



Fig. 1. Anonymous, Manchu Bride's Robe, late 19th c.,
silk tabby, tapestry (*kesi*) ornaments, details in black paint, 202 x 141 cm,
Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

The Biographies of Robes: Manchu Imperial Robes and the Politics of Representation, Social Division and Textile Production during the Late Qing Dynasty Period

Sarah Amarica

The Qing dynasty was the last imperial dynasty of China, reigning from 1644 until the establishment of the Republic of China in 1912.¹ Governed by the Manchu ruling elite rather than by the native Han, the country experienced material prosperity and territorial expansion, but also endured the strict imposition of class and cultural divisions.² Fearing the loss of their cultural identity, Manchu leaders implemented policies—mainly concerning the dress code—to prevent the intermingling of cultures.³ Keenly aware of the propagandistic potential of appearance, the Manchu elite used clothing as a political means to “underscore [their] legitimacy and heritage.”⁴ Every aspect of a garment’s formal construction and use was thus codified, including motifs, patterns and colours.⁵

Material culture theorist Igor Kopytoff developed the concept of “the biography of things,” claiming that objects bear specific histories which enhance their meaning.⁶ Accordingly, my analysis of Chinese imperial robes will demonstrate that every aspect of their production and dissemination offers insight into the cultural practices, social structures and family traditions of the time. More specifically, the late-nineteenth-century Manchu bride’s robe (fig. 1) in the collection of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts (MMFA) provides material evidence of the social division between the Han and Manchu,⁷ but also attests to a remarkable and unique history of silk production and textile craftsmanship in Imperial China.



Fig. 1. Anonymous, Manchu Bride's Robe, late 19th c., silk tabby, tapestry (*kesi*) ornaments, details in black paint, 202 x 141 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

This Manchu robe features complex yet harmonious patterns of colour and shape. A bold red hue comprises the majority of the silk, while multicoloured floral cuffs enhance the sleeves. A diagonal wave pattern embellishes the robe's base. A high collar meets a diagonal seam which runs across the chest, concealing loop-and-toggle fastenings behind gold and floral detailing. Nine decorative medallions are symmetrically dispersed across the front, shoulder area and back, and upon closer inspection contain intricate motifs enhanced with gold stitching and black paint. The robe's long, billowing sleeves and ankle-length cut would have covered most of the wearer's body, but its pure silk composition would have felt luxurious and light on the skin.

This noble lady's garment is distinguished by its vivid hue and nine multicoloured floral roundels, called *kesi*, placed across the front and back. Each coat's colour palette and decorative pattern were codified, adhering to the stylistic conventions of their respective dynasty and specific time period. The colour red, for example, symbolizes summer, the prime of life, and was

worn by elite women during celebratory family events such as births or weddings.⁸ The colour black was commonly worn by older women, and white was seen on widows.⁹ The decorative silk medallions also contain symbolic value: flower and butterfly motifs signify fidelity; two winding gourds represent fertility; and a bat carrying a swastika symbolizes abundance as well as the mantra “May you have the greatest joy.”¹⁰ Aside from referencing Chinese philosophy, nature or the cosmos, these regulated symbols also indicated rank. A text codifying court dress—containing sixty thousand illustrations—was commissioned by the fourth Qing Emperor, Qianlong (1711–1799), in 1797.¹¹ Only upper-ranked officials and their wives wore dragons and birds, for example, while the labouring class wore solid colours with simple prints.¹²

Silk robes were often adorned with embroidery, which was similarly codified. As early as 221 BCE, the palace employed specialized artisans whose sole purpose was to design embroidered patterns intended to showcase the elite status of members of the royal family.¹³ Both men and women were employed in this task. Sinologist James Dyer Ball claims that the most intricate of projects, theatrical robes and lady’s dresses, for example, could take “ten or twelve women four or five years [of] constant work to finish.”¹⁴ Embroidery techniques may be traced to particular regions and time periods. For some time, the “forbidden stitch” was reserved only for embroiderers working on imperial robes in the Forbidden City, a testament to the political significance of even the stitches of court robes.¹⁵ Some embroidery was purely ornamental but still required tremendous skill and patience, as seen in the intricate gold stitching of a wedding robe from the Qing period (fig. 2). This garment shares similar detailing to the Manchu bride’s robe at the MMFA.



Fig. 2. Detail of wedding robe from the Qing Dynasty, n.d., silk embroidery. Courtesy of Art of Silk. <http://www.artofsilk.com/blogs/news/6402320-modern-silk-embroidery-technology#.VjlmLK6rR0s>.

Most textile workers in Imperial China remain anonymous in scholarly literature and museum collections, as is the case with this particular Manchu robe. This should not reduce the labour-intensive process that sericulture required, nor should it diminish the unique tradition of Chinese silk production, which emerged as early as 3000 BCE.¹⁶ Cultivating silk moths and collecting and spinning thread from silk worms was a painstaking, multi-step process. Silk production is so steeped in tradition that its stages are recited in ancient lore.¹⁷ In the earliest instances, silk work was done primarily by female members of farming communities, and even incorporated into young girls' schooling. By the mid-fifteenth century, men were also involved in both private silk workshops and imperial enterprises.¹⁸ The demands of foreign trade would eventually push the production of silk from private family business towards mass production.¹⁹ It is essential to recognize that every court garment exists within a vast history of silk fabrication and commodification involving gendered labour, children's education and community engagement.²⁰

Multicoloured silk coats were commonplace throughout Imperial China, but strict codes governed their use. For example, among the Manchu elite, robes were first categorized according to official and non-official wear, then subcategorized into formal, semiformal and informal wear.²¹ This noble lady's garment at the MMFA would have been considered "official informal," worn during domestic events or important family occasions.²² The coat's loop-and-toggle fastenings and wave borders are typical Manchu signifiers. The billowing sleeves and overall loose fit were common among elite Manchu women for two reasons: first, the baggy fabric would have appropriately concealed the wearer's figure, and second, because pure silk was costly, the excess fabric would have connoted wealth.²³ How it was worn and its function are recorded in an exquisitely detailed embroidered roundel on a woman's summer robe that shows two women with similar billowing garments (fig. 3). Silk gauze was worn during summer, silk and satin during spring and autumn, and garments would be lined with fur during winter months.²⁴



Fig. 3. Detail of the central embroidery work of a woman's summer robe, 1875–1900, silk gauze, Asian Art Museum of San Francisco. © BrokenSphere / Wikimedia Commons. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Woman%27s_summer_robe_Asian_Art_Museum_SF_2004.36_central_embroidery_detail.JPG.

This floor-length, one-piece gown is vastly different from a Han woman's formal dress, which consisted of an over-jacket, a full jacket (*aoshan*) and a pleated skirt (*qun*). A late-nineteenth-century satin and silk semi-formal domestic skirt at the Art Institute of Chicago (fig. 4) is composed of many pleats, which, according to Eileen Chang, helped showcase a woman's expected graceful comportment. "Ladies of good family walked with such mincing steps on their tiny feet that, although the pleats could not be prevented from moving a little, this motion was restricted to an almost imperceptible quaver of the fabric."²⁵ The design of each garment is thus influenced by class, gender and function. Some labouring Han women preferred trousers (*ku*) to skirts, a trend that Manchu women adopted near the end of the Qing dynasty.²⁶



Fig. 4. Anonymous, *Woman's Qun (Semiformal Domestic Skirt)*, 1870–90, silk, satin, embroidered with silk and gold leaf, cotton waistband, lined with silk, 97.7 cm x 101.5 cm, Art Institute of Chicago. http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/artwork/6775?search_no=1&index=10.

The end of the Qing era brought Western influences into styles of dress, further solidifying the historical value of court robes. Beneath the sheer beauty and complexity of this nineteenth-century Manchu bride's robe lies a history of cultural, class and gender divisions regimented by strict codes and policies of dress. Circulated and worn among royal families, rural communities and men and women alike, a garment becomes a rich object of material culture. As Kopytoff's concept of the "biography of objects" suggests, garments are imbued with the biographies of those who come into contact with them.²⁷ However, the maker and wearers of the Manchu bride's robe remain a mystery, and as such the history it presently reveals is cultural rather than personal.

NOTES

¹ Barry Till, *Silk Splendour: Textiles of Late Imperial China 1644-1911* (Victoria: Gallery of Greater Victoria, 2012), 17.

² Ibid.

³ Dong Shen, "Chinese Urban Clothing from 1644 to Present: A Historical Study" (paper presented at the 1st USA-Canada-Taiwan International Conference of Sinology, California State University, Sacramento, February 17, 2005), <http://csuspress.lib.csus.edu/sinology/>.

⁴ John E. Vollmer and Janine Andrews, *Dressed to Rule: 18th Century Court Attire in the MacTaggart Art Collection* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2007), 51.

⁵ Although the Manchu and Han were at first forbidden from copying each other, their styles of dress would "gradually and necessarily [influence] each other." This was especially evident in women's attire. See Jie Gao, "Chinese Women's Clothing in Transition During the 20th Century," *Quarterly Journal of Chinese Studies* 1, no. 3 (Spring 2013): 9.

⁶ Igor Kopytoff, "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process," in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 66.

⁷ I have not found any further research to substantiate the Museum's claim that this is a bridal robe, only that the garment was used for celebratory purposes. Thus, for fear of imposing a Western reading onto Chinese bridal wear, I have chosen not to discuss this subject.

⁸ Vollmer and Andrews, 49.

⁹ Shen.

¹⁰ "Manchu Bride's Robe" (unpublished notes, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts Archive, Montreal).

¹¹ This text was titled *The Illustrated Precedents for the Ritual Paraphernalia of the Imperial Court*. See Dreweatts & Bloomsbury Auctions, *Chinese Ceramics and Asian Works of Art* (London: Dreweatts & Bloomsbury, 2014), 36,

<http://www.dreweatts.com/media/dreweatts/auctions/13816.pdf>.

¹² Shen.

¹³ Shengfei Zhu and Pia Fennell, “King’s Silk Art: Embroidery from Imperial China,” Art of Silk Blog, last modified July 31, 2013, accessed October 24, 2015,

<http://www.artofsilk.com/blogs/news/8404057-kings-silk-art-embroidery-from-imperial-china#.VjleAa6rR0s>.

¹⁴ James Dyer Ball, quoted in Till, 35.

¹⁵ Till, 13.

¹⁶ Ibid., 40.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Mau Chuan-Hui, “Silk Industry: Technology and Human Capital Formation in France and China” (paper presented at the S.R. Epstein Memorial Conference: Technology and Human Capital Formation in the East and the West, London School of Economics, London, June 18–21, 2008), accessed October 26, 2015,

<http://www.lse.ac.uk/economicHistory/seminars/Epstein%20Memorial%20Conference/PAPER-Mau.pdf>.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Till, 20.

²² Ibid.

²³ Gao, 10.

²⁴ Till, 20.

²⁵ Eileen Chang, quoted in Gao, 9.

²⁶ Gao, 9.

²⁷ Kopytoff, 66.

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