

Overview of the Mother-of-Pearl Inlay Lacquerwares from the Qing Dynasty Imperial Household in China

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Received: 23 April 2025 | Accepted: 25 May 2025 | Published: 30 June 2025

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55057/ajress.2025.7.5.38>

Abstract: *This study offers a comprehensive analysis of Qing Dynasty mother-of-pearl inlay lacquerware, focusing on imperial household artefacts. Using a three-phase qualitative approach—planning, document analysis, and thematic synthesis—it investigates inlay evolution, material selection, and symbolism. Sources include museum catalogues, scholarly works, and Qing archives, particularly from the Palace Museums. Findings reveal a range of inlay forms (flat, embedded, carved, stacked, wire, coloured), each with specialised shell preparation methods. Techniques like sand inlay and Baibaoqian reflect imperial aesthetics and technical mastery. The research systematises each production stage and provides a foundation for conservation and reinterpretation of this craft.*

Keywords: Mother-of-Pearl, Inlay Lacquerware, Qing Dynasty, Imperial Household

1. Introduction

Mother-of-pearl inlaid lacquerware, originating in the Western Zhou period, became a prized imperial art during the Qing Dynasty, peaking under Emperor Kangxi (Xing, 2014). His admiration elevated the craft within royal collections. Building on Ming foundations, Qing imperial factories further refined and systematised its production.

Historically, the Qing dynasty is divided into early, middle, and late periods, with the “Kang-Qian Golden Age” (Kangxi, Yongzheng, Qianlong) marking peak national strength (Figure 1). During this era, mother-of-pearl inlay craftsmanship was refined across generations. Watt and Ford (1991) noted that inlay techniques reached their zenith under strong imperial support. As Clunas (1991) observed, inlay became a symbol of social status tied to material culture. The imperial court encouraged innovations, resulting in highly intricate and artistic works.

Furthermore, the high esteem for Qing dynasty mother-of-pearl inlaid lacquerware stemmed not only from material precision and craftsmanship, but from the refined fusion of design and technique (Hearn, 2005). Artisans embedded ultra-thin, polished shell fragments into lacquered surfaces following drawn patterns. To create depth and shifting light, they often combined methods such as flat, thick, painted, and relief inlay (Park, 2010), each requiring strict control over shell thickness, cut precision, and insertion angle.

Consequently, the designs displayed exceptional complexity and artistry, featuring motifs like “phoenix with peony,” “dragon chasing a pearl,” landscapes, flora, fauna, and narrative scenes. Each required great skill and patience to execute on limited lacquer surfaces. The resulting

works, with shimmering iridescence, exemplified the refined opulence of the imperial court (Clunas, 1997).

| Qing Dynasty | | (r. 1644–1911) |
|--|--|----------------|
| Shizu [reign title: Shunzhi] | | r. 1644–1661 |
| Shengzu [reign title: Kangxi] (1979.5) | | r. 1662–1722 |
| Shizong [reign title: Yungzheng] | | r. 1723–1735 |
| Gaozong [reign title: Qianlong] (1988.350) | | r. 1736–1795 |
| Renzong [reign title: Jiaqing] | | r. 1796–1820 |
| Xuanzong [reign title: Daoguang] | | r. 1821–1850 |
| Wenzong [reign title: Xianfeng] | | r. 1851–1861 |
| Muzong [reign title: Dongzhi] | | r. 1862–1874 |
| Tezong [reign title: Guangxu] | | r. 1875–1908 |
| (Pui [reign title: Xuantong]) | | r. 1909–1911 |

Figure 1: Qing Dynasty Emperors' Reign Periods

In addition, inlay techniques advanced notably during the centralised reigns of Kangxi, Yongzheng, and Qianlong.

As Qing imperial power consolidated, the court offered strong support for lacquerware via centralised organisation, resources, and technology—most notably through institutions like the Zaoban Chu (Imperial Workshops).

On one hand, the dismantling of traditional artisan constraints enabled skilled civilians to enter imperial workshops, where stable conditions and collaboration with masters fostered innovation and raised technical standards.

On the other hand, the demand for ornate ritual and domestic items drove strict aesthetic and quality standards in mother-of-pearl inlay. A centralised system with palace artisans and clear division of labour elevated the craft's complexity, scale, and refinement, establishing it as a symbol of imperial authority and cultural sophistication.

Subsequently, the abolition of the artisan caste system during the Shunzhi period enabled craftsmen to develop their skills more freely, unlike in the Tang and Song periods when identity-based restrictions prevailed (Xing, 2014).

However, as national strength declined in the late Qing, mother-of-pearl inlay lost its brilliance (Rawski, 1998), though imperial demand for luxury lacquerware persisted.

2. Literature Review

Qing dynasty mother-of-pearl inlaid lacquerware household items included boxes, daily utensils, and scholar's desk tools (Figures 2). Boxes ranged from jewellery and makeup containers to *Four Treasures of the Study* sets, elevated by inlaid decoration to reflect wealth and taste. Scholar's items, adorned with intricate designs, expressed literati refinement, while bowls, trays, and tea sets combined utility with artistic flair. These lacquerwares symbolised status at the time and remain admired for their unique craftsmanship and aesthetic value.



Figure 2: Round Box with Inlaid Mother-of-Pearl and the 'Seashells in a Sea House' Motif, made of Sandalwood from the Qing Dynasty



Figure 3: Pen Holder with Inlaid Mother-of-Pearl and 'Xi Zhi Loves Geese' Motif, made of Sandalwood from the Qing Dynasty

Baibaoqian (Hundred-Treasure Inlay) also called the *Zhou System*, uses materials such as pearls, jade, coral, and agate for inlay on lacquer or wooden surfaces. The technique was developed during the Ming Jiajing period by Yangzhou artisan Zhou Zhu, who crafted intricate patterns of landscapes, figures, and flora. Initially controlled by the corrupt official Yan Song, *Baibaoqian* was reserved for the elite. After Yan's fall, it gradually spread to the public (Figure 3).

By the Qianlong period, artisans such as Wang Guochen, Lu Yingzhi, and Lu Kuisheng brought *Baibaoqian* to its peak. Beyond Yangzhou, the Qing Imperial Workshop in Beijing and craftsmen in Guangzhou also excelled in producing these ornate works. The technique involves selectively inlaying various processed precious materials—such as gemstones, ivory, coral, and jade—onto a single object to enhance thematic expression. Originating in the Ming Dynasty and evolving from mother-of-pearl inlay, *Baibaoqian* creates vibrant, light-reactive patterns and is primarily found in classical furniture and fine crafts (Figure 4).



Figure 4: Rectangular Box with Baibaoqian Inlay and 'Shepherding' Motif, made of Zitan Wood from the Early Qing Dynasty



Figure 5: Chamfered Square Box with Baibaoqian Inlay and 'Three Auspicious Suns' Motif, made of Hardwood from the Jiaqing Period of the Qing Dynasty

The rosewood box features a chamfered square shape with a raised edge at the lid-body junction and a chamfered foot at the base (Figure 5). Its lid follows the “round heaven, square earth” layout, with a silver wire meander-pattern border. At the centre, an oval green jade relief depicts the *Three Rams Herald Prosperity*, showing a large ram kneeling and turning its head beneath a radiant sun.

Moreover, on either side of the box are two smaller rams—one lying, one walking—flanked by an evergreen and a longevity chrysanthemum. Surrounding the jade are nine red-lacquered bats and mother-of-pearl inlaid clouds. The borders feature *Lingzhi*, lotus motifs, and dragons amid flowers, crafted from stained ivory, red lacquer, and mother-of-pearl.



Figure 6: Butterfly-Shaped Box with Baibaoqian Inlay and 'Eight Immortals' Motif, made of Zitan Wood from the Mid-Qing Dynasty

The *Baibaoqian* octagonal box depicting the Eight Immortals features premium inlay materials: pine leaves in stained ivory, sacred stones in Shoushan stone and lapis lazuli, mother-of-pearl clouds, agate garments, and trees set with rubies, sapphires, and fluorite. These vivid inlays contrast elegantly with the deep purple sandalwood base (Figure 6).



Figure 7: Redwood Incense Box with Inlaid Mother-of-Pearl and 'Endless Prosperity' Motif from the Mid-Qing Dynasty

A rosewood incense box (15.7 × 8.7 × 10 cm) is fully inlaid with mother-of-pearl floral patterns and topped with a jade beast-shaped knob (Figure 7). Vines and butterflies on its sides symbolise “endless prosperity and descendants.” According to Zhou (2012), the legs feature Kui dragon motifs popular in the mid-Qing dynasty. The raised mother-of-pearl relief and precise cutting reflect superb craftsmanship from this period. After the Mid-Qing period,

production of mother-of-pearl inlay and *Baibaoqian* declined. Thin inlay techniques nearly vanished, while thick inlays became cruder. Some *Baibaoqian* works reduced quality, replacing carved inlay with surface adhesion. Since the 21st century, however, these crafts have revived. Zhu (n.d.) suggests that rising living standards and aesthetic tastes may bring renewed vitality and artistic brilliance to these traditions. The most concentrated collection of Qing dynasty thin mother-of-pearl lacquerware is held by the Palace Museum. Other major holdings are found in the Shanghai Museum, Taipei Palace Museum, Nanjing Museum, and Lushun Museum, with significant examples also preserved in overseas institutions.



Figure 8: High-Stemmed Cup with Inlaid Mother-of-Pearl and 'Phoenix Playing with Peony' Motif, housed in the Nanjing Museum from the Qing Dynasty

A Flourishing Spring of Eternal Prosperity: Floral, Avian, and Auspicious Beasts in Dot-Inlay Lacquerware. Floral and bird motifs, drawn from nature and imbued with auspicious meaning, are key in traditional decoration. The *Qing Dynasty Dot-Inlay High-Stemmed Cup with Phoenix and Peony* (Nanjing Museum, Figure 8) features a phoenix and peony—symbols of royalty and wealth. The piece uses red, purple, and emerald tones: the phoenix's crown and wings are emerald, its tail purple and red, and the peony crafted from pink luminescent shell. The composition evokes "phoenix playing with peony," expressing blooming prosperity.

The Palace Museum holds a Qianli-Style black lacquer box inlaid with thin mother-of-pearl dragons amid clouds. The lid bears an inscription in clerical script: "As refined as gold, as precious as jade... When they meet, it is like the matching of bamboo tally tokens," signed "Xibai." The box is stamped with the seals "Changchun Hall" and "Xingben," and inside the lid is the mark "In the Style of Jiang Qianli."

The term "style" denotes imitation rather than forgery—an effort to emulate Jiang Qianli's lacquerware techniques and craftsmanship spirit (Chang, 2012).



Figure 9: Various Base Marks of Dot-Inlay Lacquerware from the Ming and Qing Dynasties

Besides Jiang Qianli, other names found on dot-inlay lacquerware include "Xin'an Zhi," "Wu Yuezheng Zhi," "Xianzai," "Juye Tang," and "Xiuyong Tang" (Figure 9). Notable examples are: Wu Yuezheng's horn bowl in the Tokyo National Museum, Xin'an Zhi's lacquer plate in the Nanjing Museum, Xianzai's teacup stand in the National Museum of Denmark, and Juye Tang's plum blossom plate. Though their origins are unclear, these marks reflect a rising awareness of brand identity. Traditional seal-script inscriptions were used to enhance

uniqueness, competitiveness, and recognition—shaping dot-inlay lacquerware development in the Ming and Qing dynasties (Liang, n.d.).



Figure 10: Dot-Inlay Domu Teapot from the Qing Dynasty

With political shifts in the Qing dynasty, dot-inlay lacquerware began to reflect foreign influences. The *Dot-Inlay Tibetan-Style Domu Teapot* (Qing dynasty, National Museum of Denmark, Figure 10) exemplifies this, standing 45 cm tall and 13 cm in diameter, lacking a handle but fitted with copper loops, chain, and a melon-shaped copper ball for portability. Despite its Tibetan form, the inlay decoration remains traditional, featuring landscapes and a double dragon motif (Huang, 2011).

Jiang Qianli pursued perfection and fostered a strong brand identity. His lacquerwares often bore a small inlaid “Qianli” seal at the base, distinguishing his work and earning admiration among scholars (Figure 11). His brand had notable social and economic influence (He, 2013), though few original pieces survive today, with many Ming and Qing imitations.



Figure 11: Black Lacquer Box with Inlaid Mother-of-Pearl and Poetic Motif, 'Qianli' Mark, housed in the Princeton University Art Museum

In conclusion, Qing imperial mother-of-pearl inlay reflected royal opulence and cultural heritage, and its revival continues through ongoing preservation efforts.

3. Method

This review uses a qualitative, document-based method to study Qing imperial mother-of-pearl inlay lacquerware through three phases: planning, sourcing and analysis, and reporting. The planning phase defined the research scope and key questions on techniques, materials, symbolism, and stylistic evolution. In the second phase, primary and secondary sources—including museum catalogues, scholarly works, and Qing archives—were examined, focusing on technical details, material origins, and court symbolism. Comparative analysis traced historical shifts in practice. In the final phase, findings were thematically structured and

supported by visual analysis, offering art-historical insight for conservation and reinterpretation.

4. Result

The Qing Dynasty mother-of-pearl inlay lacquerware is a traditional craft blending artistic aesthetics, refined skill, and material knowledge. Its essence lies in the artisan's mastery, making each piece a unique artwork. Favoured by royalty as a symbol of power and wealth, these labour-intensive creations are celebrated as treasures of traditional Chinese art and the pinnacle of ancient craftsmanship.

Paludan (1991) observed that skilled artisans mastered material selection, design, and inlay techniques, creating vivid effects through precise mother-of-pearl assembly. Leidy (2006) emphasised the visual impact of shell–lacquer contrast in highlighting inlay craftsmanship.

4.1 Mother-of-Pearl Processing Techniques

The production process includes material selection, cutting and polishing, base colour treatment, pattern design and inlay, gap filling, and repeated polishing. For details, see the flowchart in table 1.

Table 1: Mother-of-Pearl Processing Techniques Chart (Tabular Format)

| Step | Process | Significance Characteristics |
|---------------------------------------|---|--|
| 1. Material Selection and Preparation | Select high-quality shells (e.g. black, white, green, mother-of-pearl); remove outer layer to expose lustrous interior. | Ensures optimal colour, texture, and consistency for later stages. |
| 2. Cutting and Polishing | Shape shells to design specifications; polish for uniform thickness and smooth edges. | Precision cutting aids adhesion and enhances visual harmony. |
| 3. Base Colour Treatment | Apply and polish base lacquer layer. | Influences aesthetic tone and provides a clean surface for inlay. |
| 4. Design and Inlay | Outline patterns, place and adhere shell pieces accordingly. | Accurate positioning ensures structural cohesion and design clarity. |
| 5. Filling and Detailing | Fill gaps; apply protective clear lacquer layers. | Enhances durability and luminous depth. |
| 6. Polishing and Buffing | Buff lacquer surface to achieve a mirror finish. | Reveals brilliance, colour consistency, and overall visual refinement. |

By the table shows the sequential manufacturing steps for mother-of-pearl inlay lacquerware, highlighting the key actions and considerations at each stage.

4.2 Shells Selection

The mother-of-pearl is primarily sourced from seashells in the South China Sea and Southeast Asia, valued for their distinct colours and textures. Selection is based on colour, texture, and lustre to match the intended design, reflecting both the artisan's aesthetic judgement and deep appreciation of natural shell beauty.

4.2.1 River Mussels (Freshwater Shells)

River mussels are primarily harvested from freshwater environments such as rivers and lakes (Figure 12).

- a. Appearance & Colour: Their nacre (inner pearly layer) often exhibits milder iridescent hues, leaning toward soft whites, pale pinks, or subtle gray.
- b. Texture & Thickness: Freshwater shells can be slightly thinner and more delicate; hence they require extra care during the cutting and polishing stages.
- c. Common Uses: Due to their fine texture and gentle lustre, river mussel shells are often used for smaller, more detailed inlays where subtle colour transitions are desired.



Figure 12: An example of a typical river mussel shell after partial cleaning, highlighting its softer colour gradient

4.2.2 Seashells (Saltwater Shells)

Seashells are typically sourced from coastal waters, such as those in the South China Sea and other parts of Southeast Asia (Figure 13).

- a. Appearance & Colour: Saltwater shells often display more pronounced iridescence with vibrant colours (e.g., greens, purples, and blues) that can shift under different lighting angles.
- b. Texture & Thickness: Seashells are sometimes thicker and more robust, allowing for a wider variety of inlay techniques (e.g., thicker relief inlays).
- c. Common Uses: Their vivid coloration suits ornamental pieces or areas requiring eye-catching highlights, enhancing the visual impact of the lacquerware.



Figure 13: A seashell specimen prior to cutting showcasing the multicolour sheen characteristic of saltwater nacre

4.3 Shell Cutting and Polishing

The processing mother-of-pearl is complex and time-consuming. Artisans begin by cleaning and smoothing the shells, then cut and carve them into the desired forms (Figure 14).



Figure 14: Cleaning of raw seashells to remove outer lime and impurities

In ancient times, mother-of-pearl was processed mainly through sawing and grinding. Once the river mussels or seashells were cleaned and dried, they were cut into segments for easier handling and design planning (Figure 15).



Figure 15: Shells segmented into workable sections before thinning and carving.

The outer lime layer was carefully shaved along the shell's natural curve, requiring significant experience and skill to navigate its uneven surface. Grinding continued until the shell reached around 1 mm, exposing the vibrant nacreous layer (Figure 16).

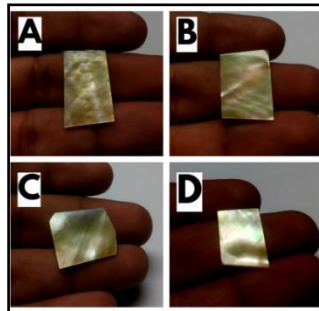


Figure 16: Polished mother-of-pearl slice prepared for inlay.

Full concentration was essential during the cutting and shaping phase, as each shell fragment had to perfectly align with intricate lacquerware designs (Figure 17).



Figure 17: Artisan cutting mother-of-pearl into detailed floral shapes for inlay

Sawn and ground shell slices, being large and thick, suited broader pattern compositions. Engraving was often added to enrich surface detail. Though elegant in result, the process was labour-intensive and demanded great patience. Without modern tools, producing a single thick shell piece required exceptional skill and endurance. On many imperial household objects, one can find both simple geometric shapes and highly detailed motifs of birds, flowers, or narrative scenes—all realized through this meticulous process (Figure 18).



Figure 18: Example of carved mother-of-pearl design applied to Qing dynasty lacquerware.

Besides sawing and grinding, historical sources mention the boiling method for processing thin mother-of-pearl. Ryukyu Kingdom records, brought to China by Oomiya Takeout and refined around 1690, describe using steam and controlled boiling to efficiently strip outer shell layers (*Ryukyu Historical Records*, 18th century; Asato, S. 1993). The core procedure involves repeated steaming and hammering, which naturally flakes the lime layer. This results in thinner, more pliable nacreous slices (Figure 19).



Figure 19: Thin nacreous layers formed after boiling and flaking of outer shell.

A blade is then used to extract pieces along the shells' grain, followed by polishing with whetstone to create smooth "thin mother-of-pearl" (Figure 20).



Figure 20: Thin, translucent mother-of-pearl pieces, ideal for intricate inlay

Due to their flexibility and iridescent colour, these thin slices are particularly suitable for delicate or small motifs. The surface can also be polished to varying degrees, allowing artisans to control the tonal range and depth of light reflection, especially useful in designs requiring fine shading and precision.

4.4 Inlaying Techniques

Mother-of-pearl inlay involves embedding shells or nacre onto lacquerware through precise, multi-stage processes. After applying and polishing multiple lacquer layers to achieve a glossy finish, fine shell pieces are inlaid and secured with adhesive, then sealed with clear lacquer to enhance durability and lustre. Inlay techniques fall into six distinct categories, each tailored to specific shell types and design applications.

- a. Flat Inlay Technique: This basic inlay technique cuts shells or nacre into small, flat pieces to form patterns on the lacquerware surface. The mother-of-pearl must be thin and even to ensure a smooth, flush finish without protrusions (Figure 21).



Figure 21: Flat Inlay Technique

- b. Disordered Inlay Technique: The disordered inlay technique is complex, embedding differently coloured or material mother-of-pearl in a staggered yet harmonious arrangement. It enables intricate, varied patterns and demands precise planning and exceptional craftsmanship (Figure 22).



Figure 22: Disordered Inlay Technique

- c. Carving Technique: The carving technique involves five key steps: *carving*, *cutting*, *assembling*, *levelling*, and *embedding*. "Carving" shapes shell components; "cutting" uses steel wire to follow blueprints; "assembling" bonds and adjusts parts; "levelling" prepares the inlay surface; and "embedding" places the components. This method is common in decorative screens, often combining mother-of-pearl with other inlay materials (Figure 23).



Figure 23: Carving Technique

- d. Embedded Inlay Technique: This technique carves grooves into the lacquerware surface to embed mother-of-pearl, producing sharper and more secure patterns than flat inlay. Originating in the Yuan Dynasty, embedded inlay differs from flat inlay in that it involves inserting mother-of-pearl into carved recesses, whereas flat inlay affixes thin pieces to the surface before lacquering it smooth. In the embedded method, polished shell pieces—chosen for brightness—are shaped to the design, with etched lines if needed. Grooves are carved into the wood, and lacquer is used to embed the shells. The surface is then sanded and coated with multiple lacquer layers to complete the piece (Figure 24).



Figure 24: Embedded Inlay Technique

- e. **Stacked Inlay Technique:** This technique involves layering multiple pieces of mother-of-pearl to create raised decorative effects. It can be used to craft three-dimensional patterns such as flowers, animals, and other designs, enhancing the piece's depth and visual impact (Figures 25-26).



Figure 25: Stacked Inlay Technique Figure 26: The Part of Stacked Inlay Technique

- f. **Wire Inlay Technique:** This technique employs metal wires or fine materials to divide mother-of-pearl segments, forming intricate, detailed patterns. It enhances both the decorative complexity and the three-dimensional depth (Figure 27).



Figure 27: Wire Inlay Technique

5. Conclusion

This study explored Qing Dynasty mother-of-pearl lacquerwares, focusing on imperial household works. Using a qualitative framework—historical review, visual and material analysis, and technical comparison—it traced the art form's full procedural and stylistic evolution.

Findings show Qing imperial lacquerware achieved exceptional refinement through diverse inlay techniques—flat, embedded, carved, stacked, wire, and coloured. Each required precise shell preparation, carving, and polishing. Shell types, from freshwater mussels to saltwater abalone, were selected for aesthetic and technical reasons. Documented methods include shell boiling, relief carving, and sand inlay, all enhancing the work's dimensional brilliance.

Beyond technique, this paper addressed the symbolic value of motifs—dragons, phoenixes, peonies, children-at-play, and literary scenes—each embodying imperial, auspicious, or scholarly themes. The craftsmanship reflected both aesthetic ideals and Qing court ideology. Though the craft declined in late Qing, modern revival efforts reflect renewed appreciation for its heritage value. By reconstructing its material and design stages, this study provides a foundation for future research in conservation, design education, and traditional art reinterpretation.

Acknowledgement

The authors would like to thank Universiti Teknologi MARA for providing the supports for this study.

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