) which secretes nacre. The mantle coats anything inside the shell of the mollusk with smooth calcium carbonate to protect its delicate soft tissue from irritation or infection, and a pearl is therefore formed whenever an object ends up inside the body of a mollusk and becomes coated with shell material. If the irritant is small or flat enough, the secretion will coat over it as though it were part of the internal surface of the shell, hence forming a blister pearl. If, however, the irritant is bigger, the mantle tissue will curve around it, gradually enveloping it away from the shell surface. The pearl nucleus-to-be becomes biologically isolated, encysted within a pocket lined by mantle cells. This pocket is called the pearl sack and its mantle cells secrete pearl material onto the nucleus. The nacreous covering is very thin at the beginning, but with each additional layer its thickness slowly increases, and the size of the pearl grows this way as long as it remains undisturbed and the mollusk is in healthful

13 Landman, Pearls, 24.
14 Ibid.
16 Landman, Pearls, 24.
18 Landman, Pearls, 26.
19 Ibid.
20 Ibid.
and growing condition.\textsuperscript{21} Depending on its quality, superior nacre is more or less translucent; and the iridescence of the outer laminae is added on by that of the many interior layers, the luster of a pearl is therefore vastly increased.\textsuperscript{22}

1 Where were they found?

Near China, pearl mussels are said to inhabit some of the rivers of Manchuria and East Siberia; the pearls found in this area are known as eastern pearls 東珠, but the genera and species of these mussels have not been confirmed.\textsuperscript{23} In China, the pearl-mussel which inhabits the water-courses near Canton (Guangzhou) and the area further to the south is, on the other hand, known to be Cristaria plicata\textsuperscript{24}, and the pearls found in this area are known as southern pearls 南珠.

As early as in the \textit{Book of Later Han} 后漢書, Fan Ye 范曄 (398-445) mentioned the Buyeo Kingdom 夫餘國, which was roughly a thousand miles north of Xuantu Commandary 玄菟郡, had its southern border connected with Goguryeo 高句麗, its east connected with the Yilou Tribe 挹婁, its west connected with the Xianbei clan 鮮卑, and on its north there was the Ruoshui River 弱水河.\textsuperscript{25} In other words this Buyeo Kingdom was located in the north-eastern part of modern China, where Manchuria was situated in Chinese history. The \textit{Book of Later Han}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item[21] Kunz and Stevenson, \textit{The Book of the Pearl}, 52.
\item[22] Ibid, 53.
\item[24] Ibid.
\item[25] Fan Ye 范曄, \textit{The Book of Later Han} 后漢書 (Shanghai: Shang Wu Yin Shu Guan, 1927): 東夷列傳: 夫餘國, 在玄菟北千里, 南與高句麗, 東與挹婁, 西與鮮卑接, 北有弱水。
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
said that in this barbaric area east of China, the land was flat and the soil was suitable for the
inhabitants to grow the five cereals; they also bred rare and precious horses, mined red jades, 
hunted for minks, and gathered pearls that were as big as jujubes. The big pearls mentioned in
this passage were eastern pearls. In the *Local Records of the County of Changshou* 長壽縣鄉土志 written in late Qing period (1644-1912), it is said that shellfish that are long in shape are
called mussels and the round ones are known as clams; and the record states that in this area
pearl-bearing mussels can be found in the rivers. The *Local Records of Mergen* 墨爾根志 also
states that the mussels and clams found in this area bear pearls. In the *Local Records of
Ningutta* 寧古塔紀略, it is said that many mussels and clams inhabit the rivers there, and they
bear numerous eastern pearls of various colours including pink, sky-blue, and white. These are
the eastern pearls of which the mussels are of uncertain genera and species as many are no longer
extant.

Hepu 合浦 is arguably the most famous area with pearl beds producing southern pearls
throughout Chinese history. As early as the Han dynasty (206BCE – 220CE), Hepu was already
known for producing a great number of pearls; its entire economy relied heavily on pearl fishing
rather than on crop farming. When Hepu’s pearl sources decreased, their people starved until

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26 Rice, two kinds of millet, wheat and beans.
27 Fan Ye 范曄, *The Book of Later Han* 後漢書: 東夷列傳: 於東夷之城，最為平敞，土宜五穀。出名
馬、赤玉、貂豽，大珠如酸棗。
28 *Local Records of the County of Changshou* 長壽縣鄉土志 in Liu Chengdong 柳成棟 (ed.), *Qing Dai
Heilongjiang Gu Ben Fang Zhi Si Zhong* 清代黑龍江孤本方志四種 (Ha’erbin: Heilongjiang Ren Min Chu Ban She, 1989), 544: 物產志: 蚌蛤，形長曰蚌，圓曰蛤。東西亮子河等處出，狹而長，內孕明珠。
29 *Local Records of Mergen* 墨爾根志 in Liu Chengdong 柳成棟 (ed.), *Qing Dai Heilongjiang Gu Ben Fang
Zhi Si Zhong* 清代黑龍江孤本方志四種 (Ha’erbin: Heilongjiang Ren Min Chu Ban She, 1989), 373: 物產志: 蚌
珠：生蛤蚌內，出嫩江源及那杜爾，多博庫，漠魯爾和落兒等河。
30 Wu Zhenchen 吳桭臣, *Local Records of Ningguta* 寧古塔紀略 (Changsha: Shang Wu Yin Shu Guan, 1939): 河內多蚌蛤，出東珠極多，重有二三錢者，有粉紅色，有天青色，有白色。
their governor, Meng Chang 孟嘗, established regulations that gave pearl-mussels time to
regenerate; and he re-instated their pearl industry and ensured the livelihood of his people this
way.31 This event is captured by the Chinese idiom *Hepu zhuhuan* 合浦珠還—literally “pearls
returning to Hepu”; this idiom means recovering something lost. Hepu was also recorded as a
pearl-producing location in the Song dynasty. Zhou Qufei 周去非 (1135-1189) of Southern
Song times (1127-1279) wrote in his work *Lingwai Daida* 嶺外代答 that in Hepu, the pearl-
producing area is called the land of Duanwang 斷望地, which is located below an isolated island
in the sea, tens of *li* 里 away from the shore, where the water does not exceed ten *zhang* 丈 in
depth.32 Hepu was still an important pearl-farm during the Qing Dynasty, and by then it was
already an area with 1500 years of pearl fishing history. Qu Dajun 屈大均 (1630-1696) of Qing
times mentions in his work *A New Account of Canton* 廣東新語 that there are seven pearl beds
in the sea of Hepu, among which the biggest ones are known as Ping River 平江, Yangmei 楊梅,
Qingying 青嬰, the second largest are known as Wuni 烏坭, Baisha 白沙, Duanwang 斷望,
Haizhusha 海豬沙, and the Pond of Bailong 白龍池 is particularly big. Their bases are
connected to the sea; the sea water is heavily salted while the water in the centre of these pearl
beds is fresh. It was said that it is because of this freshness of water that pearls are borne when
the moon shining above poured her essence into these pearls. As a result, pearls found in the
middle of the pearl beds are whiter in colour, and the ones found around the outskirts are

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31 Fan Ye 范曄, *The Book of Later Han* 後漢書: 循吏列傳: 桓帝時，尚書同郡楊喬上書薦嘗曰：臣前後
七表言故合浦太守孟嘗，而身輕言微，終不蒙察。區區破心，徒然而已。嘗安仁弘義，耽樂道德，清行出
俗，能幹絕群。前更守宰，移風改政，去珠復還，饑民蒙活。
32 Zhou Qufei 周去非, *Ling Wai Dai Da* 嶺外代答, in Yang Wuquan (ed.), *Ling Wai Dai Da Jiao Zhu* 嶺外
代答校注 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1999): 寶貨門, 珠池: 合浦產珠之地，名曰斷望地，在海中孤島下，去岸
數十里，池深不十丈。
yellower, which is attributed to the shocks from sea waves and the saltiness of the seawater. These pearls produced in Hepu are the southern pearls formed in the mussels Cristaria plicata.

It is also known that the Hong Kong area fell under the jurisdiction of the County of Dongguan 東莞 during the Southern Han 南漢, Song 宋, and Yuan 元 periods, which was roughly 907-1367 C.E. It is said that during the Southern Han period (917-971), the coasts of today’s Sai Kung 西貢, Sha Tin 沙田, and Tai Po 大浦, Lei Yue Mun 鯉魚門, and Mui Sha Tsim 梅沙尖 were controlled by the Imperial Pearl Monopoly. This area was the second most prolific pearl-fishing ground of the time in China, and is said to have produced a significant percentage of the pearls used in producing court robes and vessels. However, the pearl beds there are said to have been exhausted by the late fourteenth century.

2 Real Pearl, Cultured Pearl and Fake Pearl

Pearls collected from the Chinese areas discussed above are real natural pearls, but as indicated in Qu Dajun’s 屈大均 (1630-1696) A New Account of Canton 廣東新語, the demand for pearls spread throughout the entire populace regardless of their wealth. As the demand for pearls was

33 Qu Dajun 屈大均, Guangdong Xin Yu/A New Account of Canton 廣東新語 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1985): 貨語: 合浦海中，有珠池七所，其大者曰平江，楊梅，青嬰，次曰烏坭，白沙，斷望，海豬沙，而白龍池尤大。其底皆與海通，海水咸而珠池淡，淡乃生珠，蓋月之精華所注焉。故珠生池中央者色白，生池邊者色黃，以海水震蕩，咸氣浸之，故黃也。
34 P. H. Hase, The Historical Heritage of Ho Chung, Pak Kong, and Sha Kok Mei, Sai Kung, (Environmental Protection Department of the Government of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People’s Republic of China, 2003), 2.
35 Qu Dajun 屈大均, Guangdong Xin Yu/A New Account of Canton 廣東新語: 貨語: 今天下人無貴賤皆尚珠，數萬金珠，至五羊之市，一夕而售。
high and the supply was very limited (reasons will be discussed later in this paper), the premodern Chinese people therefore developed the art of pearl cultivation to meet their demand for this organic gem. It is said that the first real evidence of pearl cultivation in world history was written by the Chinese, perhaps as early as the fifth century C.E.\textsuperscript{36} however a source has not been named to support this claim. The earliest record consulted for this thesis containing a description of pearl cultivation is the *Miscellaneous Records of Wen Chang* 文昌雜錄 written in Southern Song period, in the 11\textsuperscript{th} century C.E. Pang Yuanying 龐元英 (fl. 1078-1082) wrote that according to Xie, the Vice Director of the Ministry of Rites, there is a way to cultivate pearls: pick a bright and round fake pearl, soak a relatively large pearl-mussel in clean water, when the mussel opens its mouth, quickly put the pearl in its mouth. Water should be changed frequently, and it should be placed under the moonlight at night, the mussel will thrive in the essence of the moon. Keep doing this for two years and a real (cultivated) pearl will be born.\textsuperscript{37}

A fake pearl was suggested as an inserted irritant in the above-mentioned formula, but various other objects, including whole or half-spheres of ivory, ceramic, or shell, or lead or clay, in the shape of spheres, fish, or most famously, tiny buddhas, have been used and inserted between the shell and mantle of pearl mussels for pearl cultivation. After the insertion, the mussels were returned to the water and were recovered a year or more later. The inserted objects would be coated with mother-of-pearl when they were retrieved.\textsuperscript{38}

\textsuperscript{36} Landman, *Pearls*, 154.
\textsuperscript{37} Pang Yuanying 龐元英, *Miscellaneous Records of Wen Chang* 文昌雜錄 (Shanghai: Shang Wu Yin Shu Guan, 1936): 第一卷: 禮部侍郎謝公言: 有 养珠法。以今所作假珠, 擇光瑩圓潤者, 取稍大蚌蛤, 以清水浸之。伺其口開, 急以珠投之, 頻換清水, 夜置月中。蚌蛤彩月華, 玩此經兩秋即成真珠矣。
\textsuperscript{38} Landman, *Pearls*, 154.
There was also a communication from F.X. de Entrecalles, dated at Peking, on 4th of November, 1734, as found in *Lettres édificantes et curieuses écrites des missions étrangères*, which mentioned that there were people in China who busied themselves with growing pearls, and the product was not only vastly superior to the imitations manufactured in Europe, but could hardly be distinguished from the genuine pearls.\(^{39}\) Father Entrecalles described the process of pearl cultivation with much details that he gained from an unnamed Chinese authority, and *The Book of the Pearl* condensed the detailed description as follows:

In a basin one half full of fresh water, place the largest mussels obtainable, set the basin in a secluded place where the dew may fall thereon, but where no female approaches, and neither the barking of dogs nor the crowing of chickens is to be heard. Pulverize some seed-pearls, such as are commonly used in medicine, moisten this powder with juice expressed from leaves of a species of holly, and then roll the moistened powder into perfectly round pellets the size of a pea. These are permitted to dry under a moderate sunlight, and then are carefully inserted within the open shells of the mollusks. Each day for one hundred days the mussels are nourished with equal parts of powdered ginseng, china root, peki, which is a root more glutinous than isinglass, and of pecho, another medicinal root, all combined with honey and molded in the form of rice grains.\(^{40}\)

While no explanation was given as to reasons for the absolute absence of women and intruding noises in the letter quoted above, this letter still indicates that the Chinese had a very elaborate and specific set of procedures developed for nourishing mussels and cultivating pearls. We may, however, supply an explanation to avoiding loud noises by consulting another work. In his work *A New Account of Canton* 廣東新語, Qu Dajun 屈大均 (1630-1696) states that pearls are also


\(^{40}\) Ibid.
called “divine fetus” 神胎; when mussels bear pearls, they are like pregnant women with a child in their womb, and these mussels will shrink and become meagre when they are shocked by thunders. From this view, we may conclude that the reasons for avoiding both female and loud noises follow the same logic as pregnant women having certain taboos that they should avoid in Chinese culture, all for the sake of guaranteeing a safe pregnancy and encouraging a healthy delivery of babies in the case of pregnant women, or pearls in the case of “pregnant” mussels and clams.

Another satisfactory description of the process was sent to the London society of Arts by Dr. D.T. Macgowan, through H.B.M. plenipotentiary in China, in which it is said that large specimens of the fresh-water mussels Dipsas plicatus are brought in baskets from Lake Tai-hu 太湖 in May or June, to the two villages in the Zhejiang 浙江 region where the industry is prosecuted. The mussels are immersed in fresh water for a few days in bamboo cages after their journey in order to help them recover from the journey and ready them for the matrices. The shells are gently opened with a spatula of bamboo or of pearl shell, and the mantle is carefully separated from one surface of the shell with a metal probe. Objects of various forms and materials are inserted as nuclei, the most common being spherical beads of nacre, pellets of mud moistened with juice of camphor seeds, and especially thin leaden images, generally of Buddha in the sitting posture. These foreign objects are introduced using the point of a bifurcated bamboo stick, and placed upon the inner surface of the shell, most usually in two parallel rows, and a sufficient number of

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41 Qu Dajun 屈大均, Guangdong Xin Yu/A New Account of Canton 廣東新語: 貨語: 珠一名神胎，凡珠有胎，蓋蚌聞雷則㾭瘦，其孕珠如孕子然，故曰珠胎，蚌之病也。
42 Kunz and Stevenson, The Book of the Pearl, 288.
43 Ibid.
objects are placed on both valves of the shell of the mussel.  

As soon as the mussel is released, it closes its shell and thus keeps the matrices in place, and it will be placed in canals, streams, or ponds, one by one, five or six inches apart, and where the depth is from two to five feet under water. Each month several tubs of night soil are thrown into the reservoir to keep the mussels nourished; great care is also taken to keep goat excretia from the water since it is highly detrimental to mussels, preventing secretion of good nacre or even killing them if the quantity is sufficient. In November, the mussels are removed from the water and opened, and the pearly masses are detached by means of a knife. If the matrix be of nacre, this is not removed; but the earthen and metallic matrices are cut away, melted resin or white sealing-wax poured into the cavity, and the orifice covered with a piece of shell. These pearly formations have some of the lustre and beauty of true natural pearls, and are furnished at a rate low enough to be purchasable by almost anyone.

The Qing royal court was known for their love for pearls. The empress dowagers, queens, and consorts all incorporated a great number of pearls in their outfits and accessories. The growing interest in pearls and the increasing appetite for the gem both among the population and within the court was noted in *A New Account of Canton*, which records that the rich were proud to possess a great number of pearls while the poor were ashamed of having no pearls, to

44 Ibid.
45 Ibid.
46 Ibid, 289.
47 Ibid.
48 Ibid.
49 Jing Wen 景聞, “Genuine and Imitation Pearls in Jewelry of the Qing Royal Court” 清宮首飾中的珍珠與假珠,” in *Qing Gong Hou Fei Shou Shi Tu Dian* 清宮后妃首飾圖典 (Beijing: Gu Gong Chu Ban She, 2012), 12.
the point where people believed that it was better to hold on to pearls than to have gold.\textsuperscript{50} With such high demand, imitation pearls started to play an important role in the life of pearl fans.

In late Qing period, when the spending power of the entire Qing empire was compromised and the government was undermined because of warfare, the interest in pearls remained unaffected. It was during this troubled time that Xu Ke 徐珂 (1869-1928) mentioned the recipe for imitation pearls in his work \textit{Qing Bai Lei Chao} 清稗類鈔: “… imitation pearls, are a work of art from the Canton area. The way to manufacture them: soak fish scales of a carp and crush them, mix the powdered fish scales with gelatine 魚膠 until the mixture turns into a paste, then add small glass beads into the mixture and cook it at a suitable temperature until the mixture wraps around the beads; they look like the real pearls and are used in women’s accessories.\textsuperscript{51}”

It is said that the art of making fake pearls changed over time, and that the imitation pearls from earlier in the Qing dynasty were of better quality than those made in the later Qing period. The earlier imitation pearls have a greyish hue, they are rounder and are mostly still intact nowadays, while the imitation pearls from later Qing times, have a pale white hue and obvious chipping and peeling on their surface.\textsuperscript{52} Cultivated pearls were made as a less expensive alternative to genuine pearls, the invention of which allowed the less rich to own pearls. When this cheaper alternative became too expensive, imitation pearls were made to more economically satisfy the demand for

\textsuperscript{50} Qu Dajun 屈大均, \textit{Guangdong Xin Yu/A New Account of Canton} 廣東新語: 貨語: 富者以多珠為榮，貧者以無珠為恥，至有金子不如珠子之語…
\textsuperscript{51} Xu Ke 徐珂, \textit{Qing Bai Lei Chao} 清稗類鈔 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 2010): 工藝類: 草珠，假珍珠也，為廣東之細工品。其制法，以鯉魚鱗浸漬研碎，和入魚膠，成糊狀物，以玻璃之小珠加適宜之溫度調合之，而包其外，狀如真珠，婦女多用以為飾品。
\textsuperscript{52} Jing Wen 景聞, “Genuine and Imitation Pearls in Jewelry of the Qing Royal Court 清宮首飾中的珍珠與假珠”, 17.
pearls. The very fact that imitation pearls were used extensively at the Qing royal court may indicate two things: 1) The Qing royalties had an excessively large appetite for pearls, which would be too expensive to support; and 2) The Qing national treasury was getting gradually depleted. When even the quality of imitation pearls was compromised, it is not difficult to conclude that the spending power of the later Qing dynasty had been drastically decreased.

3 How Were Pearls Collected?

In order to understand why pearls were so highly prized in Chinese history and culture, it is important to study how pearls were collected because the possible danger and difficulty people had to go through during the process would have directly affected the value of pearls.

Zhou Qufei 周去非 (1135-1189) of the Southern Song gives a touching description of the dangerous process of collecting pearls, which was sometimes fatal. He says that the fishermen dive into the water in order to find the mussels, which they cut open to collect the pearls. In order to find the mussels, they tie a bamboo basket to a long rope and they bring the basket with them as they dive. Once they catch a mussel they put it into the basket, shake the rope to tell the people on the boat to roll the basket up, and the divers themselves will quickly float back to the surface in order to get back onto the boat. Zhou goes on and describes the danger the divers face, saying that if the unfortunate divers come across ferocious fish or sea creatures, the people on the boat will see a strand of blood floating to the surface of the water, and they will start

53 Zhou Qufei, Ling Wai Dai Da 嶺外代答: 寶貨門, 珠池: 蟹人沒而得蚌，剖而得珠。取蚌，以長繩系竹籃，攜之以沒。既拾蚌於籃，則振繩令舟人汲取之，沒者亟浮就舟。
crying painfully knowing that their companions have been killed or swallowed. Some luckier divers may see the ferocious animals from afar, quickly float back up, and they may escape with an injured leg or a lost arm.\footnote{Zhou Qufei, Ling Wai Dai Da 嶺外代答: 寶貨門. 珠池: 不幸遇惡魚, 一縷之血浮於水面, 舟人慟哭, 知其已葬魚腹也。亦有望惡魚而急浮, 至傷股斷臂者。}

In Ming times, the procedures of collecting pearls were slightly different from that of Song. Instead of tying the rope to a bamboo basket, the basket was supposed to be carried by the diver, and the rope was tied around the waist of the diver instead.\footnote{Song Yingxing 宋應星, Tian Gong Kai Wu 天工開物: 第十八卷, 珠玉篇: 舟中長繩繫沒人腰, 掛籃投水。} They also used tin to fashion a tube curved into a circle, this round tube has an opening to allow divers to draw breaths under water.\footnote{Ibid; 第十八卷, 珠玉篇: 凡沒人以錫造彎環空管, 其本缺處, 對掩沒人口鼻, 令舒透呼吸於中, 別以熟皮包絡耳項之際。} When it is getting difficult to breath, the diver shakes the rope and the people up on the boat will hoist them out of the water, should they die under water, they may end up being swallowed by fish.\footnote{Ibid; 第十八卷, 珠玉篇: 氣逼則撼繩, 其上急提引上, 無命者或葬魚腹。} Whenever the divers emerge from the water, they will be quickly wrapped by a boiled woollen blanket; if they are made to wait they might die from cold shivers.\footnote{Ibid; 第十八卷, 珠玉篇: 凡沒人出水, 煮熱毳急覆之, 緩則寒慄死。} This Ming record is a lot more detailed in describing how this particular kind of collecting is done, either much more care was given to ensuring the safety of the divers and thus certain changes were made, or these practices existed during Song times but were overlooked by the author and left unmentioned.

Another method had been invented to fish mussels from the sea without the use of divers. Song Yingxing 宋應星 (1587-1666) mentions in his 

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\item[54] Zhou Qufei, Ling Wai Dai Da 嶺外代答: 寶貨門. 珠池: 不幸遇惡魚, 一縷之血浮於水面, 舟人慟哭, 知其已葬魚腹也。亦有望惡魚而急浮, 至傷股斷臂者。
\item[55] Song Yingxing 宋應星, Tian Gong Kai Wu 天工開物: 第十八卷, 珠玉篇: 舟中長繩繫沒人腰, 掛籃投水。
\item[56] Ibid; 第十八卷, 珠玉篇: 凡沒人以錫造彎環空管, 其本缺處, 對掩沒人口鼻, 令舒透呼吸於中, 別以熟皮包絡耳項之際。
\item[57] Ibid; 第十八卷, 珠玉篇: 氣逼則撼繩, 其上急提引上, 無命者或葬魚腹。
\item[58] Ibid; 第十八卷, 珠玉篇: 凡沒人出水, 煮熱毳急覆之, 緩則寒慄死。
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suppression Commissioner 招討 in the Song dynasty named Li 李 designed a contrivance made of iron and a plough; stones are hung from two corners of the (hoop) and a wooden pole is fixed at the top to cover the opening of the hoop. A sack, made of hemp rope is fastened to it. This contrivance is tied to the two sides of a boat, when the boat sails with the wind, the sack will collect mussels and clams (from the bottom of the sea). The fishermen know that the sack is filled with mussels when the sack grows heavy. This method prevents divers from going into the water, yet drowning still occurs from time to time.

Both methods were used in Ming times, and were also used in the Qing period. From A New Account of Canton, we can see that the fishermen have improved on the practice of using the contrivance: lures were placed in the sack to attract pearl mussels, and stronger building materials were used to make the device more durable. As for gathering by diving, we may look at a poem written by the Emperor Qianlong on pearl fishing:

采珠行
圓流有蚌清且淪；元珠素出東海濱。
旗丁泅采世其業；授餐支餉居虞村。
我來各欲獻其技；水寒冰飢非所論。

采珠行
圓流有蚌清且淪；元珠素出東海濱。
旗丁泅采世其業；授餐支餉居虞村。
我來各欲獻其技；水寒冰飢非所論。

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59 Ibid: 第十八卷, 珠玉篇: 宋朝李招討設法以鐵為耩, 最後木柱扳口, 兩角墜石, 用麻繩作兜如囊狀。繩繫舶兩傍, 乘風揚帆而兜取之
60 Ye Sheng 葉盛, Shui Dong Ri Ji 水東日記 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1980): 惟乘風行舟, 兜重則蚌滿。
61 Song Yingxing 宋應星, Tian Gong Kai Wu 天工開物: 第十八卷, 珠玉篇: 然亦有漂溺之患。
62 Ibid: 第十八卷, 珠玉篇: 今蜑戶兩法並用之。
63 Qu Dajun 屈大均, Guangdong Xin Yu/A New Account of Canton 廣東新語: 貨語: 彩之之法, 以黃藤絲棕及人發絛合為欖, 大徑三四寸, 以鐵為perPage

From this poem we can see that the pearl-fishers were still collecting pearls by diving into the water during Qianlong’s time, and they have, indeed, followed this practice for generations. Although the emperor did not write about the danger that the divers engaged in the water like other writers did, he noted the coldness of the water, and he also expressed how he was impressed by the hardship these divers had to overcome in order to collect pearls.

Collecting eastern pearls in Manchuria has proven to be even more dangerous because of the cold weather. It is said that many of the pearl fishers froze to death while diving in the cold rivers looking for pearls in Manchuria. In Ningguta, where many pearl-bearing mussels were found in the rivers, the weather is described to be extremely cold and unbearable all year. The *Local Records of Ningguta* 寧古塔紀略 painted a horrifying picture of the weather there by saying that it is painfully cold, from early spring to the third month of the lunar year the storms are so strong and full of thunder and lightning. Loose dust and sand conceals the sky and even close objects are hidden from sight. In the mid-seventh month, should white geese choose to land here they would not be able to take off again because dense frost is only a few days away.

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64 Li Xia 李俠, “Song Hua Jiang Dong Zhu Xing Shuai Ji 松花江東珠興衰記” in *Heilongjiang Shi Zhi 黑龍江史志* 14, (2012): 35.
Heavy snow falls start during the mid-eighth month of the year, and all the rivers will be completely frozen by the mid-ninth month. By the tenth month of the year land cracks; as soon as snow falls onto the ground it immediately turns into ice. Although the sun still shines, the sunlight is not warm enough to melt away the ice. Newcomers must wear three layers of fur garments, and those who have lived there for a long time might be able to counter the cold weather by wearing only one thick fur coat. Only by the end of the third month does the coldness start to thaw, but plants have yet to sprout.  

We should also note that by the end of the third month the stormy season would begin again according to the beginning of this passage, and therefore extreme weather should be expected throughout the entire year in Ningguta. Although the *Local Records of Ningguta* also mentions how the weather has gradually become milder and warmer in later years, we can still imagine how harsh the conditions must have been when early divers looked for pearls in the icy river waters and how many lives the extreme coldness must have claimed. As mentioned above, even in the south where it is known for its warm and mild climate, the pearl fishers had to be wrapped in boiled hot woollen garments as soon as they emerged from the water to prevent them from dying of cold shivers; therefore the cold weather in the north described above would have rendered the diving impossibly deadly.

The danger and risks fishermen faced when they tried to collect pearls from the water are perhaps best captured by the Tang poet Yuan Zhen 元稹 (779-831) in his poem:

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65 Wu Zhenchen 吳振臣, *Local Records of Ningguta* 寧古塔紀略其地寒苦，自春初至三月終日夜大風如雷鳴電激，塵埃蔽天，咫尺皆迷。七月中有白鵝飛下便不能復飛起，不數日即有濃霜。八月中即下大雪，九月中河盡凍，十月地裂盈尺，雪攙到地即成堅冰，雖白日照，灼不消。初至者必三襲裘，久居者即重裘可禦寒矣。至三月終凍始解，草木尚未萌芽。

66 Ibid: 近來漢官到後日向和暖，大異曩時，滿洲人云此暖是蠻子帶來，可見天意垂憫流人回此陽和也。
He noted how the pearl fishers risked their lives when they were trying to gather pearls from the
twater, and even when they risked their lives trying to find pearls, the success rate was so low that
only one man out of ten thousand would be able to get pearls. He placed an emphasis on how
fatal this task actually was by repeatedly using the Chinese word for death, si 死, reminding us
that diving into the sea trying to gather pearls has cost many lives, and that pearl-fishing was
indeed an extremely dangerous task with no guaranteed success.

Yuan mentioned how the sea god controlled everything living in the sea, and whether or not the
pearl fishers could achieve their goal depends on the good will of the sea god. He says that if the
sea god decides to keep the pearls for himself, he has the ability to collect all the pearls from the
sea by killing all the mussels living in the water. This view may sound superstitious to us, and
we may be more inclined to believe that pollution or some form of natural disaster has caused the
death of so many pearl mussels as he described in his poem, yet praying to the sea god for
blessings seems to have been a practice that the pearl fishers have followed for hundreds of years.

According to Zhou Qufei 周去非, the Song fishermen believed that the pearl beds in the sea are
like cities; it is strange and unusual in there, and men should not get close to them because sea
monsters frequent them. These sea monsters breathe through their shivering mouths, and they
are safeguarded by the sea gods. Therefore, pearl-mussels that lived in the middle of these areas are those that no one could catch since ancient times. Yet these mussels bred and overflowed out of the city (the centre of a pearl bed), and those that lived outside the cities can be caught.  

Song Yingxing 宋應星 states that these fishermen gathered pearls in the third month of every year during Ming times, they would sacrifice animals to the sea god with extreme piety. Qu Dajun 屈大均 explains that in Qing period, the fishermen would begin to collect pearls starting from the full moon of the second month of the year, and they would gather men and sacrifice five animals as offerings to the sea gods before doing so. Should their devotion be not pure, storms would stir the sea, or big fish would gather near the pearl mussels and clams, and the fishermen would not be able to gather any pearls as a result. Although the Emperor Qianlong 乾隆帝 ended his poem (quoted above) by criticizing Yuan Zhen 元稹 for mentioning the sea god, implying that the sea god’s favour is irrelevant to pearl fishing, it is apparent that the sea people (fishermen), those who lived before and after his time, believed and insisted otherwise. For the pearl-fisher, praying to the sea gods was their last resort for ensuring their own safety while they were at work.

Gathering pearls is a difficult task, and unfortunately pearl-fishers were not always eager volunteers like those the Emperor Qianlong has described in his poem. It is said that the Southern Han 南漢 government had put the pre-Chinese inhabitants living near the Hong Kong

67 Zhou Qufei 周去非, Ling Wai Dai Da 嶺外代答: 寶貨門. 珠池: 蜑家自云: 海上珠池, 若城郭然, 其中光怪, 不可向邇。常有怪物, 哆口吐翕, 固神靈之所護持。其中珠蚌, 終古不可得者。蚌溢生於城郭之外, 故可採耳。  
68 Song Yingxing 宋應星, Tian Gong Kai Wu 天工開物: 第十八卷, 珠玉篇: 蜑戶探珠, 每歲必以三月, 時牲殺祭海神, 極其虔敬。  
69 Qu Dajun 屈大均, Guangdong Xin Yu/A New Account of Canton 廣東新語: 貨語: 凡彩生珠, 以二月之望為始, 珠戶人招集贏夫, 割五大牲以禱, 稍不虔潔, 則大風翻攪海水, 或有大魚在蚌蛤左右, 珠不可得。
pearl beds under strict military discipline, and these inhabitants were forced to labour as pearl-fishers, without any right to leave the area or escape from the dangerous task assigned to them.\textsuperscript{70} The Manchurian, pearl-fishers of Butha Ula 打牲烏拉, also led a difficult life. Wang Fenling 汪玢玲 and Tao Jin 陶金 quoted a passage from the *Local Records of Butha Ula 打牲烏拉志期全書*\textsuperscript{71} that says that there were rules about the minimum number of pearls every pearl-fisher had to collect; should they gather more than required, they would be humbly rewarded, but if they gathered one pearl fewer than required, they would receive ten whiplashes as punishment.\textsuperscript{72}

Wang and Tao said that the life these pearl-fishers led was sad and harsh and this is reflected in the legends that circulated among the pearl-fishers\textsuperscript{73}, and that most of these legends involve beautiful pearls with supernatural qualities, and sometimes they can even turn into a beautiful woman who would try their best to help and save the suffering pearl-fishers.\textsuperscript{74}

In short, pearl-fishing is a difficult task, and it is sometimes fatal for those involved in the process. Pearl-fishers risked their lives in order to gather pearls from the water, yet not all these labourers were volunteers. Some pearl-fishers were forced into pearl-fishing and were not given an option to reject taking on this dangerous job which might cost them their lives. Even if they managed to survive, the regulations and rules on pearl gathering and the imperial pearl monopoly made them suffer greatly. Their sacrifice, sufferings, desperation, and wish for a better life were therefore mourned for in poems and other genres of literature.

\textsuperscript{70} P. H. Hase, *The Historical Heritage of Ho Chung, Pak Kong, and Sha Kok Mei, Sai Kung*, 2.
\textsuperscript{72} *Local Records of Butha Ula 打牲烏拉志期全書*: 每珠軒定例應交額珠十六顆,共應交九,百四十四顆...如額外多得一顆者,將多得珠之牲殅賞毛青布二疋。缺少一顆,將少得珠之牲殅責十鞭。
\textsuperscript{73} Wang Fenling 汪玢玲, Tao Jin 陶金, “*Da Sheng Wu La Gong Zhu Yu Dong Zhu Gu Shi/The Story of the Tributary Pearls and Eastern Pearls in Butha Ula 打牲烏拉貢珠與東珠故事*,” 338.
\textsuperscript{74} Ibid.
Chapter 3
The Value of Pearls

In order to discuss the significance of pearls, we should also try to establish the value of pearls in ancient China, because it is by understanding the great price that people were willing to pay for pearls that we can start to appreciate what a significant role pearls have played in Chinese culture.

1 Monetary Value of Pearls

The author of *A New Account of Canton* 廣東新語 lived during Qing times, and he seems to believe that southern pearls were not a valuable item for ancient Chinese, indeed, he said that in ancient time pearls were considered worthless while they were precious to the Chinese living in his time, and to support that idea he added as proof that ancient Chinese who lived in the Hepu area exchanged pearls for rice yet they could not even feed themselves properly. Hepu is known for not developing agriculture, and its entire economy depended on pearl-fishing, they therefore traded pearls for rice with merchants. In other words, pearl was their only income, it was as important as money to them because they obtained what they needed and ensured their own livelihood through bartering with outsiders using pearls. Qu Dajun’s 屈大均 view on pearls being seen as worthless in ancient times is therefore highly disputable.

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75 Qu Dajun 屈大均, *Guangdong Xin Yu/A New Account of Canton* 廣東新語: 貨語: 然古時珠賤今珠貴，古時合浦人以珠易米，珠多而人不重。
As early as in *Yu Gong* 禹貢 in the *Book of Xia* 夏書, a.k.a. *Shang Shu* 尚書, the pearl was mentioned as one of the gifts that the city of Xu 徐州 offered to the king. Should pearls be recognized as worthless, offering them to the king would be considered a disrespectful and illogical gesture. Pearls have a long history of being gifts treasured by royal rulers in Chinese history. Fang YiZhi 方以智 mentioned in his work *Tongya* 通雅 a few rulers who were offered some impressive pearls in the 6th to the 9th centuries, including the Emperor Wu of Liang 梁武帝 (r.502-549), Emperor Taizong of Tang 唐太宗 (r.626-649), Emperor Shunzong of Tang 唐順宗 (r.805-806), and Emperor Xuanzong of Tang 唐玄宗 (r.712-756). Should, as Qu Dajun claimed, pearls be worthless to the ancient Chinese, the fact that Chinese rulers have been offered pearls as gifts for such a long time in Chinese history would suggest that Chinese rulers have been greatly disrespected by their own subjects and their neighbouring countries for centuries, which contradicts our general belief. In fact, Emperor Taizong of Tang is considered to be one of the strongest rulers who have ever reigned over China, he was even respectfully called Tengri Qaghan 天可汗 by tribes surrounding China to show their recognition of his rightful dominion; it is therefore implausible for neighbouring countries to knowingly disrespect Chinese rulers like him by offering them tributes and gifts that their own people openly deemed worthless. Thus, it is much more logical for us to believe that pearls were indeed valuable in ancient China.

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77 *Shang Shu* 尚書, *Yu Gong* 禹貢： 海岱及淮維徐洲.... 貢維土五色，羽獸夏狄，峰陽孤桐，泗濱浮磬，淮夷蠙珠臮魚....
78 Fang Yizhi 方以智, *Tongya* 通雅: 卷四十八, 撰金石: 梁武帝有蛇鶴珠，唐太宗時婆利國貢火珠，順宗朝拘珍國貢履冰珠，罽賓天寶中獻上清珠，照一室，水旱禱之皆驗，又貞觀中佛菻獻錄金精又閬風珠，走珠也。
The worthlessness of pearls suggested by Qu Dajun 屈大均 is more likely a misunderstanding. According to Zhou Qufei 周去非 of the Southern Song times, the fishermen risked their lives in order to find pearls, yet they were not good at bargaining and therefore they usually sold their pearls at very low prices. However, what happened after the humble fishermen sold their pearls was that the pearls kept changing hands, and whenever that happened, their prices grew. From the humble fishing village where they were first found in the water and sold, they changed hands till they ended in the bigger cities, and a few changes of hands later the pearls would end up in the capitals. By the time the final buyer made their purchase, the prices of pearls grew so much that they could only be considered priceless. Zhou adds that pearl-fishing is administered by the officials appointed by the royal court, and the state where pearls were found is called Lian 廉州 (which is a word meaning honesty) to imply that pearls are precious enough to tempt the officials into corruption. To arrive on a conclusion that pearls were worthless by reading on how the fishermen sold their pearls at low prices is thus a huge misunderstanding, because the story of pearls hardly stopped there; how their prices grew significantly should not be overlooked because by skipping the long journey pearls took till they were bought by their final owners, the value of pearls will be outrageously underestimated.

If pearls were considered cheap and worthless, poets using them to represent richness and wealth in their works would also seem illogical. Du Fu 杜甫 (712-770), one of the most prominent

79 Zhou Qufei 周去非, Ling Wai Dai Da 嶺外代答: 寶貨門, 珠池: 珠熟之年, 蜑家不善為價, 冒死得之, 尽為黠民以升酒斗粟, 一易數兩。既入其手, 即分為品等銖兩而賣之城中。又經數手乃至都下, 其價遞相倍蓰, 至於不貲。
80 Zhou Qufei 周去非, Ling Wai Dai Da 嶺外代答: 寶貨門, 珠池: 珠熟之年, 蜑家不善為價, 冒死得之, 尽為黠民以升酒斗粟, 一易數兩。既入其手, 即分為品等銖兩而賣之城中。又經數手乃至都下, 其價遞相倍蓰, 至於不貲。
81 Zhou Qufei 周去非, Ling Wai Dai Da 嶺外代答: 寶貨門, 珠池: 採珠在官有禁, 州以廉名, 謂其足以貪也。
Chinese poets of the Tang dynasty, wrote a poem to describe the extremely luxurious life of Yang Guozhong 楊國忠 (710-756) and the sisters of Consort Yang 楊貴妃 (719-756):

麗人行
三月三日天氣新，長安水邊多麗人。
態濃意遠淑且真，肌理細膩骨肉勻。
絣羅衣裳照暮春，蹙金孔雀銀麒麟。
頭上何所有，翠微盍葉垂鬢唇。
背後何所見，珠壓腰衱穩稱身。
就中雲幕椒房親，賜名大國虢與秦。
紫駝之峰出翠釜，水精之盤行素鱗。
犀筋饗飫久未下，鸞刀縷切空紛綸。
黃門飛鞚不動塵，御廚絡綘送八珍。
簫鼓哀吟感鬼神，賓從雜遝實要津。
後來鞍馬何逡巡，當軒下馬入錦茵。
楊花雪落覆白蘋，青鳥飛去銜紅巾。
炙手可熱勢絕倫，慎莫近前丞相嗔。

Emperor Xuanzong of Tang 唐玄宗 favored the Yang family because of his infatuation with Consort Yang. Yang Guozhong was promoted and became his prime minister, and the emperor also conferred the titles of the Lady of Guo 虢國夫人 (d.756), the Lady of Qin 秦國夫人 (d.754), and the Lady of Han 韓國夫人 (d.756) to three of Consort Yang’s sisters respectively. This poem of Du Fu depicts how everything that the Lady of Guo and the Lady of Qin used was utterly luxurious: they were dressed gloriously; they wasted delicacies prepared for them by the royal kitchens; and even the utensils they ate with were made of exotic materials.
The Lady of Guo and the Lady of Qin, with their sister being the centre of the emperor’s infatuation, were bestowed great favors; and considering their rumored extravagant lifestyle, what they used would naturally have to be of the best quality. Du Fu said that they wore silk dresses with peacocks embroidered on them with gold threads and *qilins* 虬麟 embroidered on them with silver threads; they wore thin pieces of jade ornaments on their hair, and pearls on their waistband held their dress in place; hump of camel⁸² was served to them on a jade dish, and fish was served on a plate carved out of crystal; their chopsticks were made of the horn of rhinoceros.

Considering this record, it is reasonable for us to assume that pearls were highly valued by the Tang people and that they were considered to be treasure as precious as gold, silver, jade, crystals, rhinoceros horns, and rare delicacies prepared by the royal chefs. Should pearls be considered worthless as suggested by Qu Dajun 屈大均, all the others would have been worthless as well. It can, of course, be argued that since the two sisters had a bad name, there was a slight possibility that they were not very respected, and what they used were not of the best quality there was. However, this possibility was ruled out by the last stanza of the poem above, where Du Fu said that the Yang family was arrogant and influential in the country because of the emperor, and that no one should meddle with the Yang family because the prime minister, Yang Guozhong, would be angry otherwise. It is, therefore, difficult to imagine anyone would dare disrespect the Yang sister by giving or selling them anything worthless.

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In short, the southern pearls were mistaken as worthless because of how cheaply they were sold by the fishermen, who were not good at pricing and bargaining at all. These pearl-fishers could not afford to drive a hard bargain when they bartered because they never developed agriculture and their entire livelihood depended on trading pearls for their necessities. Pearls actually grew in prices whenever they changed hands, and from the fishing village all the way to the capitals, they were sold at least several times. By the time pearls reached the hands of their final buyer, their prices were already so high that they were considered priceless. Southern pearls have a long history of being offered to kings and emperors of China as gifts, they have also been collected and worn by those who could afford them; they were hardly ever considered worthless.

As for eastern pearls which grew in the north-eastern part of China, Xu Mengshen 徐夢莘 (1124-1207), a historian from the Southern Song dynasty, wrote in his *San Chao Bei Meng Hui Bian* 三朝北盟滙編 that northern pearls were introduced to the Middle Kingdom (China) through trade. He wrote that when Emperor Tianzuo of Liao 遼天祚帝耶律延禧 (r.1101-1125) first ascended the throne, China was under the reign of Emperor Huizong of Song 宋徽宗 (r.1100-1126), and the royal court of Song was abusing luxury. The people living in the Song court then adored northern pearls. Northern pearls all came through trade to the market in China from the north. According to Xu, Emperor Tianzuo of Liao wanted to prohibit this particular export when he first learned about this, but his subordinates objected saying that it was beneficial to Liao that China was willing to exhaust their treasury for something useless, and China, on the other hand, would suffer. When the Liao emperor heard this, and since he was also a proud

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83 Same as eastern pearls, they are pearls gathered from the northern part of China.
person, he followed their advice and promoted their plan.\textsuperscript{84}

It is impossible for us to conclude from the abovementioned account that the Chinese fascination with eastern pearls started in Northern Song 北宋 (960-1127) as Wang Yunying 王云英 maintains in his article \textit{The Regulations on the Use and Gathering of Eastern Pearls In Qing Dynasty} 清代對東珠的使用和采捕制度\textsuperscript{85}, because nowhere in the aforementioned account can we see any innuendos pointing to the beginning of this fascination. We can, however, confirm that the Chinese living in the Song Dynasty esteemed eastern pearls (a.k.a northern pearls) grown in the north, and they were spending a large part of their wealth on obtaining pearls through trade, and the Liao court was happy with that because, as the seller, they were earning a big profit and draining the treasury of their enemy with the pearl trade.

In the early Ming dynasty, the Jurchen 女真 clan was divided into three tribes: Jianzhou 建州, Haixi 海西, and Ye Ren 野人, who were said to excel in horsemanship and marksmanship 騎射, foraging, and fishing. Wang commented that these were the main ways through which they supported their economy.\textsuperscript{86} The Jurchen people were slower in terms of technological development during that time, and the most advanced among them was the Jianzhou tribe. The Jianzhou tribe made most of their progresses on inventions directly or indirectly related to military endeavours or hunting needs; their farming and living needs were not met, and lives

\textsuperscript{84} Xu Mengxin 徐夢莘, \textit{San Chao Bei Meng Hui Bian 三朝北盟滙編} (Taipei: Shang Wu Yin Shu Guan, 1976): 卷三: 天祚嗣位立未久，當中國崇甯之間漫用奢侈宮禁，競尚北珠。北珠者，皆北中來榷場相貿易。天祚知之，始欲禁絕，其下謂：中國傾府庫以市無用之物此為我利而中國可以困恣。聽之而天祚亦驕汰，遂從而慕尚焉。
\textsuperscript{86} Ibid, 47.
were even harder for the other comparatively backward tribes.\textsuperscript{87} Therefore, just like the people in the Hepu area who exchanged pearls for food and other necessities, the Jurchen people gathered what they could in their area, including eastern pearls, and used these materials to barter with Ming in order to get things such as farming tools and oxen, salt, cooking utensils, and clothes etc..\textsuperscript{88}

The number of eastern pearls sold at the market by Jurchen people during Ming times was very limited, because eastern pearls were offered to the Ming royal court as tribute instead.\textsuperscript{89} Jurchens bringing tributes to the Ming court would, of course, be rewarded in return according to the custom then, and by bringing tributes to the royal court they would be granted five days at the local market where they could sell other goods they brought with them at great prices.\textsuperscript{90} In addition to that, Jurchens used the chance to raise their own status so that they could earn the admirations of other tribes, because by bringing tribute to court, they established or reinforced their connection with the Ming emperor, which was something for them to boast about. Going to Ming also gave the Jurchens a chance to learn more about the Ming to prepare them for their grand agenda of conquering China.\textsuperscript{91} As the Jurchens developed further, Nurhaci 努爾哈赤 united all the Jurchen tribes and established a powerful Manchurian court. The precious things that they gathered, foraged or hunted were no longer sent to Ming as gifts; they were either saved for the use of their own royal court or traded to Korea instead.\textsuperscript{92}

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{87} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{88} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{89} Ibid, 48.
\textsuperscript{90} Ibid, 49.
\textsuperscript{91} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{92} Ibid.
\end{flushleft}
In Qing times, eastern pearls were reserved only for the Qing royal court, others were forbidden to wear them unless they were bestowed upon them by the emperor, the gathering and use of eastern pearls were therefore strictly controlled by the government. Pearls should not be collected unless permission has been given by the emperor. If he decides to put pearl farming on hold, the general will be notified and officials will be sent to scout all the pearl beds on a regular basis to make sure no one gathered pearls in secret against the wishes of the emperor.\(^{93}\) Because of all the aforementioned history of eastern pearls, and the role they played in the rise of the Manchurians, they were greatly revered by the Qing emperors and were considered to be extremely precious.

2 Cultural Significance of Pearls

Pearls were considered superior treasures by the Chinese, especially in Guangdong and Guangxi provinces, where Hepu was well-known as the place where pearls were born. Guo Pei 郭裴 (1529-1605) said that in Ming times, the people in Guangdong and Guangxi adored pearls to such a degree that they often named their children Pearl (Zhuniang, 珠娘, if they were girls; zhu’er, 珠兒, if they were males).\(^{94}\) Qu Dajun 屈大均 explained that this was because pearls were believed to be born from the moon and nourished by the sun, therefore they were considered the glory of the Guangdong and Guangxi area, and thus to be named Pearl is an honour.\(^{95}\) By naming their children Pearl, the parents expressed how their children were dear to

\(^{93}\) Ibid, 51.
\(^{94}\) Guo Pei 郭裴, *Erya 尔雅*: 物産志: 合浦有珠市，粵俗以珠為上寶，生女謂之珠娘，生男謂之珠兒。
\(^{95}\) Qu Dajun 屈大均, *Guangdong Xin Yu/A New Account of Canton 廣東新語*: 貨語: 大抵珠者粵之精華，月之所生，日之所養，以為士女之光耀。
them; how they wanted their children to be adored like pearls; and how they wished that their children would shine in life.

In his work *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio* 聊齋志異, a collection of supernatural folklore and tales, the Qing author Pu Songling 蒲松齡 (1640-1715) told a story about Li Hua 李化, a rich man living in Changzhou 常州 who was over fifty years old but had no sons. He and his wife greatly cherished their only daughter but unfortunately the daughter succumbed to sickness suddenly when she was merely fourteen years of age. He then took a servant in as his concubine, and she bore him a son a year or so later. He held this son dear to him as though he were a piece of precious jade, and he named him Pearl Boy (Zhu’er 珠兒).96

Stories are not to be held as facts that have truly happened, yet those held with such high esteem for years, such as this collection, have to be able to communicate with the audience by reflecting certain beliefs and customs that they do understand in order for them to enjoy the composition. From the aforementioned passage from this particular story, we can see that Pearl, or Zhu’er, was indeed a name given to children who were cherished by ancient Chinese. We have discussed above that this was a practice in the Guangdong and Guangxi area, yet judging from this story, this practice was not restricted to those areas. In the story it was mentioned that the rich man was from Changzhou, which is part of Zhejiang 浙江, therefore it would be safe for us to conclude that the practice of naming children using the term Pearl had already spread by the time

Pu Songling wrote his famous work.

Nowadays, Chinese people use the idiom *zhangshang mingzhu* 掌上明珠, literally meaning “a valued pearl in one’s palm,” to express how precious someone, usually his daughter, is to him. The idiom “the apple of one’s eyes” may be considered an equivalent in the English language. This idiom is said to have originated from a poem that Fu Xuan 傅玄 (217-278) wrote in the early Western Jin 西晉 (265-316) period.

This poem was written to depict how a girl who lived in Chang’an (長安) mourned for the loss of her love. And the line “昔君視我，如掌中珠。何意壹朝，棄我溝渠” is where the above-mentioned idiom came from. Roughly translated, it was the girl saying “you used to see me as a pearl in your palm, why did you suddenly leave me as if you abandoned me in the ditch.” To be seen as a pearl in his palm here would mean that she was cherished like a precious treasure, and she would not have imagined that something this precious would become unwanted one day. She was both shocked and saddened. However, her emotional pain is not what we should discuss here, what we should pay attention to instead is that in Jin times, pearls were already
something that the Chinese people considered precious and dear, they were already used in
poems to imply preciousness. The idiom that stemmed from this poem is even more widely
known than the poem itself, and “a valued pearl in one’s palm” is still in use after 1800 years.
This is evidence proving that pearls have been precious to Chinese throughout the ages and its
standing hardly ever changed.

Pearl also appears in another idiom that the Chinese use to describe things that are of supreme
value and incomparable quality. *Hebi Suizhu* 和璧隋珠 literally means the jade bi-disc of the He
family and the pearl of Marquis of Sui: these two items were the most precious of all treasures
in all Chinese legends. Han Fei 韓非 (280-223BCE) said in his *Jie Lao* 解老 that the jade of the
He family need not be decorated with the five colours, and the pearl of Marquis of Sui need not
be decorated with gold or silver, because no substance is enough to add to their beauty and
perfection97, and it is from this saying of his that the idiom originated.

The story about the jade of the He family is very well known among the Chinese and it is
recorded in *Han Feizi*. The story says that a man named He 和 from the state of Chu 楚 found
an uncut piece of jade on the mountain in the state of Chu. Mr. He offered it to King Li 厲王
(r.758-741BCE), who ordered a jade worker to appraise it. The jade worker said “this is a piece
of rock.” The king therefore thought that Mr. He was lying, and amputated his left leg. And then
King Li died, and King Wu 武王 (r.740-689) succeeded him, and Mr. He offered his uncut piece
of jade to King Wu. King Wu asked a jade worker to appraise it, yet the jade worker also said

97 Han Fei 韓非. *Han Feizi* 韓非子 (Shanghai: Sao Ye Shan Fang, 1931): 解老: 和氏之璧, 不飾以五
采; 隋侯之珠, 不飾以銀黃; 其質之美, 物不足以飾之。
“this is a piece of rock.” King Wu therefore thought that Mr. He was lying and amputated his right leg as punishment. When King Wu died, King Wen (r.689-675BCE) ascended the throne, and Mr. He cried at the foot of the Chu mountain with the uncut piece of jade in his arms for three days, when his tears ran dry he started crying blood. King Wen heard of it and sent someone to ask Mr. He “there are many people who have had limbs amputated in this world, why are you crying so sadly over it?” Mr. He replied “I am not upset about my amputation. I am saddened by the fact that this precious piece of jade was mistaken as a rock, and a loyal person was called a liar, this is the reason why I am sad.” The king therefore told a jade worker to cut the jade open and found out that it was indeed a magnificent piece of treasure, and thus named the jade “jade of the He family”.98 This piece of jade was later known as the state treasure of Chu, and it was owned by Qin Shi Huang (r.259-210BCE) when he united all the states and named himself the first emperor of China. Legend has it that Qin Shi Huang carved his imperial seal out of the jade of the He family.

The story of the pearl of Marquis of Sui can be found in Gan Bao’s 干寶 (fl. 317-322) Shou Shen Ji 搜神記. It is said that near the Zha Shui 湍水 River in Sui 隋, there was a hill known as the Hill of the Severed Snake 斷蛇丘. The Marquis of Sui was on a journey, and he saw a huge wounded snake, severed in the middle of its body. The marquis suspected that the snake was a spirit, so he ordered his subjects to treat its wound with medicines. The snake was able to move

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98 Han Fei 韓非. Han Feizi 韓非子: 和氏: 楚人和氏得玉璞楚山中，奉而獻之厲王。厲王使玉人相之。玉人曰：“石也。”王以和為詐，而刖其左足。及厲王薨，文王即位。和又奉其璞而獻之文王。文王使玉人相之。又曰：“石也。”王又以和為詐，而刖其右足。武王薨，文王即位。和乃抱其璞而哭於楚山之下，三日三夜，淚盡而繼之以血。王聞之，使人問其故，曰：“天下之刖者多矣，子奚哭之悲也？”和曰：“吾非悲刖也，悲夫寶玉而題之以石，貞士而名之以詐，此吾所以悲也。”王乃使玉人理其璞而得寶焉，遂命曰：“和氏之璧。”
away then, and because of this the hill was named “the Hill of the Severed Snake”. A little more than a year later, the snake returned to repay the marquis for his kindness with a big pearl that it held in its mouth. The pearl’s diameter was a full inch in length, it was pure white in colour, and it shone in the dark as brightly as a moon would. The pearl was able to shine brightly enough to light up a room. This pearl is known as the pearl of Marquis of Sui. The last mention on this pearl in writings has it that the pearl ended up in Qin Shi Huang’s possession as well, and it is said that he adored it a lot. It is rumoured that he took it to his grave in order to light up his coffin chamber.

Han Fei originally meant to describe how things of natural beauty need no unnecessary adornment to bring it to perfection, and those that need such adornments to shine were fundamentally not good enough. The idiom that originated from this saying of his is made up of the two supreme treasures that he mentioned, and nowadays it is used to describe treasures, their beauty, their value, and their rareness. From this, we can understand that a rare pearl of supreme quality was just as revered as a rare piece of jade of supreme quality. Knowing that jade has been revered by Chinese for thousands of years, one can conclude that pearls enjoyed an equivalent reverence in the Eastern Zhou 東周 times (770-255BCE) of early Chinese history.

3 Magical Power of Pearls

So far, we have looked at how pearl-gatherers had to risk their lives in order to collect pearls from the water; discussed how much the premodern Chinese were willing to pay for pearls; and explained how pearls or the Chinese word for “pearl” itself was used a symbol of significant value; yet all these discussions did not directly answer the question of why the Chinese revered pearls so much. In order to answer the question, we will start looking into the more practical uses of pearls so that we can understand why a pearl was more than just a beautiful gem for the ancient Chinese people.

In the New Account of Canton, there is a passage in its entry on pearls stating that the moon does not shine on its own, it relies on sunlight to shine, and the moon therefore emits light, and this light comes from the sun; pearls, like the moon, do not shine on their own, but they rely on the moon in order to be able to shine, therefore pearls can reflect light, and this light comes from the moon. The moon is born from the sun, and pearls are born from the moon, and humans and other matters are born from the pearls. The moon is the mother of pearls, while the sun is the father of pearls; and therefore the precious pearls of the people living in Guangdong and Guangxi are treasures because of the sun and the moon.100

This passage explains why ancient Chinese insisted that pearl-mussels be put under the

100 Qu Dajun, Guangdong Xin Yu/A New Account of Canton: 貨語: 故夫月無光，以日而為光，故月有外景，皆日之景。珠無光以月而為光，故珠有內景，皆月之景。月生於日，珠生於月，而人物又生於珠。珠以月為母，以日為父，粵人之寶珠，蓋所以寶日月也。
moonlight at night during pearl-cultivation\textsuperscript{101}; it is because they thought that the mussels needed to soak up the essence emitted from the moon, the very substance that they thought would nourish the pearls inside the mussels, in order to cultivate healthier and more beautiful pearls. Also, it helps us understand that, for the ancient Chinese, every pearl is a gem crystalized from the essences of the sun and the moon, the two very entities that shine upon this earth, and pearls should therefore be respected and revered because they are like small capsules filled with the two essences so very important to life, and which are magical to humans.

Another reason for pearls to be so highly valued is that pearls have various uses other than being mere ornaments or decorations that people wore. One of these different uses is that they were used in burials. Records show that ancient Chinese had a habit of burying the dead with things that they treasured; and the burial objects from premodern China have drawn the interest of many scholars worldwide. Therefore in order to understand the reason behind the wish to be buried with pearls, we must first try to understand the burial culture in ancient China. Jade was well known for being a favourite among burial objects, and burial jade has been used in ancient China since more than two thousand years ago; and since jade is considered a rare gem just like pearls, we may therefore try to understand the use of pearls in burials by studying the use of jade.

In \textit{Shanhaijing 山海經}, the reason behind the belief of jade being able to protect the alive and the dead is explained. It says that jade is food for deities and spirits, and wearer of jade will be

\textsuperscript{101} Pang Yuanying龐元英, \textit{Miscellaneous Records of Wen Chang 文昌雜錄}: 第一卷: 禮部侍郎謝公言: 有一養珠法。以今所作假珠，擇光瑩圓潤者，取稍大蚌蛤，以清水浸之。伺其口開，急以珠投之，頻換清水，夜置月中。蚌蛤彩月華，玩此經兩秋即成真珠矣。
protected from harm.\textsuperscript{102} It is very likely that, instead of believing that decomposition was a natural process, the Han people may have thought that the body decomposed due to attacks launched by evil spirits.\textsuperscript{103} Zang Zhen therefore suggested that the aforementioned paragraph should be understood as “since jade was food for deities and spirits, when evil demons and spirits approach humans, wearer of jade can be protected from these entities because the entities can feed on the jade worn instead of harming the human body”; and thus when a corpse is dressed with jade, evil spirits from the underworld can feed on the burial jade items instead of harm the body of the dead and thus the jade prevents decay.\textsuperscript{104}

Not only did premodern Chinese try to ensure the integrity of the dead by dressing their body, covering their face with jade items and offering sacrifices to appease the dead, they also filled the mouth of the dead with rice and jade pieces. This is known as fan han 飯琀, fan literally means rice, and here it basically means putting some uncooked rice grains into the mouth of the dead; and 嚼 means having something in one’s mouth, and here it means putting something precious and valuable into the mouth of the dead.\textsuperscript{105} Jade was not the only material used as han, pearls, shells, gold and silver coins were all used as han in premodern China.

\begin{itemize}
\item[102] Shan Hai Jing 山海經 in Yuan Ke 袁珂 (ed.), Shan Hai Jing Jiao Zhu 山海經校注 (Chengdu: Bashu Shushe, 1993): 西山經 - 密山...丹水出焉...其中多白玉, 是有玉膏。其源沸沸湯湯, 黃帝是食是饗...瑾瑜之玉為良, 堅栗精密, 濁澤而有光。五色發作, 以和柔剛。天地鬼神, 是食是嚙; 君子服之, 以御不祥。”
\item[105] Na Zhiliang 那志良, Zhong Guo Gu Yu Tu Shi/Pictorial Interpretation of Chinese Antique Jade 中國古玉圖釋, (Taipei: Nan Tian Shuju, 1990), 354.
\end{itemize}
Ancestor worship in Chinese culture played another important role in the choosing of material used for making burial items. Ancestor feeding is also referred to as “feeding” the dead, and it constituted the single most important cultic practice; the presentation of offerings was a ritual procedure aimed at appeasing ancestral spirits and the spirit world at large. The belief that the dead needed to be fed inside the tomb and the expectation that the living, in turn, would continue to offer sacrifice in the hereafter, emerges before the Han. A tomb, where the worshipping and sacrificing took place, was built not only as an underground home for the dead, but also as a place for the magical transformation of the dead. A tomb was therefore an entrance to immortality and began to convey the sense of eternity itself.

Tomb architecture, funerary goods, and decorative scenes in the form of murals were not the only mechanisms to ensure that the deceased would continue to be catered for in their afterlife. The most important act of religious worship to sustain a bond between the living and the departed was the presentation of sacrificial food offerings, because it was believed that food offerings and sacrificial rituals forged a sensory bond with ancestral spirits. It was suggested in the Book of Rites, to bury someone means to hide the corpse away and conceal the dead from the eyes of the living, thus the deceased had to be appeased and placated in luxurious tombs and receive offerings tailored to their needs and tastes to ensure that they would not return and

avenge themselves.\textsuperscript{109} Success in feeding the spirits depended on several factors, and one being that the correct “food” was chosen. Some texts suggest that, in terms of the efficiency and reach of sacrificial offerings, there existed a direct relationship between flavour and memory. In other words, living ritual participants and their immediate ancestors may appreciate the flavour conveyed by a particular food offering, but more distant ancestors and more intangible spirits prefer ethereal ingredients above individual physical foodstuffs. The most powerful offerings therefore are those that belong to the realm of vital essence or qi 氣, and jade being a stone that possesses essential vital forces is naturally one of the best offerings one could provide to the dead ancestors.\textsuperscript{110} By the same token, pearl, being a gem that was believed to possess the essences of the sun and the moon, is therefore naturally another suitable offering to the dead.

The belief of pearls being able to prevent a corpse from decay started much earlier than the Qing period. Li Rong 李冗 of Tang Dynasty (618-907) wrote in his Du Yi Zhi 獨異志 that a man named Li Guan 李灌 was a very quiet man who always traveled to Jianchang 建昌 of Hongzhou 洪州. One day, he parked his boat at the shore, where he had a small hut. He had a Persian neighbour who was sick. Seeing that the Persian man was dying, he took pity on him and treated him with medicine and congee and the Persian man died after a few days. Before he died, he pointed at where he was lying down and said “I have a pearl in here, with a diameter almost an inch in length.” He wanted to repay Li Guan’s kindness with the pearl. As he died, a dim light shone through his blanket. Li Guan found the pearl under the dead man’s blanket, bought a coffin to bury the Persian in, and secretly put the pearl into the mouth of the dead Persian, and he

\textsuperscript{109} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{110} Ibid, 73.
planted trees there to mark the grave. Ten years later, he came to the same town again. Yang Ping, the surveillance commissioner then, received a diplomatic document from Persia inquiring about a Persian traveller who died in an inn in Jianchang. He therefore ordered that all who had helped the Persian be arrested and interrogated. Li Guan asked the prisoners what crimes they were charged for and they told him what caused their arrest. He therefore told the district official what happened ten years ago, and together they returned to where the Persian was buried. The trees had already grown so big that their crowns were touching each other, forming a canopy. They opened the coffin and saw that the dead Persian was still looking fresh like he was still alive, and they found the pearl in his mouth. That night, Li Guan sailed away in his boat and no one knew where he disappeared to.111

We cannot read the story as fact, but we can learn about legends and folklore circulating during Tang times from it. From this story, we can see that Tang scholars are familiar with the legend of how pearls could preserve a dead body or even the theory behind it, which is why the dead Persian with the big pearl in his mouth looked alive even after having been buried for ten years. As to why the hero Li Guan put the pearl into the mouth of the dead Persian rather than keeping it for himself, we can explain by consulting other records that detail ancient Chinese funerary rites. As we explained above, the practice of putting items into the mouth of a corpse for burial is known as fan han 飯唅. Sima Guang 司馬光 (1019-1086) of the Song dynasty wrote in his Shuyi 書儀 that according to ancient rites, the feudal lords should use seven seashells as fan han, 111 Li Rong 李冗, Du Yi Zhi 獨異志 (Shanghai: Shang Wu Yin Shu Guan, 1937): 補佚: 李灌者，不知何許人。性孤靜。常次洪州建昌縣，倚舟於岸。岸有小蓬室，下有一病波斯。灌憫其將盡，以湯粥給之。數日而卒。臨絕，指所臥黑氈曰: 中有一珠，可徑寸。將酬其惠。及死，氈有微光溢耀。灌取視得珠，買棺葬之，密以珠內胡口中，植木誌墓。其後十年，復過舊邑。時場憑為觀察使，有外國符牒，以故人死於建昌逆旅，其粥食之家，皆被梏訊經年。灌因問其罪，囚具言本末。灌告縣寮，偕往郭鵲番伐樹，樹已合拱矣。發棺視死胡，貌如生，乃於口中探得一珠還之。其夕，棹舟而去，不知所往。
senior officials should use five, shi 士 should use three; and those who ranked above the senior officials kept using pearls and jade. He further commented that even if one wanted to use a lot of coins as han, the amount of coins he could hold in his mouth would not be enough to make him rich because a mouth could not possibly hold many coins, and although pearls and jade could more easily fit into one’s mouth, they tended to tempt thieves, thus only three taels of these materials would be used. Therefore in the aforementioned story written by Li Rong, the pearl was put into the mouth of the dead Persian because the hero might have wished that the poor Persian, who died far away from home, would be appeased after his death; and he did it in secret so that no one would know about the pearl and the Persian’s grave would not be raided by thieves.

The Empress Dowager Cixi 慈禧太后 (1835-1908) of Qing Dynasty was not as lucky as the poor Persian mentioned in the story. It is rumored that she was dressed in a burial dress with thousands of pearls sewn onto it, and that she held a huge pearl in her mouth when she was buried. This record was said to have been recounted by her closest imperial eunuch Li

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112 Since Sima Guang did not specify how ancient the ancient rite he wrote about is, 士 is left untranslated here because it could have meant soldier in earlier times; and at the same time it also stands for scholars in later times.
113 Sima Guang 司馬光, Sima Shi Shu Yi 司馬氏書儀 (Shanghai: Shang Wu Yin Shu Guan, 1936): 卷一，卷五，喪儀一：古禮諸侯飯七貝，大夫五，士三，大夫以上仍有珠玉。
114 The unit of measurement 錢 is translated as taels here. Since Sima Guang did not clarify whether he was measuring this weight according to Song custom or to the older system that he was writing about, and the measuring system varied in different dynasties, a modern equivalence in weight has been left out in this thesis.
115 Considering how the ancient rite he cited had official titles including 諸侯, 大夫, and 士 which were used in Zhou times, we may estimate that the ancient rite he talked about in his work is the Zhou custom; and 錢 is a measure unit that did not exist before Tang dynasty, so it is more likely that Sima Guang wrote three taels according to Song custom, and one tael in Song dynasty is roughly 4 grams nowadays, so the three taels in this passage is roughly equivalent to 12 grams.
116 Li Xia 李俠, “Song Hua Jiang Dong Zhu Xing Shuai Ji 松花江東珠興衰記”: 36.
Lianying 李連英 and then written by his nephew Li Chengwu 李成武 in the work Ai Yue Xu Xuan Bi Ji 愛月軒筆記, yet unfortunately the work has been lost. The rumored information seems to be relatively reliable because when the Empress Dowager Cixi’s mausoleum was looted in the year 1928 by the warlord Sun Dianying 孫殿英, one of those who went to re-organize the mausoleum after the raid, named Baoxi 寶熙 (1871-1942), wrote a diary Yu Yi Dong Ling Re Ji 于役東陵日記 which gave a description of what he saw within the looted tomb, and what he wrote corresponded with the rumor.

Baoxi wrote in the diary that on the 24th of August, 1928 he saw:

...the coffin lying on its side under the bed made of rock, the outer-coffin painted in gold has been hacked and destroyed, abandoned in the north-west corner, and covered with a board. They lifted the board up and saw that the Empress Dowager Cixi’s body was there. Her body was lying on its side inside, her left hand was placed on her back, and her hair was not loosened up. Her outer and inner garments have been stripped off her, her face and her body has already started fermenting, and moulds have already grown all over to about an inch long. The tomb raiders started breaking into the mausoleum on the 17th of May, and they stopped on the 24th of May, her body has been exposed out of her coffin for over 40 days. The humidity in the underground palace is high, and it is naturally braising hot, and these conditions have caused the fermentation and moulding. Immediately they summoned the female workers to cover the body with a yellow cloth, put the unbroken red coffin on the bed made of rock, and then wrapped her body tightly with yellow satin, and slowly they turned her body upright. Her complexion was pale
and grey, her two eyes have sunken in and formed two black holes, and there was a crack
under her lips. Comparing the rumour and the diary above, I would like to propose that the body of the empress
dowager has been stripped because she was wearing something of significant value, and the
burial dress with numerous pearls sewn onto it as recounted by Li Lianying 李連英 could
therefore be true. I would also like to suggest that the crack under her lips could have been
caused when the tomb raiders tried to get the huge pearl out of her mouth forcefully, and
therefore Li Lianying’s recollection could indeed be true. What happened to her was exactly
what Sima Guang 司馬光 feared nine hundred years before her time. Whether the pearl she held
in her mouth would have been able to preserve her dead body from decaying we would never
know, but we can be sure that all those pearls did not protect her from being disturbed in her
eternal sleep and they have attracted thieves who mercilessly looted her resting place instead.

Nevertheless, many pearls, especially the big and magnificent ones, were believed to have
magical power. Zuoqiu Ming 左丘明 of the State of Lu 魯 during the Spring and Autumn period
wrote that pearls were able to prevent conflagration and should therefore be treasured; and
Wei Zhao 韋昭 (204-273) of Eastern Wu 東吳 (229-280) during the Three Kingdoms period

117 Baoxi 寶熙, Yu Yi Dong Ling Ri Ji 于役東陵日記 in Gao Boyu 高伯雨 (ed.), Qianlong Cixi Fen Mu Bei Dao Ji Shi/Actual Records of the Robbing of the Tombs of Emperor Qianlong and Empress Dowager Cixi 乾隆慈禧
填墓被盜紀實 (Hong Kong: Da Hua Chu Ban She, 1975):
見石床下梓宮欹側而立，金色外椁劈毁，椁置于西北隅，上覆片板，啟視則慈禧玉體在焉。側臥其中, 左手搭于北上, 發未散。上衣附體之衣已去, 面與身發
酵，生白毛及寸，蓋盜掘日期始于五月十七，訖于五月廿四日。玉體暴露于梓宮外者四旬有餘，地宮潮
濕, 天然蒸熱, 以至成此狀況也。即傳婦差以黃緞, 置未毁朱棺于石床, 然後以黃緞褥緊束玉體, 緩緩移
轉正面。面色灰白，兩目深陷成黑洞，脣以下有破痕。

118 Zuoqiu Ming 左丘明, Guo Yu 國語 (Shanghai: Shang Wu Yin Shu Guan, 1937):
... 珠足以禦火災，則寶之。
commented on this sentence by saying that the reason for pearls to be used for guarding against conflagration was because they were the essence of water.\textsuperscript{119} Kophen罽賓 was said to have offered a pearl to Emperor Xuanzong of Tang, and this pearl, when prayed to, will banish flood and draught.\textsuperscript{120} There were, of course, other pearls that were believed to be able to shine according to various legends and that their light can protect their owners from harm; the legend of Black Water Pearl黑水珠 is one that was passed down by the Jurchen女真 people orally.

Black Water Pearl is a legend about the rumored national treasure of the Jurchen Jin dynasty金朝 (1115-1234): the black water pearl, which Wanyan Aguda完顏阿骨打 is said to have displayed in his palace. It is a love story behind the discovery of this magnificent pearl which reputedly had protective powers. Legend has it that a young lad named Da Wucheng大武成, who was the last descendent of the royal bloodline of Balhae渤海國, concealed his identity and joined the Liao遼 army led by the brother of the emperor of Liao after Liao conquered Balhae. There, he was assigned to guard the garden of the new royal consort, Lady Black Water, and they fell in love and decided that they would join Liao’s enemy, Wanyan Aguda’s, cause instead. Lady Black Water gave him the pearl that her father passed to her before he died, and told him that this pearl had been protecting her from being violated by the Liao emperor. She explained that whenever the Liao emperor wanted to get close to her, the pearl would shine and knock him dizzy with its light, and she hoped that the pearl would keep Da Wucheng safe. He then gave her the dagger that his father passed to him and told her to protect herself with it, and she helped him

\textsuperscript{119} Zuoqiu Ming左丘明, Guo Yu國語, Annotated by Wei Zhao韋昭注: 國聞國之寶六而己。...珠足以禦火災，則寶之。[註] 珠，水精，故以禦火災。
\textsuperscript{120} Fang Yizhi方以智, Tongya通雅: 卷四十八, 撰金石: 當賓天寶中獻上清珠，照一室，水旱禱之皆驗。
escape Liao after they exchanged gifts. Soon after he left, the brother of the emperor wanted to rape Lady Black water behind the emperor’s back; she stabbed him with the dagger that Da Wucheng gave her, and set fire to her own mansion and committed suicide. Da Wucheng always kept her pearl close to him when he followed Wanyan Aguda into dangerous battles, and soon he became a famous warrior, unfortunately he was shot in a battle. Before he died, he told Aguda the story of him and Lady Black Water and offered the pearl to him, and Aguda therefore made the pearl his national treasure once he defeated Liao.\(^\text{121}\)

This legend is said to have been passed on through oral tradition only; older written records of it have yet to be found, and all the characters that appear in the story, besides Wanyan Aguda and the Liao king, most probably never existed. The Liao emperor in history that lived during Aguda’s time, and even the emperor whom he succeeded, had no siblings at all, so the brother of the emperor that was said to have attempted rape did not exist. The black water pearl is said to have safeguarded the virginity of Lady Black Water, however it did not protect Wu Dacheng from the arrow that took his life. Nevertheless this did not stop the Jurchen people from esteeming pearls and believing that they have the ability to protect people from harm, and this is why such a legend was passed down through generations among the Manchurians.

Pearls were also believed to possess magical power because of their significance in Buddhism. Buddhism spread to China in early Chinese history, as early as Han times according to some records. In *Mouzi Lihuolun* 牟子理惑論 it is said that Emperor Ming of the Eastern Han 東漢明帝 (r.57-75) dreamt of an shining immortal flying into his palace, and upon consulting all his

officials the next day, a very learned man named Fu Yi 傅毅 told him it was Buddha, an enlightened being in Sindhu 天竺 [India]. The emperor thereupon sent thirteen\textsuperscript{122} envoys, including Zhang Qian 張騫\textsuperscript{123}, Qin Jing 秦景, and Wang Zun 王遵, to copy forty-two sections of sutras at Yuezhi 大月氏 (a tribe originally settled in the grassland area of the present Xinjiang 新疆 and Gansu 甘肅 who moved into the northern area of the Indian subcontinent later and founded the Kushan Empire), and these were later stored in the fourteenth room of the Stone Chamber of Lantai 蘭台石室. A temple was built in Luoyang 洛陽, the imperial capital then, and statues of Buddha were constructed. The emperor also built his mausoleum and decorated it with paintings of Buddha\textsuperscript{124}.

Whether or not Emperor Ming of Eastern Han was the first to introduce Buddhism to China is difficult to prove, yet the annal *Zizhi Tongjian* 資治通鑑 written by Sima Guang 司馬光 recorded that:

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\text{...the emperor heard that there is a god in the western region, whose name is ‘Buddha’, and therefore sent envoys to Sindhu to seek his teachings. He received Buddhist scriptures and sramanas. Buddhist teachings focus on nothingness, and promote compassion, mercy, and ahimsa (do no harm), and Buddhists believe that when men die, their soul lives on, and they will be reincarnated into a physical body again. For what they do, no matter good or bad, when they are alive they will receive karmic retribution,}
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\textsuperscript{122} Some versions of the same legend differ in the numbers of envoys sent on mission. Here the number of envoy sent is 13, while some others claim it is 12 or 18.
\textsuperscript{123} Some versions of the same legend did not mention Zhang Qian.
\textsuperscript{124} Mou Rong 牟融, *Mouzi Lihuolun* 牟子理惑論: 項漢明皇帝, 夢見神人, 身有日光, 飛在殿前, 欣然悅之。明日, 博問群臣, ‘此為何神? ’有通人傅毅曰: 臣聞天竺有得道者, 號之曰‘佛’, 飛行虛空, 身有日光, 殆將其神也。于是上悟, 遣使者張騫, 羽林郎中秦景, 博士弟子王遵等十三人, 于大月支寫佛經四十二章, 藏在蘭台石室第十四間。時于洛陽城西雍門外起佛寺, 于其壁畫千乘萬騎, 繞塔三匝。又于南宮清涼台及開陽城門上作佛像。明帝存時, 預修造壽陵, 陵日顯節, 亦于其上作佛圖像。
therefore, Buddhism encourages people to do spiritual practice until they become buddhas. Buddhists are good at using words of wisdom to enlighten and advise the ignorant, and sramanas are those who are well learned in the teachings of Buddhism. Thus Buddhism started to spread in China, and paintings were made according to Buddhist motifs. Among the royalties and nobles, the Prince of Chu, Liu Ying, was the first to favour it\textsuperscript{125}.

Therefore, even though we cannot be sure if Emperor Ming of Eastern Han was the first to introduce Buddhism into China, it is highly likely that he played an important role in the spread of Buddhism in China. And, in turn, this shows that Buddhism has reached ancient China at least two thousand years ago.

After the initial introduction and spread of Buddhism, China went through a long period of unrest: the Three Kingdoms Period 三國, Wei 魏, Jin 晋, and the Northern and Southern Dynasties 南北朝 marked the period with wars and conquests that lasted for more than three hundred years. This long period of unrest encouraged the spread of Buddhism even further, and therefore by the time Tang dynasty was established, it has already become a mainstream religion in China.\textsuperscript{126} The influence a mainstream religion that have lasted for so long has on a culture is naturally immeasurable, and the importance of Buddhist teachings in China is therefore prominent.

\textsuperscript{125} Sima Guang 司馬光, \textit{Zizhi Tongjian/Comprehensive Mirror in Aid of Governance 資治通鑑} (Beijing: Gu Ji Chu Ban She, 1956): 卷四十五, 漢紀三十七: 顯宗孝明皇帝永平八年： 初，帝聞西域有神，其名曰佛，因遣使之天竺求其道，得其書及沙門以来。其書大抵以虛無為宗，貴慈悲不殺；以為人死，精神不減，隨復受形；生時所行善惡，皆有報應，故所貴修練精神，以至為佛。善為宏闊勝大之言，以勸誘愚俗。精于其道者，號曰沙門。于是中國始傳其術，圖其形像，而王公貴人，獨楚王英最先好之。

Pearl is one of the seven treasures of Buddhism 佛教七寶. Different sutras varied on what should be considered the seven treasures, but the *Lotus Sutra* 法華經, well known for its incomparable influence in China and Japan\(^{127}\), insists that pearl is included in the seven treasures. In the eleventh chapter of the *Lotus Sutra*, it is said that:

...a tower adorned with the seven treasures emerges from the ground and hovers in the air in front of the Buddha; the tower is five hundred yojanas\(^{128}\) in height and two hundred and fifty yojanas in length and width. It is adorned with various jewels, had five thousand railings and hundreds of thousands shrines and rooms. It is beautifully decorated with countless flags and banners, and it has numerous jewelled keyuras\(^{129}\) and jewelled bells hanging from it. The fragrance of tamala leaves and sandalwood is released from all sides of this tower, covering the world. Its various banners and umbrellas were made of the seven treasures: gold, silver, lapis lazuli, tridacna stones, agate, pearls, and red jade\(^{130}\), and they are as high as the palaces of the four heavenly kings.\(^{131}\)

By being one of the seven precious treasures fit for building the jewelled tower paying homage

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128 由旬: A Sanskrit measure in height.
129 瓔珞: Indian decorations worn around the neck, usually adorned with jade.
130 玫瑰: sometimes translated as ruby, but red jade seems more convincing here.
131 Jiu Mo Luo Shi 鳩摩羅什 (trans.), *Lotus Sutra* 妙法蓮華經 (Taipei: The Corporate Body of the Buddha Educational Foundation), 336-337: 見寶塔品第十一：爾時，佛前有七寶塔，高五百由旬，縱廣二百五十由旬，從地涌出，住在空中，種種寶物而莊校之。五千欄楯，千欄千闇，無數幢幡以為嚴飾，垂寶瓔珞，寶玲萬億而懸其上。四面皆出多摩羅跋栴檀之香，充徧世界。其諸幡蓋以金，銀，琉璃，硨磲，瑪瑙，真珠，玫瑰七寶合成，高至四天王宮。
to buddhas, and with Buddhism being a religion that numerous ancient Chinese have practiced, pearls, recognized as one of the seven treasures of Buddhism, would have easily made the alleged magical power of pearls even more convincing in premodern China. As a result, the Chinese, desiring the power to protect themselves while they were alive and after they died, sought after pearls tirelessly and the significance of pearls grew accordingly.

4 Medical Significance of Pearls

Not only were pearls valuable because of their significance in history, culture, and religion, ancient Chinese also believed that they possess medicinal power, and therefore they were used in many traditional Chinese medical formulae. Even today, many Chinese still eat pearl powder for the medicinal qualities that they are believed to have. In other words, pearl is a precious gem that has a practical use in the daily life of the Chinese people other than being something for mere admiration.

Unlike Cleopatra of Egypt, who dissolved an enormous pearl and drank it in order to win her famous wager against Anthony according to Pliny the Elder\textsuperscript{132}, and the medieval European physicians who believed that only pearls of best quality according to their grading criteria should

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\textsuperscript{132} Pliny the Elder, \textit{Natural History} IX, Loeb Classical Library, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1938), 244: cap LVIII, lines 120-121: "... \textit{ex praecepto ministri unum tantum vas ante eam posuere aceti, cuius asperitas visque in tabem margaritas resolvit. Gerebat auribus cum maxime singulare illud et vere unicum naturae opus. Itaque expectante Antonio quidnam esset actura detractum alterum mersit ac liquefactum obsorbuit." – From her previous instruction, her servants placed in front of her a single vessel of vinegar, the harshness and strength of which can melt pearl away. She was wearing in her ears that especially remarkable and truly unique work of nature. And so, with Antonio anticipating, what she was going to do, she dropped one of her two earrings which she has taken off, and when the pearl has melted, she drank it.\end{flushright}
be used in medicine as suggested by Matthaeus Platearius, whose passage written on pearls were widely followed by European encyclopedists in the Middle Ages, the Qing scholar Qu Dajun said that the white, clear and round ones were categorized as top quality pearls and saved them for other uses, and only the ones that were deemed unworthy for making jewellery with were used for medical purposes. It is not a case without exception, since the rich who could afford better pearls might choose to incorporate more expensive pearls into their medicines. For example, according to Li Rong, Li Deyu, prime minister of the emperor Wuzong of Tang (r.840-846), lived an especially luxurious life, and every time he ate a soup it would cost a fortune because it was cooked from expensive ingredients such as precious seashells, pearls, and jade. In *Baopuzi*, Ge Hong (284-363) of Eastern Jin (317-420) said that pearls with a diameter over an inch are actually edible, he said that eating pearls as such would prolong one’s life. He also suggested that soaking these big pearls in buttermilk would melt them and turn them into mercury, and after adding pumice stone, beehive, and limonite to this mercury, the mixture can be pulled till it is three or four chi long. He said that men should make pellets out of this, abstain from eating and fast when they take these

133 Matthaeus Platearius, *Liber de simplici medicina* (The Bavarian State Library, 1512, digitized by Google Books in 2009); Session 10, De margarita “Margaritae alie sunt perforatae artificio; alie natura et illae quae meliores sunt ponuntur in medicinis cum margaritarum receptio simpliciter inventitur. Aliae autem perforatae et peiores quas apothecarii in medicinis ponunt. Quaedam tamen non perforare eqipollent margaritis perforatis. Sunt itaque eligendae aliae et clarae, quae obscura et quasi subalbida est, non est ponenda in medicinis. – Som pearls are drilled by craft, others are natural and these are the better ones which should be put in medicines when one tries to make a cure out of pearls. Others which are artificially pierced are worse in quality, the apothecarists put these in their medicines. However, there are certain pearls which are stronger than the pierced pearls. They are the round, white and clear ones. Those that are dark and rather pale in colour should not be put into medicines.

134 Qu Dajun, *Guangdong Xin Yu/A New Account of Canton* 廣東新語: 貨語: 珠身以圓白光瑩細無絲路者為精珠，半明半暗者為褪光珠，次肉珠，次糙珠藥珠。

135 Li Rong, *Du Yi Zhi* 獨異志: 卷下; 武宗朝宰相李德裕奢侈極，每食一杯羹費錢約三萬，雜寶貝珠玉雄黃朱砂煎汁為之。至三煎，即棄其滓於溝中。

136 Three chi in Eastern Jin is equivalent to 73.5 centimeters, and four chi is 98 centimeters.
pellets in order to earn immortality.\textsuperscript{137} Ge Hong’s work is of Daoist nature and is generally not considered to be in mainstream of traditional Chinese medicine.

As for the medical qualities of pearls, Li Shizhen 李時珍 (1518-1593) states that they are salty\textsuperscript{138}, sweet\textsuperscript{139}, cold, and not poisonous.\textsuperscript{140} His contemporary Li Zhongzi 李中梓 (1588-1655) wrote that he could not figure out the taste, but pearls are cold and not poisonous.\textsuperscript{141} Most physicians in Qing times agreed with them.

For pearls in both external and internal medical uses, all traditional Chinese herbalists and physicians insisted that pearls should be finely ground until they are completely powdered before use. It is easy to understand why pearls should be in powder form for external application because they would easily roll off the targeted area of application due to their shape, and they would, therefore, be more manageable for external application when powdered. For finely grinding pearls before internal intake, Li Xun 李珣 of the Five Dynasties Period 五代 (907-960) explained that it is because if it is not carefully powdered finely like flour, it will hurt the internal

\begin{enumerate}
\item Ge Hong 葛洪, \textit{Baopuzi 抱朴子内篇} (Shanghai: Zhong Hua Shu Ju Ping Jing Guan): 仙药: 又真珠徑一寸以上可服，服之可以長久，酪漿漬之皆化如水銀，亦可以浮石水蜂窠化，包彤蛇黃合之，可引長三四尺，丸服之，絕穀服之，則不死而長生也。
\item The five tastes of Chinese medicine are spiciness, sweetness, sourness, bitterness, and saltiness. Saltiness corresponds to the kidneys with water balance of human body, and is therefore associated with dissolving masses, removing moisture and phlegm, and softening hardness. (Subhuti Dharmananda “\textit{Taste and Action of Chinese Herbs: Traditional and Modern Viewpoints}”, Institute of Traditional Medicine http://www.itmonline.org/articles/taste_action/taste_action_herbs.htm)
\item Sweetness in Chinese medicine corresponds with the spleen, which regulates digestions and absorption of nutrients, it is associated with tonification, calming and reducing irritation, and generating fluid. (Subhuti Dharmananda)
\item Li Zhongzi 李中梓, \textit{Juan Bu Lei Gong Pao Zhi Yao Xing Jie 鍼補雷公炮制葯性解} (Shanghai: Gu Ji Chu Ban She, 2002): 卷六, 異類部: 珍珠 - 味無考，性寒無毒
\end{enumerate}
Lei Xiao of the Northern and Southern Dynasties period (420-589) has given detailed instruction on how pearls should be powdered for medical use. He said that for medical use, only clean and new pearls should be used. He instructed as follows:

...place the chosen pearls in a pouch made of tough silk; finely grind garden burnet, slenderstyle acanthopenax bark, and purslane, four liang each together. Then, place four to five jin of oysters into a flat frying pan, and support the pan firmly in all directions; put the pearls on top, and add the ground medical herbs; cover the pan, and cook in jiang shui for three whole days, do not let the fire go out. After three days have passed, take the pearls from the pan; wash them clean with broth of licorice root. Place them in a mortar and crush, filter through a thick silk gauze repeatedly; then grind twenty thousand times and it will be safe to use.

Li Shizhen of Ming times said that no pearls that have been used as jewellery or used for burial should ever be used in medicine. Pearls should be soaked in human breast milk for three days; after they are cooked, crush and grind them. He said that another way to treat pearls is to

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142 Lei Xiao 雷斅, *Hai Yao Ben Cao 海藥本草*, ed. Shang Zhijun 邵志鈞 (Beijing: Ren Min Wei Sheng Chuban She, 1997): 蟲魚部, 卷第五: 炮藥, 須久研如粉面, 方堪服餌。研之不細, 傷人臟腑。
143 Lei Xiao is from Liu Song (劉宋) and the measurement of weight has not been found and therefore an equivalent to our system has not been calculated here.
144 Lei Xiao 雷斅, *Lei Gong Pao Zhi Lun 雷公炮炙論* (Nanjing: Jiangsu Ke Xue Ji Shu Chuban She, 1985): 雷公云: 凡使, 須取新凈者, 以絹袋盛之; 然後用地榆, 五花皮, 五方草三味各四兩, 細銼, 了。又以牡蠣約重四五斤已來, 先置於平底鐺中, 以物四向支穩, 然後著真珠于上, 了。方下銼了三件葯, 籠之, 以漿水煮三日夜, 勿令火歇: 日滿出之, 用甘草湯淘之令凈後, 于臼中搗令細, 以絹羅重重篩過, 卻, 更研二十萬下了用。
place them in a silk pouch, insert that pouch into a piece of bean curd, and cook for a time long enough for a stick of incense to finish burning. This method of cooking pearls, Li said, was said to be able to not hurt the (medicinal properties of) pearls. Both Lei Xiao’s and Li Shizhen’s detailed description of the process of grinding pearls suggest that extreme care was taken to ensure the correct execution of each step of the procedure, and that it is not a procedure that ordinary people could do. It required professional medical knowledge to enhance the healing power of pearls in order for them to become suitable for medical use.

In terms of external application of pearls, Li Shizhen, the author of *Compendium of Materia Medica* 本草綱目, held that when applied to the eye, pearl powder can remove mild nebula and cataract; when applied to the face, it will nourish the skin and enhance the complexion; when applied to hands and feet, it can remove rough skin; and when stuffed into the ears, it will cure deafness. In Qing times, Chen Shiduo 陳士鐸 (1627-1707) commented that pearl powder was used in external application more than it was for oral consumption and was therefore stored for external uses. He agreed with Li Shizhen’s view on what pearls can do when applied externally, and added that pearls are the best substance for promoting skin regeneration, and is therefore a necessary medicine for treating malignant abscesses. He also warned against applying pearl powder to the affected area without making sure that the toxin inside has been cleansed out completely, he said that it may delay the closing of the wound.

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145 Li Shizhen 李時珍, *Ben Cao Gang Mu/Compendium of Materia Medica* 本草綱目: 介之二, 真珠: 凡入藥，不用首飾及見屍氣者。以人乳浸三日，煮過如上搗研。一法，以絹袋盛，入豆腐腹中，煮一炷香，云不傷珠也。  
146 Ibid: 介之二, 真珠: 點目，去膚翳障膜。塗面，令人潤澤好顏色。塗手足，去裏塞耳，主聾。  
147 Chen Shiduo 陳士鐸, *Ben Cao Xin Bian* 本草新編: 卷之五, 羽集: 真珠…潤顏色。點目去膜，塞耳治聾。...然內治絕少，存之以為外治之需。真珠，生肌最良，瘡毒中必用之葯。然內毒未淨，遽用真珠以生
(fl.1659) of the Qing provided us with a description on how to accurately apply pearl powder on desired wounds, he said that after collecting the pearls from water, finely grind them, and blow the powder onto the wounds, wait for the wound to dry out and peel off, it will be healed. He said that pearl powder would work wonderfully on burns when it is mixed with medicines for tissue regeneration. Yet, one should remember to protect the wounds treated with pearl powder from water, because that will make the wounds rot.\textsuperscript{148}

For internal use, Li Xun 李珣 of the Five Dynasties period suggested that pearls are antidiarrheal, and when pearl powder is mixed with common anemarrhena rhizome it can cure fever and diabetes.\textsuperscript{149} His view on pearls being antidiarrheal seems to contradict with later ones because later physicians categorized pearls as salty in taste, which was believed to promote the internal action of softening and removing. Indeed, later physicians seem reluctant to make the same suggestions, especially in Ming and Qing periods. Li Shizhen, in his most famous work \textit{Compendium of Materia Medica}, suggested that pearls be used for calming the heart, clearing phlegm, aiding childbirth in cases of obstructed labour, and the shedding of stillborn child and placenta.\textsuperscript{150} Li Zhongzi also suggested that pearls could calm the heart, quench thirst, remove phlegm, induce labour, and help the shedding of a stillborn child. He added that it could cure infantile pyretic palpitation and epilepsy.\textsuperscript{151} The idea of pearls being used in medicine for
infantile pyretic palpitation existed long before Li’s time; in Northern Song times, Kou Zhongshi寇宗奭 (fl.1111) has already mentioned that idea in his work.¹⁵² Hardly anything has been added to the list by Qing physicians, most of them followed the belief presented by the Ming physicians.

In short, Chinese have incorporated pearls into their medicine for thousands of years. Pearls which were of lower qualities than what was used in jewellery-making were used in medicines, although sometimes better and more expensive pearls, even rare and magnificent ones, were used if the patients could afford it. Pearls were used in Daoist medicines for life prolongation and immortality, and they were used both internally and externally in traditional Chinese medicine to cure various ailments. Pearls were therefore much more than just a luxurious gem to be worn for the ancient Chinese, they were believed to be able to also help restore and promote their health when needed.

珠: …鎮心…，止喝墮痰，…催生下死胎，又主小兒驚熱風癲。
¹⁵² Kou Zhongshi寇宗奭. Ben Cao Yan Yi 本草衍義, 卷十七: 真珠：小兒驚熱藥中多用。
Chapter 4
Conclusion

For over two thousand years, pearls have played a significant role in the lives of the premodern Chinese people, and it is still a gem very much treasured by people nowadays. Many scholars have written about it in the course of Chinese history, and from their work we can see that pearls were significant to the Chinese culture and precious to the Chinese people for various reasons.

The demand for pearls gradually grew over time; we can see that by observing how the ancient Chinese invented ways to satisfy their desire for pearls. They imported them from surrounding pearl-collecting tribes at very high prices when they could afford it, and they cultivated or made imitation pearls to more economically meet their demand when they could not afford the genuine pearls. China was indeed, like what Qu Dajun 屈大均 suggested in his *New Account of Canton* 廣東新語, a society where the rich were proud to have many pearls, and the poor were ashamed for having none.

Pearl-fishing has claimed many lives in ancient China; people risked their lives in order to find pearls in the water with no guaranteed success. In order to lower the death rate, the Chinese invented a device to aid them in collecting mussels from the bottom of the sea to avoid diving as much as possible, yet even with that technological breakthrough, the fishermen still drowned from time to time. These adventurous pearl-fishers were not always volunteers; some of them were forced into pearl-fishing by the government and they had no choice but to engage in this fatal task. They therefore developed a habit of praying and sacrificing to the sea gods in order to ensure their own safety while they were at work, because that actually was their last resort. The
risk these humble pearl-fishers took to gather pearls added to the value of genuine pearls since pearls were something that they had to risk their lives in order to obtain.

Pearls were so precious and valuable to the Chinese that they were considered gifts fit for kings and emperors; royalty, noblemen, and the rich were all willing to pay great prices for them. Their generosity did not directly enrich the pearl-fishers who risked their lives trying to collect pearls, but merchants and traders surely made great profits out of it. Possessing and wearing pearls gradually became a potent symbol of wealth and power in ancient China; and since pearls have played such an important role in Chinese culture, they also became a symbol of dearness in the Chinese language.

In addition to being an invaluable collectible and a gem used in making luxurious accessories, pearls were also believed to have many other more practical uses. Pearls were also believed to have magical power. They were used in burials because they were believed to have the power to preserve the dead body, they were believed to be able to guard the owner against harm, and also the ancient Chinese believed that some pearls would grant certain wishes when prayed to. And, according to the Lotus Sutra 法華經, pearls were also recognized as one of the seven treasures of Buddhism 佛教七寶. For the more scientifically-inclined, pearls were also used in medicines and were believed to have the power to restore and promote health.

Pearls, being a gem significant and useful in so many ways to the premodern Chinese, have therefore enjoyed admiration and reverence for thousands of years in China. Through this brief foray into the vast store of history, legends, records, and medical classics that have mentioned
pearls, I hope to have uncovered some explanations for general beliefs, customs, and practices surrounding pearls that have always been taken for granted as received knowledge. Only through a careful examination and contextualization of significant objects and ideas can we hope to further develop our understanding and appreciation of premodern Chinese culture.
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