

An item found in the Varia section of the Wilanów collection under the inventory number Wil. 2407 is described in documentation as a diadem. It is an artefact of unknown provenance, presumably made in the nineteenth century. Until recently, the material used in its decoration had also remained unknown. The aim of this paper is to identify this material, as well as to shed light on a number of other issues related to the provenance and function of this piece. This only became possible owing to the kind help and cooperation of the employees of the Museum of King Jan III's Palace in Wilanów, particularly Alicja Łoboda, Renata Pieniek and Dr Joanna Paprocka-Gajek.¹

The label of 'diadem' is slightly misleading, as it tends to

be associated with a lavish piece of jewellery, sometimes used as a symbol of authority (even though the Greek word from which it derives denoted a simple headband made of cloth). It would therefore be more accurate to describe the piece in question as an ornamental headband, intended to adorn the coiffure of an unknown Chinese lady of the Qing dynasty. Indeed, the Chinese provenance of this item is now beyond doubt.

The semi-circular metal headband (Fig. 1) of lightweight and delicate make spans ca. 15.5 cm; it reaches the maximum height of 4 cm in its central part. An analysis of its material, commissioned for conservation purposes, was conducted in 2011 and 2020 by Alina Tomaszewska-Szewczyk from the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń. The 2020 documentation classifies the material composition of the piece into the categories of 'silver, gold, brass, synthetic pearls, unidentified proteinaceous substance (keratin?), red paste', thereby making a significant revision of the earlier inventory description: 'copper, enamel, synthetic pearls'. Having analysed the alloy, the art conservator concluded that 'elements of the diadem had presumably been made of brass and subsequently silvered. Gold was applied onto this intermediary layer'. The report also includes the assessment: 'Certain elements are inlaid with an unidentified proteinaceous substance of fibrous structure'.² The laboratory examination by infrared spectroscopy conducted in 2011 failed to identify the material, because it was compared to casein, albumen and gelatin; it proved the most similar to the spectrum of casein. The

AS LOVELY AS PEONIES AND ORCHIDS. THE CHINESE HEADBAND WITH KINGFISHER FEATHERS IN THE WILANÓW COLLECTION

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1 I am also grateful to Anna Straszewska PhD(habil.) from the Institute of Art of the Polish Academy of Sciences for inviting me to give a presentation at a seminar of the Decorative Arts and Design Department, and for inspiring me to contact the Wilanów Palace Museum and study this object.

2 Quoted after A. Tomaszewska-Szewczyk, *Dokumentacja prac konserwatorskich i restauratorskich* (Toruń, 2020), unpublished material kindly made available to me by the Museum of King Jan III's Palace at Wilanów.

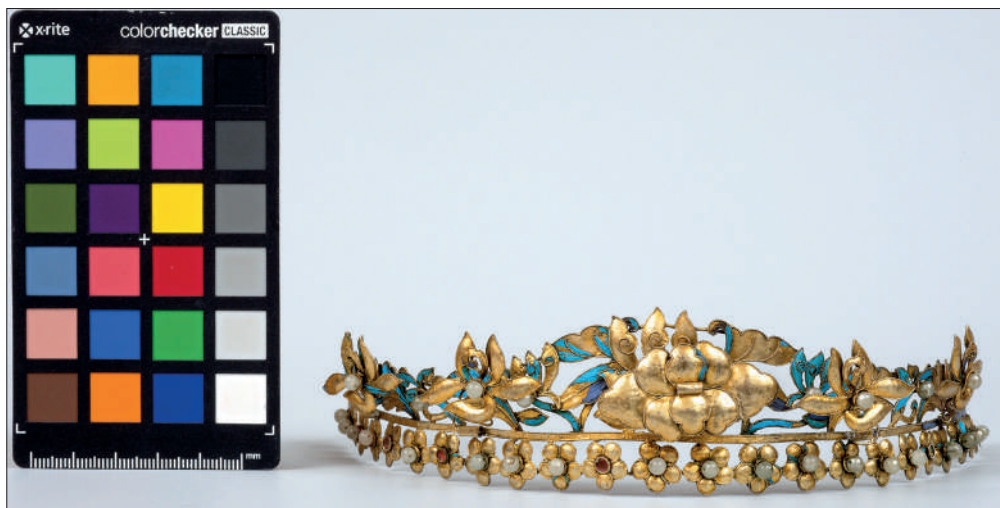


Fig. 1

Headband, China, early twentieth century, Museum of King Jan III's Palace at Wilanów

principal aim of the conservation was to protect the metal, and the analyst did not attempt to solve the mystery of the 'proteinaceous substance'. Yet, in fact, the presence of this material (along with the shape and iconography of the entire piece) provides irrefutable evidence that the headband is of Chinese make, since both the material and technique are unique to China. This mysterious substance is kingfisher feathers.

In October 2023, Ms. Renata Pieniek, who works as a conservator at the Wilanów Museum, attended my presentation entitled *Heavenly Jewels. Chinese jewellery decorated with kingfisher feathers*, delivered at a seminar organised for the Department of Decorative Arts and Design of the Institute of Art of the Polish Academy of Sciences. The subject made her think of a Wilanów object still bearing traces of decoration made of a mysterious substance containing protein. In a conversation with Wilanów employees, Alina Tomaszewska-Szewczyk (who, regrettably, passed away in 2021) had apparently expressed the supposition that the unidentified material might be feathers; yet the hypothesis had not been recorded in the official documentation of the conservation works, which the management of the Wilanów Palace Museum kindly allowed me to access.

As has already been said, the headband is a delicate construction of small metal plates and gilt wires. Both ends feature wire hoops which may have been used to fasten it to the wearer's hair with pins or ribbons. The lower ornamental band is composed of regular, five-petalled rosettes with imitation pearls in the centre (some of which are missing). The upper part is more intricate and taller in the central section, where it must have looked quite impressive against a chignon tied at the back of the head. The centrepiece of the decoration is a large flower – a stylised peony with small leaves. It is flanked by two smaller, daintier orchids, also surrounded by curling leaves and stylised clouds; this part also features

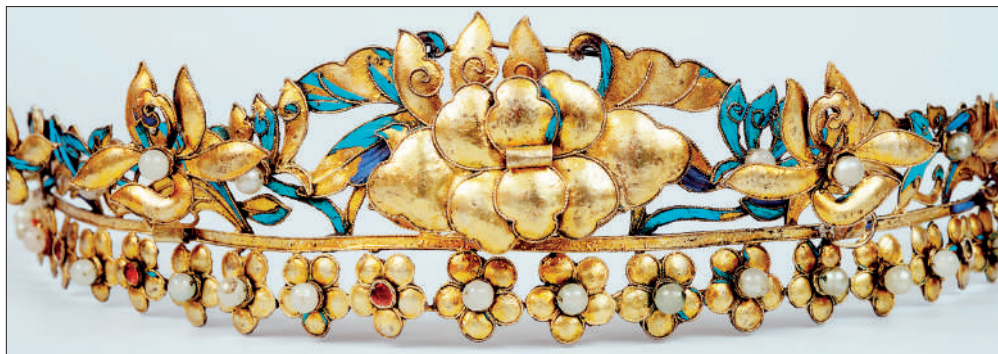


Fig. 2

Headband, China, early twentieth century, central section with the flowers of a peony and an orchid, Museum of King Jan III's Palace at Wilanów

several pearls. The entire composition is symmetrical and additionally organised by the string of rosettes, yet its individual elements form asymmetrical compositions.

The vegetal motifs used here are highly popular in Chinese art and ornamentation. In the context of accessories for women, both the peony and the orchid are synonymous with beauty and attractiveness. Tree peony is one of the most popular flowers in Chinese iconography and one of the most auspicious symbols. It evokes associations with wealth, success and beauty, the latter including the allure of a woman in full bloom. The dainty orchids, in turn, may be identified as specimens of the genus *Cymbidium*, whose stylised, conventional forms in Chinese art tend to represent all types of orchids. In reference to women, these imply refinement and understated elegance, contrasting with the splendour of the peonies (Fig. 2).

The individual elements, such as petals and leaves, were cut of sheet metal. Some of them were then shaped into distinctly convex forms, which – along with the openwork arrangement of the pieces – gives the ornament a three-dimensional look. All pieces of the sheet metal, which the conservation documents identify as made of a copper alloy covered with a layer of gold or silver, are lined with a single thread of twisted filigree wire. This technique, also used in cloisonné, served to secure the material applied to the metal – in this case, kingfisher feathers, only fragments of which have survived.

At first glance, bright blue kingfisher feathers may be mistaken for cloisonné enamel. Only when examined closely – preferably under magnification – can the striated structure of individual barbs be seen (Fig. 3). Unlike in other jewellery traditions (e.g. in Europe or India), where entire feathers were used as accessories, China developed a unique technique of covering the surface of ornaments with painstakingly cut fragments thereof. Its name – *diancui* – translates loosely to 'dotting with cerulean'.

Information on the use of kingfisher feathers appear in Chinese sources as early as in the Han (206 BCE – 220 CE) and Tang (618–907 CE)



Fig. 3

Headband, China, early twentieth century, magnified image showing the structure of the feather, Museum of King Jan III's Palace at Wilanów

dynasties; numerous iconographic descriptions date back to the Song era (960–1279), while the earliest known archaeological artefacts come from the fourteenth century.³ So great was the demand that feathers from the southern provinces of China could not satisfy it. More had to be imported from South-Eastern Asia, specifically from the territories of present-day Thailand, Vietnam and Cambodia. As noted by Roderich Ptak, in the Song and the early Ming era, thousands of bird skins, and possibly live specimens, were imported to China every year as part of tribute and trade with these lands. Since kingfishers need a large territory to live, such mass-scale hunting (evident even from the partial records that are still extant) must have affected the population.⁴ This is all the more likely given the fact that the initially elitist product and the technique of its manufacture would in time become immensely popular. Relevant literature contains no clear indication as to why it was that particular colour and these particular feathers that gained such approval; the favoured colours in Chinese culture were usually red and yellow. Presumably, the iridescent blue hue of the feathers was somehow associated with jade, which was synonymous with a precious gem, though it is not a visually obvious association.

By the Ming era (1368–1644) *diancui* had already become one of the most popular types of women's jewellery, along with jade and gold. The technique was used primarily to decorate hair ornaments, most notably

3 Y. Luk, 'Collecting Chinese Jewellery at the Victoria and Albert Museum', *Transactions of the Oriental Ceramic Society*, vol. 81, 2016–2017, p. 37.

4 R. Ptak, 'Chinese Bird Imports from Maritime Southeast Asia, c. 1000–1500', *Archipel*, 2012, no. 84, pp. 197–245.

hairpins, but also headbands and diadems, as well as entire crowns and other types of elaborate headdress worn by members of the highest social strata. The most opulent ones included ‘phoenix crowns’ that were a part of a bride’s ceremonial attire. The name originates from a mythical bird symbolising femininity, marital bliss and the empress – which also signifies the status of the bride during her rite of passage, when she becomes ‘the empress of the day’. Such crowns are also depicted on portraits of ancestresses, which showed the deceased wearing the most elaborate formal attire.

The custom of Imperial China did not dictate that women cover their heads, except for practical reasons, such as protection from the rain or sun. Ladies from the more affluent strata of Han society (the ethnic majority in the country) rarely had the need to do so, since they spent most of their lives indoors, and were thus in no danger of having their coiffure ruined. Artfully arranged hair adorned with ornaments was an important attribute of beauty and femininity. The term *shoushi*, which literally means ‘decorated heads’, is sometimes used in Chinese to denote jewellery in a broader sense.⁵

In Qing times (1644–1911), ornaments inlaid with kingfisher feathers also began to be worn by women from the ruling Manchu class, ethnically different from the Han. Their headdress featured a structural element called the *liangbatou* – a frame wrapped in black fabric, to which various ornaments could be pinned. In the final years of the Empire, the *liangbatou* grew to impressive sizes, resembling giant bowknots. The more formal types of headdress worn at court, such as crowns or caps, were also decorated with *diancui*. By contrast, the technique was less common among the Chinese diaspora, as can be inferred from the surviving iconography and museum artefacts. This is all the more interesting given that Southeast Asia, from where kingfisher feathers were imported, was home to many Chinese communities, whose members nevertheless preferred gold jewellery.

The manufacture of *diancui* ornaments began with making pieces of sheet metal (gold, gilt silver or other) lined with wire. Small pieces of the feather vane were then cut to fit the given shape and fixed onto the surface with glue. Constance Frederica Gordon Cumming, who travelled through China in the latter half of the nineteenth century, provides a vivid description of the procedure:

Suppose a head-dress is to be made on a silver-gilt ground. The general pattern is marked out by strips of fine silver-gilt wire, which are soldered to the groundwork. The working jeweller sits at a table on which are arranged his tools and materials. These consist of strips of bright plume cut away from the rib, and neatly laid on a sheet

⁵ Luk, ‘Collecting Chinese Jewellery’, p. 31.

of paper; beside them lie several small very sharp chisels. On a tiny charcoal brazier stands a cup of strong glue dissolved in spirit, and beside it lie some very fine paint-brushes. Holding the ornament in his left hand, with his right he dexterously cuts an atom of feather just the right size and shape for some piece of his pattern. Then, with a fine brush, he applies the glue to the metal, and thereon with the same brush lifts and deposits the morsel of feather, which he presses home with a smooth horn needle. From long practice, he works with a rapidity and dexterity wonderful to behold [...].⁶

The iridescent blue feathers could constitute the only decoration or be combined with other materials: jade, coral, glass imitation of gemstones, small pearls (Fig. 4). Some of the most lavish and most colourful ornaments may be found on the Manchu *liangbatou*, where *diancui* was often juxtaposed with fresh or artificial flowers. Elements of decorative hairpins were mounted on thin wires or even on springs. Some authors claim that elegant women were expected to move with such grace and restraint that the ornaments in their hair never wobbled.⁷ Nevertheless, it seems rather unlikely that people would consistently and deliberately design jewellery that *could* move, if that potential was not intended to be used; in some cases that might have even proved physically impossible.⁸ Nor is it congruous with the (much admired) teetering gait of women with bound feet, who swayed ‘like willows’.

The vast majority of *diancui* wares are hair ornaments – from simple hairpins to elaborate crowns. Their iconography predominantly features popular symbols associated with luck (e.g. bats), beauty (e.g. peonies), fertility (e.g. pomegranate fruit) and other aspects of good fortune. The more unusual motifs include ideograms or miniature three-dimensional animals. Earrings are much less common (a pair of large amber earrings with rosettes inlaid with feathers is in the collection of the National Museum in Warsaw);⁹ rarer still are nail sheaths. Known artefacts also include fans (a specimen decorated with kingfisher feathers and other precious materials is held at the National Museum in Cracow)¹⁰ and

6 C.F. Gordon Cumming, *Wanderings in China* (Edinburgh–London, 1886), p. 134.

7 Cited after I. Clark, ‘Chinese hairpins. “Rhapsody in Blue”’, undated, *Rethinking Pitt-Rivers*, web.prm.ox.ac.uk/rpr/index.php/object-biography-index/19-prmcollection/290-chinese-hairpins.html (accessed 27 March 2024).

8 The collection of the Asia and Pacific Museum includes a hairpin topped with a cockerel figure mounted on a spring; a miniature lantern is suspended on a chain attached to the animal’s beak (inv. no. MAP 7600). There is no way to wear the item without setting the ornaments in motion.

9 Inv. no. SKAZsz 2432/1-2 MNW.

10 Inv. no. MNK 116491a; A. Małowska-Germasińska, ‘Chiński wachlarz płaski – budowa, zniszczenia i konserwacja dwóch wachlarzy z przełomu XIX i XX wieku w Muzeum Narodowym w Krakowie’, *Toruńskie Studia o Sztuce Orientu*, vol. 3, 2008, pp. 77–88.



Fig. 4

Ornament for a woman's
headdress, China, eighteenth/
nineteenth century,
Metropolitan Museum of Art
in New York, John Stuart
Kennedy Fund 1915

trinkets, such as small screens.¹¹ Gordon Cumming mentions bridal sedans, which, similarly to crowns, could be rented out for wedding ceremonies.

While the ethical aspect of producing *diancui* wares seems to have been overlooked in China at the time of their popularity, it was commented on by female travellers from Europe and America who visited the Qing empire in the latter half of the nineteenth century, when bird protection movements (in which women were actively involved) started to develop in Anglo-Saxon countries in response to the fashion for bird feathers.¹² Miss Gordon Cumming was both delighted and saddened by *diancui* wares: 'They are beautiful, but it is quite grievous to think of the wholesale slaughter of these lovely birds involved by such a demand, and extending over so enormous a district, for it is not here only that these lovely feathers are so highly prized. I saw an immense deal of the same sort of work at Canton [...]'.¹³

The custom of using *diancui* ornaments survived the longest in the context of the theatre, and valuable crowns are still passed down by generations of actors, even though imitation pieces have long since become the norm. New acquisitions, however, are greatly frowned upon. In 2015, the Beijing Opera actress Liu Guijian posted on Weibo (China's largest social media platform) to show off a crown made of the feathers of eighty kingfishers, for which she had paid 120,000 yuan, i.e. over 19,000 USD. She was severely criticised, not only for the ostentation of the gesture, but also for the questionable ethics of having animals

11 A small, perfectly preserved screen was auctioned at Sotheby's Hongkong in 2011 with its estimated value set at 600,000 to 800,000 HKD (ca. 76,400 to 101,900 USD at June 2025 rates), www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2011/chinese-ceramics-works-of-art-hk0358/lot.3301.html (accessed 29 June 2024).

12 *Fashioned from Nature*, ed. E. Ehrman (London, 2018), p. 88.

13 Gordon Cumming, *Wanderings in China*.

killed solely for the purpose of display.¹⁴ Be that as it may, there still exist artisans who practice the craft, e.g. restoring museum pieces. Kingfisher birds are now under protection in China, albeit not every species thereof: the white-throated kingfisher, for instance, can still be hunted. The scale of illegal import, too, remains unknown. Feathers for further processing can easily be bought on Aliexpress and other large online retail websites.

In any case, younger generations seem to be increasingly conscious of environmental issues, as evidenced e.g. by internet blogs and tutorials teaching how to make jewellery that emulates historical designs using coloured goose feathers¹⁵ or natural peacock ones,¹⁶ sourced from domesticated birds. Contemporary production tends to focus on earrings; hair ornaments are mainly used as elements of historicising outfits worn by the female members of the *hanfu* revival/cosplay movement. Yiqian Wu, author of an interesting paper written at the University of Sydney, analyses the ethical aspects of *diancui* in the context of Buddhist and Taoist philosophy. She points to these as the source of pro-environmental attitudes strongly embedded in Chinese culture, whose modern interpretations may imply a rejection of practices that involve animal suffering.¹⁷

Returning to the piece in the Wilanów collection, its form arguably corresponds with Han-style hairstyles of the Qing dynasty. These were neatly bound chignons tied at the back of the head, fixed with cosmetics, sometimes with horsehair pads added in for volume. Incidentally, the Wilanów collection contains a series of *panneaux* depicting beautiful women, most likely made before 1821, which used to be displayed in the Chinese Rooms.¹⁸ It is a typical example of export pieces of decorative art, which also conforms to the tradition of conventional depictions of Chinese beauties; some of the ladies in the paintings wear characteristic blue ornaments in their hair. The *panneau* inv. no. Wil.1870 (Fig. 5) clearly shows a large hairpin with dangling beads fixed at the side of the beauty's head. Another lady (inv. no. Wil.1893, Fig. 6) wears a headband whose colour scheme might be different than *diancui* ornaments, but which nevertheless provides an idea of how a hairstyle featuring a similar piece of jewellery might have looked like. The evolution of ornament forms throughout the nineteenth century was slow, and individual pieces

14 www.chinadaily.com.cn/opinion/2015-04/27/content_20547689.html (accessed 15 Oct. 2023).

15 www.youtube.com/watch?v=12tHwPZDDY0&t=17s (accessed 15 Oct. 2023).

16 hanfugirl.sg/about/historical-crafts/ (accessed 15 Oct. 2023).

17 Y. Wu, *A Study of Historical Transformation and Cultural Change in Chinese Dian-cui Jewellery*, an MA dissertation submitted at Sydney University, 2020, ses.library.usyd.edu.au/handle/2123/24005 (accessed 27 March 2024).

18 K. Jerzmanowska et al., *Osobliwości Dalekiego Wschodu w historycznej kolekcji Wilanowa*, ed. J. Mielezsko (Warszawa, 1993), pp. 24–29.



Fig. 5

A Woman with a Peony, China (Canton?), early nineteenth century, Museum of King Jan III's Palace at Wilanów

are difficult to date. Thus, even though the artefact under analysis is unquestionably newer, the paintings provide an interesting context for it. The later dating of the headband is apparent from the use of artificial pearls. Pearl imitations, mostly made of glass, have been in use since ancient times; in this case, however, they are made of a synthetic material, perhaps celluloid (the exact nature of the substance cannot be determined without destructive examination), of the kind that was only invented in the late nineteenth century.¹⁹

The long-cherished *diancui* wares quickly began to fall out of fashion in the twilight years of the Empire, and faster still after its collapse, with the simplification of female attire and hairstyles. It is likely that by the 1920s they were mainly worn by older women who still had access to pieces made earlier. As the demand was dwindling, so did production. According to Luk Yu-ping, the last workshop manufacturing such jewellery in Canton closed in 1933.²⁰ In the light of this information, it seems plausible that the Wilanów headband was produced in the early twentieth century.

Ornaments featuring kingfisher feathers did not, it seems, find their way into European collections before the nineteenth century. They evidently

¹⁹ In the early twentieth century many different methods of making synthetic pearls using celluloid, gelatin and other materials were patented in France alone; M.-J. Oppé, H. Oppé, 'Imitation Pearls in France', *BEADS: Journal of the Society of Beads Researchers*, vol. 8, 1996, pp. 23–34.

²⁰ Luk, 'Collecting Chinese Jewellery', p. 41.



Fig. 6

A Woman with Two Children, China (Canton?), early nineteenth century, Museum of King Jan III's Palace at Wilanów

failed to spark the interest of foreign merchants, who tended to seek haberdashery items that would appeal to buyers in Europe, such as folding fans or trinkets made of ivory, to be used as fashionable accessories. *Diancui* most likely started to appear in the West in the latter half of the nineteenth century, following colonial expansion into China and the resulting interest in exoticism. Unlike fans, such accessories never became a part of European fashions; they were only kept as curios, props or museum exhibits.²¹

Evidence for this claim may be found e.g. in the history of acquisitions made by British museums. In 1883, the Victoria and Albert Museum purchased its first set of such jewellery from the International Colonial and Export Exhibition held in Amsterdam; a *dianzi* court headdress only followed in 1902.²² The provenance of a similar set from the Pitt Rivers

21 Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *The Blue Bower* (The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, Birmingham), painted in 1865, shows a red-headed model wearing a characteristic blue butterfly-shaped pin in her hair, yet it is likely a part of an artistic 'pan-Oriental' stylisation. Within the much later Art Déco style, there were some experiments with applying the technique of *diancui* to decorate the dials of luxury Cartier watches. In 1959 the famous shoe designer Roger Vivier, then associated with the house of Dior, made at least two pairs of stilettos covered in real kingfisher feathers, most likely as an individual commission. One of these pairs is now kept at the Arizona State University Fashion Institute for Design and Merchandising, the other at the Costume Institute Metropolitan Museum of Art (see ASU FIDM profile on Facebook, www.facebook.com/FIDMMuseum, posted 28 May 2024). At that time, natural bird feathers were a common addition to accessories, yet their application to shoes must have been regarded as unusual extravagance.

22 Luk, p. 32.

Museum in Oxford remains unknown. It was categorised as part of the founding collection which dated from 1884, yet the entry was added later and most likely only because the item had not been entered into any other registers.²³ The number of late-Qing ornaments with kingfisher feathers found on the European antiquarian market is relatively high, which points to their growing popularity as a souvenir from China at the time.

Polish collections feature only a few such items. As noted above, the National Museum in Warsaw owns a pair of unusual earrings and a rectangular ornament,²⁴ all from the collection of Władysław Jagniałkowski, who served as an officer of the French colonial forces at the turn of the nineteenth century. Another rare item is the already mentioned fan held at the National Museum in Cracow. Arguably the largest public collection in Poland belongs to the Andrzej Wawrzyniak Asia and Pacific Museum in Warsaw. The first part was purchased in 1977 from Mieczysław Żaboklicki, along with other belongings of Żaboklicki's uncle, who had fought in the Russo-Japanese war in Manchuria (1905–1906). Given this provenance, the set may be dated to the early twentieth century or to a slightly earlier period, assuming that the ornaments had been worn. The collection comprises fifteen inventory entries (complete ornaments and fragments thereof),²⁵ one of which is an openwork headband, smaller and less intricate than the Wilanów one. Eleven further items were acquired in 1984 from Helena Styk, a member of the Polish diaspora in Manchuria.²⁶ The ornaments may date from a similar period; the feather decoration on some of them is incomplete or only traces of it remain, most likely due to long years of use.

In the 1990s I was involved in creating descriptions for all these sets, together with my then mentor and supervisor Barbara Pokorska. This collaboration resulted in, among others, the publication of a popular-science article in the *Spotkania z Zabytkami* periodical.²⁷ The ornaments have been exhibited a number of times, most prominently at the 'Klejnoty bogów i ludzi' [Jewels of gods and men] exhibition in 1999.²⁸ Their most recent appearance was at the exhibition entitled 'Muzeum? A po co?' [A museum? What for?] in 2021, where, paired with ivory items, they illustrated changes in the attitude museum specialists and

23 Clark, 'Chinese hairpins'.

24 Inv. no. SKAZsz2668 MNW.

25 Inv. no. MAP 3959-3961, 3966-3972, 3974, 3976-3978 and 3984.

26 Inv. no. MAP 7600, 7603, 7615, 7620–7627.

27 B. Pokorska, J. Wasilewska-Dobkowska, 'Biżuteria chińska', *Spotkania z Zabytkami*, 2000, no. 9.

28 B. Pokorska, *Klejnoty bogów i ludzi. Biżuteria azjatycka ze zbiorów MAiP*, Muzeum Azji i Pacyfiku (Warszawa, 1999).

audiences have displayed towards materials of animal origin used in arts and crafts.²⁹

Unfortunately, the details of how the headband in question found its way to the Wilanów collection remain unknown. The piece is not mentioned in inventory books from 1895 and 1936. We are certain of its origin and approximate age, of its function and cultural context, and most of all of the interesting technology of its manufacture and the materials used. Further in-depth archival study may help retrace its history. The piece certainly deserves attention, and would benefit from being moved to the section of Oriental objects, where it would be exhibited in the appropriate company of images of Chinese ladies wearing similar ornaments in their hair.

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29 *Muzeum? A po co?*, ed. B. Banasik (Warszawa, 2021), p. 65.

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