

With the COVID-19 virus, we have a disease with no known cure, and I feel much like how people must have felt during the emperor's reign ... a talisman would be sought after for protection if you had no other possibilities of a cure for ailments.

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The Forbidden City in Beijing, China is filled with magnificent treasures made of gold, jade, rare woods, fine silk and other valuable and exquisite materials. A big surprise for me was discovering some of these old and historic treasures included fruiting bodies of fungi, especially *Ganoderma* or commonly referred to in China as *lingzhi* (靈芝).

The Forbidden City is a massive complex on 180 acres with over 90 palaces and courtyards and 980 buildings. The Qianlong emperor, who reigned from 1735 to 1796, built a garden complex of 27 buildings and beautiful courtyards in the northwest corner of the Forbidden City that was to serve as his retirement retreat. This was somewhat of a secret garden complex filled with treasures from around the

► Figure 1. A painting by court artist Giuseppe Castiglione in 1734 entitled "Qianlong collecting *lingzhi*" showing the young emperor on an expedition collecting *Ganoderma*. From the collection of the Palace Museum, Beijing, China.

Imperial Fungal Treasures of the Qianlong Emperor





Figure 2. Two paintings of Luohans or disciples of Buddha holding *Ganoderma*. These images were painted by Shodo-sho in 1851 and are depictions of the Luohans first made by Guan Xiu in 894. The Qianlong Emperor greatly admired the paintings of the 16 original Luohans which were kept at the Shengyin Monastery. The originals were destroyed in 1850 and these were repainted in 1851. William T. Henry Walters Collection, Walters Art Museum, Baltimore.

world that most people were forbidden to see. Since the 1700s, very few people have been in this restricted area of the Forbidden City or seen the treasures that are inside. When the last emperor left the Forbidden City in 1924, the buildings in the Qianlong Garden were closed and they have never been opened to the public. Currently, the buildings with their majestic interiors are being restored so that the world can have the

opportunity to see the extraordinary palace of the Qianlong emperor. For a view of what the interiors of a few buildings look like after conservation, see the World Monuments Fund website for the Qianlong Garden Project. This important restoration work continues and as you would expect for wooden buildings that are 230 years old, there is wood decay and other age-related issues that need attention. I had the

opportunity to work at the Forbidden City when the World Monuments Fund undertook a comprehensive conservation and training project with the Palace Museum of China to restore the Qianlong Garden complex. It was during my visits that I became aware of the little-known fungal treasures in the emperor's Forbidden City.

An early painting completed in 1734 entitled "Qianlong collecting *lingzhi*"



Figure 3. Naturally grown *Ganoderma* with long stipes (top) would be sought after and cherished for their symbolism of immortality. For many centuries scepters or ruyi would be carved to mimic *Ganoderma* with long stipes (lower three in photo). They were often given to the emperors as gifts and the Palace Museum has several thousand of them in different forms and made out of many rare woods, bamboo and other materials. These carved *Ganoderma* ruyi are thought to bring long life, good health and good luck.

shows that the emperor's enjoyment for collecting fungi began at an early age (Figure 1). The painting by Jesuit and court artist, Giuseppe Castiglione, was completed when Qianlong was an adolescent and before he became emperor. It shows two views of the same person at different ages; the young Qianlong when he was a boy and when he was a teenager. The collecting

basket the boy carries does not contain mushrooms but instead is filled with lotus flowers. The older Qianlong is holding a symbolic wooden scepter carved in the shape of a *lingzhi* with a long stipe. Many old paintings of royalty, sages and other important religious figures are shown holding a *Ganoderma* scepter or *ruyi* which is a powerful symbol (Figure 2). *Lingzhi* is well known

in Asia for its use in traditional medicine and although it can be argued when the first evidence of using *Ganoderma* for medicinal purposes was documented, we do know that this fungus was used medicinally for a very long time. Today, as in the time of the Qian Dynasty, it is commonly referred to as the fungus of immortality. In addition to the possible benefits that it provides to



Figure 4. One of the earliest depictions of a *Ganoderma* scepter or ruyi is in a scroll entitled "The Thirteen Emperors" painted in the 7th Century by Yan Liben. This section of the scroll shows Emperor Xuan of Chen wearing a dark robe and holding a *Ganoderma* scepter. Denman Waldo Ross Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

protect against disease when used in traditional medicine, it is also considered to be a symbol of long life, good health, good luck and prosperity. If a glossy *Ganoderma* with a normal size stipe conjures up a representation of these attributes, one can only assume that *Ganoderma* with exceptionally long stipes are used for even more powerful imagery. Finding *Ganoderma* with very long stipes in nature is possible but they are rare. As alternative to these scarce naturally-grown *Ganoderma*, carvings of *Ganoderma* with a long stipe were made from wood and bamboo (Figure 3). They were held as scepters or displayed as a talisman that relayed the symbolic message of providing protection, the very best of health, an abundance of good fortune and an extended life with even the possibility of immortality. One of the earliest

examples of a *Ganoderma* scepter can be seen in a 7th century scroll painting of Emperor Xuan of Chen (Figure 4). These scepters were important objects in Chinese culture for hundreds of years as evidenced by several thousand of them in the Forbidden City (Palace Museum in Beijing) historic collections made of wood, ivory, jade and other materials that were gifts to the emperors over the ages. Today *ruyi* carved with *Ganoderma* continue to be treasured decorative items with a high value that are sought after for bringing good luck and prosperity to their owners (Figure 3).

There are so many phenomenal treasures in the Forbidden City that are made from the finest materials with superb craftsmanship, but I was most surprised and intrigued by the imperial fungi that I encountered. There are three extraordinary zitan (red sandalwood)

cabinets each holding a large *Ganoderma* fruiting body for display (Figure 5). The cabinets, often called screens, have beautiful workmanship and were designed to be placed on tables so the *Ganoderma* would be prominently displayed. A poem written by the Qianlong emperor is painted on the back of each cabinet. They are sturdy wooden cabinets made specifically to hold these fruiting bodies. One has stylistic *Ganoderma* designs carved into the wood along the bottom. The center is unornamented sandalwood panels holding the *Ganoderma* with the fungus mounted at the center on top of the wood. A second cabinet is different and in addition to a sandalwood frame it has a colorful cloisonné type of decorative work with enamel on metal that holds the *Ganoderma* onto the cabinet. The fruiting body on this cabinet has slipped



slightly from its mount and is in need of some restoration work to move it back into its proper place. Another cabinet is also carved with *Ganoderma* features along the base but the fruiting body is held by many cloud shaped zitan carvings that hold it in place. It is not known if the Qianlong emperor collected some of these *Ganoderma* while on his fungal expeditions, but we do know he greatly admired them and were considered among his most valued possessions. This is evident from another

Figure 5. The Qianlong Emperor's imperial fungi. Large *Ganoderma* were mounted on zitan cabinets for display in the palace. These cabinets or screens were designed to be placed on tables. The top left photo shows a *Ganoderma* mounted on a plain wooden front with stylistic images of *Ganoderma* carved along the bottom. The top right cabinet has a fruiting body held and surrounded by colorful cloisonné decorative work. The bottom left and enlarged in the bottom right photo shows another large *Ganoderma* held by many carved cloud-shaped patterns. This cabinet also has the stylistic *Ganoderma* carved along the bottom frame. Each cabinet has a poem written by the emperor on the back. The top left cabinet's poem is dated 1774. Photos courtesy of The Palace Museum, Beijing.

unmounted *Ganoderma* that belonged to the emperor (Figure 6). This fruiting body had a poem written by the emperor on the bottom surface in gold paint. It is dated 1774 and was translated in Fang Jing Pei's *Treasures of the Chinese Scholar: Form, Function and Symbolism* published in 1997. A part of the poem is:

*Leaving its homeland,
it bade farewell to mountains
and rivers,
to become a screen upon
the desktop.
Like the clear moon
it is difficult to paint or describe,
natural and untouched
by human design.
Its appearance is as rare
as purple sandalwood
or white jade.
Descriptions of its quality
may require many words.
Its age in years is as numerous
as harvest grains,
as impossible to count as clouds
over the countryside.
It is as precious as the time
of Emperor Yao.*

This unmounted *Ganoderma* may have been in a cabinet or could have been displayed on top of a wooden base similar to a scholar's rock. These are rocks with unique shape and color, mounted on a wooden base, and set out to

contemplate their fine detail and beautiful characteristics. There are several examples of very old *Ganoderma* that were used in this way (Figure 7). Often the wooden base holding the *Ganoderma* is carved with images of *Ganoderma*



Figure 6. (above) An unmounted *Ganoderma* with a poem composed by the Qianlong Emperor and painted with gold paint on the pore surface by scholar and calligrapher Ruan Yuan. The poem is titled "Eight rhymes on lingzhi screen by his honorable majesty". (below) This *Ganoderma* may have been in a cabinet or just placed on a wooden base for display. Photographs courtesy of Southeby's New York.





as well. These mounts display the *Ganoderma*'s decorative features and unusual growth forms and can be admired as a piece of natural art. Fruiting bodies with unique and interesting shapes were not only selected for their beautiful art form but they also carried all the symbolic representations of the *lingzhi* bestowing good luck, long life and good fortune on the owner and those who view it.

As you can see in the figures, the historic fungi referred to as *lingzhi* had a broad species concept and both the glossy *Ganoderma* (*Ganoderma lucidum* complex) and *Ganoderma applanatum* types could be considered *lingzhi*. Keep in mind that during the reign of the Qianlong emperor, binomial nomenclature was just beginning and the genus name for fungi was often just called "*Fungus*." Differences in fruiting body characteristics were certainly noted and the stipitate laccate *Ganoderma* appeared to be used most often. However, when it came to symbolic uses by the Qianlong emperor both appeared to be acceptable. In 1781, the name *Boletus*



Figure 7. Examples of *Ganoderma* with unusual shapes and interesting features that were mounted on a wooden base and displayed. Some of the wooden bases were finely carved with images of *Ganoderma* as seen in the top photo. These objects are beautiful forms of natural art and they also are symbols to bring good health, prosperity and luck. From a private collection.

lucidus was used for the lacate form (see FUNGI, spring 2019), this changed to *Ganoderma lucidum* in 1881 and it wasn't until very recently that the lacate *Ganoderma* complex in China was separated into different species and called *Ganoderma lingzhi*, *G. sichuanense*, *G. multipileum* and others.

I enjoyed immensely the opportunity to work with colleagues at the Forbidden City and to find out about these imperial fungi and learn about the Qianlong emperor's keen interest in *Ganoderma*. He, as well as other emperors, must have enjoyed the beauty and symbolism of these polypores very much because they seemed to have them everywhere. In addition to the *Ganoderma* mounted in cabinets, displayed on stands or represented in scepters, there are also wall paintings, ceramics and even furniture with *Ganoderma* on them. There is one truly magnificent zitan table that has an extraordinary array of *Ganoderma* carved into it (Figure 8). This is one of the most remarkable pieces of furniture that I have seen. It is covered on all parts except the top surface with carving of *Ganoderma*. The Forbidden City and especially the Qianlong emperor's secret garden and retirement complex with all of these *Ganoderma* was a place steeped in great symbolism. These symbols appeared to have functioned well with the emperor living to be 88 years old.

There are many examples of fungi that were used as traditional medicine and used as symbols for protection to ward off illness. The indigenous people of the Pacific Coast of North America used *Laricifomes (Fomitopsis) officinalis* (Agarikon) for traditional medicine and they carved fruiting bodies of this fungus into spirit figures (Blanchette et al.; *Mycologia* 84: 119–124). These

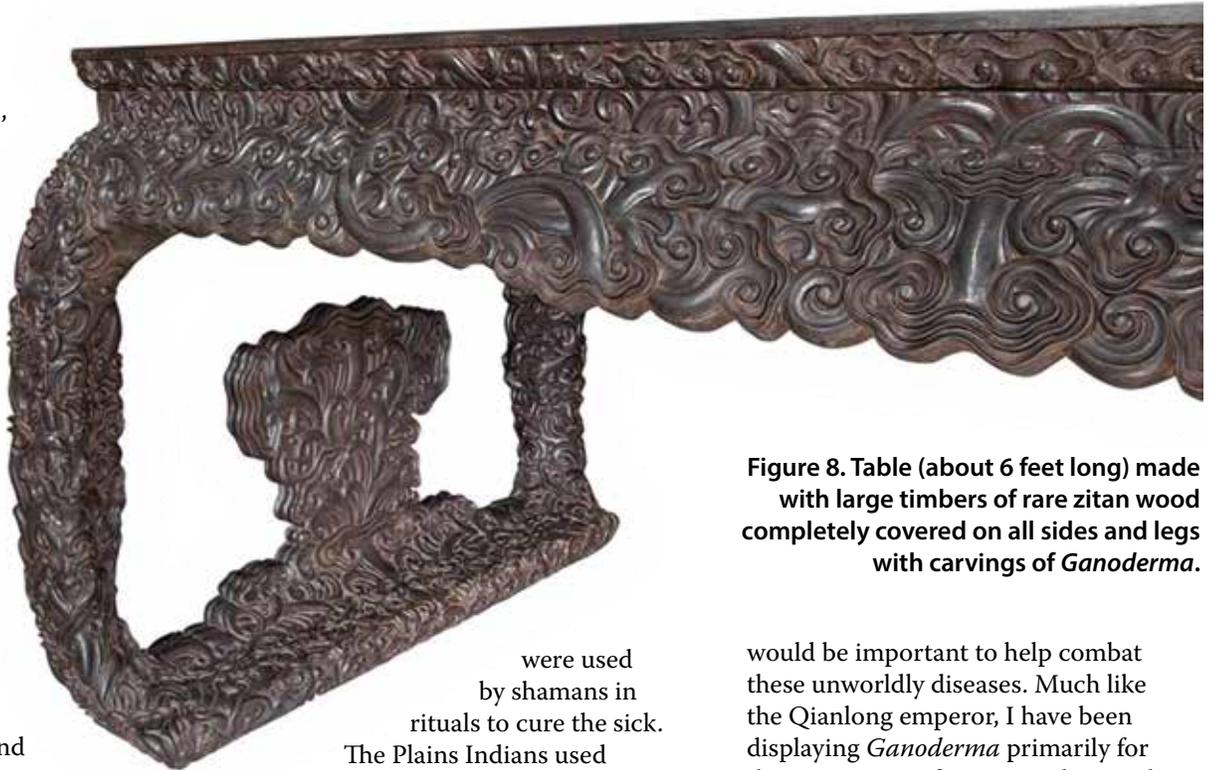


Figure 8. Table (about 6 feet long) made with large timbers of rare zitan wood completely covered on all sides and legs with carvings of *Ganoderma*.

were used by shamans in rituals to cure the sick.

The Plains Indians used

Haploporus odoratus in medicine and made protective necklaces with them (Blanchette; *Mycologia* 89: 233–240) and the indigenous people of Nepal and other regions of the Himalayas made masks out of *Ganoderma* that were used in rituals by shamans to ward off evil spirits (FUNGI, fall 2017). The historic use of *lingzhi* in China is yet another example where a medicinal fungus was used as a powerful symbol for protection and good health.

With the COVID-19 virus, we have a disease with no known cure, and I feel much like how people must have felt during the emperor's reign. In the 1700s, the cause of diseases was not understood and cures had to rely on traditional methods for a remedy. *Lingzhi* was part of their traditional medicine but it was also used as a symbol for protection and just displaying the *Ganoderma* provided reassurance since they were thought to have the power to ward off illness, provide protection and bestow a long life. Immortality might also be possible, although the Daoist's view of immortality did not necessarily mean of the body but focused more on the transcendental immortality of the soul. I can also understand how a talisman would be sought after for protection if you had no other possibilities of a cure for ailments. Keeping your spirits up and a positive attitude

would be important to help combat these unworldly diseases. Much like the Qianlong emperor, I have been displaying *Ganoderma* primarily for their interesting features and natural artistry in my office and home for many years. I must admit that I have had lots of good luck, good health and good fortune in my life. However, like the Qianlong emperor, I just enjoy looking at these beautiful fungi and like to contemplate their historic symbolism and acclaimed supernatural power. Any and all other benefits coming from them are also most welcomed.

We are very fortunate that these objects with fungi have survived for 230+ years. Once forbidden to see, these imperial treasures now provide firsthand knowledge about how fungi were used in Qian Dynasty culture and the important role of *Ganoderma* in the life of the Qianlong emperor.

Acknowledgments

I thank the Palace Museum in Beijing and the World Monument Fund for the opportunity to take part in the restoration of the Qianlong Garden complex, collect information on the imperial *lingzhi* and for photographs of objects at the Forbidden City, and Li Yue, Wang Shiwei, Henry Ng, Mechthild Baumeister, Nancy Berliner and Liu Chang for their help to assemble information for this article, beneficial discussions and kind assistance. I also thank Julia Kerrigan, Clemson University for the gift of a magnificent long stiped *Ganoderma* shown in figure 3. 🍄