ANNAMESE ORDERS: PRECIOUS METAL, TASSELS, AND BEADS

John Sylvester, Jr.

*Over the centuries, beads have been used for myriad purposes but a seemingly unique application is their use as components of several types of Annamese orders. Now known as Vietnam, the State of Annam issued a number of civil awards during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Four of these–*khanh, boi, tien, *and* bai*–were made of precious materials and incorporated bead strands and tassels in their composition. The* khanh *was reinstated as the second-ranking civil order of the Republic of Vietnam in 1957.*

INTRODUCTION

Annam, properly known as Dainam, and now called Vietnam, was unified under the Nguyen dynasty in 1802. It attracted the colonial ambitions of the French, then engaged in imperial rivalry with Britain in Asia and elsewhere. In 1847, the first clash took place, as the French mounted an expedition to punish the Court at Hue over the persecution of Christian missionaries and converts. In 1862, the French returned to begin seizing the south of Vietnam, called Cochin China by westerners. Spurred on by ambitious young naval officers, France was later to take the northern area of Tonkin. In 1883, France forced the Court at Hue to sign a convention which effectively ended the independence of Annam. The Emperors remained in the Imperial Palace with titular authority over the country and some actual authority over the central coastal area.

The Nguyen court was based, as with most formal aspects of Vietnam, on a Chinese imperial model. There were five classes of nobility and nine degrees of civil and military ranks of a mandarinate, who earned their entry by passing an exam in the Confucian classics.

Like all Europeans of the 19th century, the French were fascinated by the bestowal of decorations and medals. In Annam they found a system of awards in use by the Court at Hue that could be transposed, if somewhat awkwardly, into the Western context. Jules Silvestre (1903:65), the Director of Native Affairs in Cochin China and a student of numismatics, wrote that the Annamese awards "belong to the class of emblematic jewels," and, as such, resembled Western orders more than medals. They were awarded as symbols of the Emperor's pleasure for the virtue of mandarins or for the meritorious service of civil and military servants of the Throne. Silvestre (1903:65) noted that they were "also awarded, and perhaps with greater frequency, to the rich man who has given large sums to the Imperial Treasury."

THE PRINCIPAL AWARDS

There were four principal awards: the *khanh, boi, tien,* and *bai* (Dang Ngoc Oanh 1915; Sylvester 1986; Sylvester and Hüsken 2001). The *khanh* (Figs. 1-3; cover, Pl. IA), usually of gold, although for the Emperor and princes perhaps of jade, was shaped like the stone gongs called *khanh*, which had a ceremonial character and pleasing sound. They were decorated with curlicues or dragons and inscribed in Chinese characters that originally had an auspicious meaning pertinent to the recipient, but later just indicated one of the four grades of the *khanh*. The *boi* was the equivalent award for women, oblong or hourglass shaped and with a design of curlicues or phoenixes and Chinese characters. Both the *khanh* and *boi* were worn from a red or, in mourning, green cord around the neck and decorated with tassels or beads hanging from the lower edge.

The *tien* (Pl. IB) was a lesser award, but still, depending on the degree, of prestige. They were in gold and silver, and occasionally in bronze for

Figure 1. *Khanh* of the Special Class, repoussé gold, ca. 1930; 86 mm x 50 mm (photo: J. Sylvester, Jr.).

recipients of lesser rank. The *tien* were in the form of coins, with many patterns, often with a square hole in the center like Chinese cash, and decorated with auspicious symbols and Chinese characters. Decorations awarded for merit in China, as sometimes elsewhere, developed out of the bestowal of coins of honor. Some examples of *tien* were actually used as currency, but when received as an award would be either strung through the central hole or punctured to be mounted on a cord for wear around the neck. When worn in such fashion they also usually had tassels hanging below.

The *bai* were an insignia of rank or position, but had an honorary character, and some in silver were awards for bravery by soldiers. The *bai* were in gold for the Imperial family and the highest mandarins, sometimes decorated with pearls and beads of red coral (Pl. IC). Most for the mandarins were in ivory (Fig. 2). In earlier times they were of other materials, such as ebony and horn, for soldiers and lesser servants of the court. The *bai* were usually rectangular with a suspension piece at the top that looks roughly like a fleur-de-lis. Those for men did not have tassels, and were worn suspended from a button at the top right of the long tunic. Some *bai* for women of the court were more hourglass shaped or oblong, and were equipped with tassels. The *bai* were inscribed with the person's position or name, and were a visible ID card that allowed the wearer entry into the palace and informed the public of the person's position.

The tassels on the earlier awards were usually suspended from an elaborate knot with long strands of three colors, usually green, yellow, and red. For higher ranking persons, the tassels might be suspended from red-coral beads. Later on, the use of small glass beads came into fashion. A typical example might have the knot replaced by a beaded design in the auspicious shape of a bat (Fig. 1; Pls. IA, IB) composed of red, yellow, and light blue or other-colored beads. Suspended from this would be three or four multi-strand beaded tassels, each topped by a large bead of real or imitation red coral and ending in small orange tufts of yarn. The fringe created by the tassels displays four or five differently colored horizontal bands. There could be considerable variety; for instance, the upper design in one example being replaced by a woven dragon's face.

Under President Ngo Dinh Diem, the Republic of Vietnam revived the *khanh* in 1957, as the second-ranking civil order of the state. There were some American recipients of this most unusual order. In gilt, it maintained the same shape as those of the Court at Hue, but the design was changed to one of a scholar's scroll, five stalks of bamboo (the symbol of President Diem's First Republic), and dragons. It was in four classes, the Special Class being suspended from a Western-style orange sash, while the other three were worn on a cord around the neck. Each of the latter were differentiated by size and the color of the small tufts of yarn at the bottom of the tassels. Like

Figure 2. A mandarin, believed to be a medical doctor in Hanoi, with family and friends around the early 1920s. He wears a *khanh* around his neck and an ivory *bai* at the top right of his tunic, both in the usual fashion. His other awards include the Order of the Dragon of Annam, the Laotian Order of the Million Elephants and White Parasol, the Cambodian Royal Order of Moniseraphon, the Cambodian Royal Order, and four French Indochina medals (collection of J. Sylvester, Jr.).

Figure 3. A group of senior Annamese officials wearing their robes and decorations, which include several *khanhs*, ca. 1920 (collection of J. Sylvester, Jr.).

those of the later Imperial awards, the tassels were composed of beads arranged in horizontal bands. The bands were successively purple, yellow, orange, green, and silver, with each band being separated from its neighbor by a single row of white beads next to a single row of purple beads.

CONCLUSION

The awards discussed above are uncommon and are eagerly sought by collectors of Asian medals. Like all orders, decorations, and medals, they are reflections of history, and testament to the merit, valor, and vanity of man.

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John Sylvester, Jr.