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Studio And Soiree: The Use And Misuse Of Chinese Textiles In A European Setting

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ANCIENT WEST MEXICAN CLOTHING AND ITS ECUADORIAN ORIGINS: NEW EVIDENCE OF MARITIME CONTACTS (Precis only.)*

by Patricia Rieff Anawalt

Evidence of ancient cultural contacts between coastal Ecuador and the mountains of West Mexico exists in clothing similarities between the two areas, namely tunic-like shirts and short breeches for males and a tropical mode of dress for females. This non-Mesoamerican attire is illustrated in the early sixteenth century codex Relacion de Michoacan and also appears on mortuary figurines from the deep shaft tombs of Ixtlan del Rio, Nayarit (400 B.C.- A.D. 400). Coeval prototypes of this West Mexican clothing occur archaeologically along that section of the Ecuadorian coast which was the homeland of long-distance merchant navigators. Their trade goods, described by the Spanish, included local-style garments made of wool, a fabric foreign to Mesoamerica. The adoption of this exotic apparel by the West Mexican elite implies an association of great worth and power with those who introduced it. That these agents were Ecuadorian maritime traders is further suggested by zoological evidence.*

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dragon robe ensemble or an approximation of it on their wedding day even if normally they were not entitled to do so. With the decline of the empire rank could be purchased and it could also be bestowed on individuals for services rendered. The powerful Canton merchant Howqua was painted several times wearing a dragon robe in a pose of studied casualness alien to the conventions of polite Chinese body language. In none of these cases did success in the civil service examinations apply but we can speculate that the outward mark of status, in this case the dragon robe, was eagerly appropriated.

So, dragon robes were not hard to obtain. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries even within the Chinese community their exclusivity had been undermined. If we follow Igor Kopytoff's model and think of dragon robes as having life histories then at this stage in their biographies they were exposed to what anthropologists have termed a diversion. The conditions were set for them to be sold to westerners.

Why did they buy them? The criteria of age and of quality, although important, did not seem to be uppermost in the minds of those foreigners who sought to own them. Few robes had any antiquity at all when they were first purchased although it is true that in some cases sales talk probably convinced the buyer otherwise. The majority of these garments are adequately but not superbly crafted. It seemed to satisfy the customer that they were 'all done by hand' as if this mode of production was unique to China and commanded a special reverence. Despite their commonplace nature, they were the ease with which they could be obtained, dragon robes represented for some Europeans the spirit of the East. Everything certain westerners wanted to believe about China was embodied in these garments. At the very time that Chinese society was going through a series of disastrous dislocations dragon robes were held up as symbols of an ordered empire, static and wise-ruled. This picture, as we know and as many knew at the time, was far from the truth. As Brian Spooner has commented in his enlightening study on authenticity and the production of traditionality, 'western societies have a longstanding cultural interest in the Other'. Foreigners came to localise in dislocation all the potentialities of a civilization as far removed from their own as it was possible to be and to project onto the costumes all their personal aspirations of what a society should be like. It was not the real China they sought but a country of the mind. They took home these robes as tangible evidence of a myth.

It is obvious then that purchasers of dragon robes wished to possess them in order as Graburn says to 'get close to the very spirit'. He also writes that another requisite for souvenirs is that they should be 'cheap, portable, understandable, and it helps if they are useful'. The wicked uncle's dressing gown in Smith's genre painting has had the horsehoof cuffs taken off and the original buttons transferred from the side to the sleeve ends where they become a decorative feature rather than a means of closure. A tasseled cord has been added round the waist and the whole has been transformed into something more wearable in European terms. An 1895 catalogue of Yule-tide gifts from Liberty's store in Regent Street, London, suggests other uses for Chinese garments. It informs us that 'these robes form some of the most beautiful examples of Chinese needlework, are suitable for fancy costumes, or reconstructed to form square or oblong pieces, are invaluable as draperies for pianos, table covers and wall hangings'. Prices ranged from three to ten guineas.

Dragon robes became invalidated on reaching Europe even though they had been purchased in good faith as authentic signifiers from within the culture. There is no doubt that most foreigners were getting the authentic thing. There was plenty to go around as we have seen. Not until the Second World War do we have evidence of dragon robes being made especially for sale to the Allied troops stationed in India. Itinerant Indian salesmen toured the encampments selling trinkets to take back home. Dragon robes, with widely-spaced embroidery motifs, were one of the things on offer as were Chinese embroidered shawls.

These shawls present us with a different situation. A picture from a trade catalogue published by the China National Textiles Import and Export Corporation in 1979 shows a Chinese model advertising one of these shawls. The promotional photograph is misleading because, unlike dragon robes, these shawls were never worn by the Chinese themselves. They were a bulk commodity exported from China to Europe and America and they featured in customs lists and silk statistics. Like Chinese export porcelain they were expressly for foreigners and in that respect they follow an established path.

There is some evidence to suggest that these flambant wraps were first ordered by traders from Latin America and that the style may, in part, be based on a Spanish rebozo, a large fringed mantle. Some rebozos are known to have been woven from Chinese silk. A Spanish prototype for these Chinese shawls should perhaps be questioned as, although Spanish ladies undoubtedly wore shawls and mantillas before China started exporting their version to the west, an extensive search through Spanish pictorial archives of the early nineteenth century has not, as yet, produced a single representation of an embroidered and fringed shawl like those which here concern us. We may also read toward a tentative suggestion from artisans, encouraged by foreign merchants, invented this commercial artefact for the purposes of sale, perhaps adapting an Hispanic American style in the late
eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. When these appealing garments found their way to Spain they were enthusiastically taken up and appear there with great regularity in paintings and early photographs, so much so that they almost seem to have been adopted as part of the national dress of Spain. Not only that, but they started to be manufactured in Spain itself directly after the style of those made in China.

In all three countries of production, Manila in the Philippines making up the trio, the embroidered designs on the Chinese shawls are flowers or else motifs taken from the Chinese traditional patterning repertoire. As Craig Clunas has written in the introduction to the Victoria and Albert Museum's publication on Chinese export art this latter form of decoration is in fact 'a debased exoticism, signalling in the design sphere China's availability of these shawls in 'art colours'.

There is some dispute as to when the shawls were first made and when they became popular in Europe and the Americas. Fashion plates in journals from both sides of the Atlantic illustrate 'China shawls' from the early 1800s onwards but the shawls in these pictures do not always look like those which have come down to us today and which we regard as having been made in China. The incorrect identification of the countries of origin of these shawls points up the west's ignorance of Asia. The starting date of manufacture cannot have been much before the end of the eighteenth century at the earliest. Even so, Liberty's saw fit to advertise in their 1930 catalogue of shawls one which was 'reproduced in China from an old Chinese shawl' thus giving the impression that they had a long history of production and that they were an item of dress with which the Chinese were familiar, two assumptions we know to be false.

Bearing in mind the difficulty of precise dating, the Chinese-ness of these shawls seems not to have been stressed in the early and middle decades of the nineteenth century as much as it was later in the century and beyond. In the earlier period white on white versions were particularly popular for brides and lent them a rather demure air. By the 1880s this connotation had been lost and Chinese fringed shawls came to have 'arty', somewhat bohemian, associations. They no longer belonged to the mainstream of fashion and featured in nearly all of Liberty's catalogues. The first of these, produced in 1881, set the tone by announcing the availability of these shawls in 'art colours'.

Perhaps it is at this point that the Spanish and New Mexican dimension fused with the Chinese in the minds of northern Europeans, imbuing these shawls with a mix of gypsy abandon and a promise of the east. A photograph from 1926 shows a troupe of female performers, Los Trovadores de Santa Fe, dressed in nothing but these silk shawls. Several issues of a Parisian magazine, Les Modes, illustrate mannequins dressed in the same way during the 1920s. Time and again, from the end of the nineteenth century through to the teens, twenties and thirties of the twentieth century, the Chinese embroidered shawl stood for all that is fiery, risqué, seductive and sensuous, anything, in fact, that is away from the ordinary. Kees van Dongen, a Dutch painter who often sketched the lion-tamers, clowns and acrobats at the Cirque Medrano in Paris with Picasso characteristically clothed one of his models in a Chinese shawl in this portrait if 1907-1909. In Marcel Proust's description of Odette's house in the first part of Remembrance of Things Past, Swann left his lover's bedroom and 'climbed a staircase that went straight up between dark painted walls hung with Oriental draperies, strings of Turkish beads, and a huge Japanese lantern suspended by a silken cord'. In Volker Schlondorff's film Swann in Love based on Proust's great novel, the set designer realized the 'oriental draperies' of the text as shawls from China. Again, Theresa Stratas, in the 1982 Franco Zefferelli production of La Traviata languished as Camille against cushions spread with Chinese export shawls. In the 1970s, Harry More-Gordon, a Scottish painter, posed his nude model on one of these shawls. 'Bed of Roses', as this painting is called, is painted on a Chinese shawl, which continues to transmit the associations we have been discussing. These associations had no meaning for the workers who produced them in China.

Graburn, Appadurai and their colleagues as well as the authors of a thought-provoking exhibition catalogue from Germany have all addressed the issues we are discussing here. I am grateful for the opportunity to include China, up till now left out of these discussions, in this critically-informed panel.

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TOBA BATAK TEXTILE INVENTIONS (1)

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INTRODUCTION

This article focuses on fruits of looms worked by Toba Batak weavers in the Silindung Valley, North Sumatra, Indonesia. Silindung Valley weavings are characteristically bright and fashionable. They are described by the Batak themselves and by visitors from outside as the "least traditional" of Batak woven goods. They are also surging in popularity throughout all of Toba and increasingly making inroads into the market replacing the old-style textiles which are larger, of coarser yarn, and deeper/sober in colour. It is the modern style of Batak textile which today commands the highest prices locally. "Connoisseurs" of Indonesian textiles, however, usually will not even consider buying them. To the connoisseur, they are evidence of the decline that is occurring in the once wondrously sophisticated Indonesian textile arts.

In this paper I will examine some of the changes that are occurring in Silindung Valley textiles. This Valley of so-called "declining textiles" is precisely the location of rapid fashion change. The invention of new textiles is not infrequent. I believe that the vitality and dynamism of the Silindung Valley textile tradition forces us to reconsider what is meant by "decline" as it is used, for example, in the following quotation:

"To me, antique Batak textiles, especially those from Toba, represent the highest achievement of Indonesian weaving. Hence what now comes from this area is so heart-rending to look at. The contrast between modern and antique products is nowhere else so extreme ... Decline through European influence is especially evident in the imported regular yarn dyed in bright aniline colours... (Visser 1918-1919:21,22).

SILINDUNG VALLEY TEXTILE INNOVATIONS

To discuss Silindung Valley textile innovations, I will focus on the work of a single weaver/ikat-maker, Nai Ganda (ill 1), who inhabits the village of Hutagalung. She first told me about her textile inventions in 1986, and again in 1990 she showed me several more of her creations, hot off the loom.

Each of Nai Ganda's inventions is of a different order, but each exemplifies the "modern" features for which Silindung Valley textiles are known. I shall briefly review the inventions she introduced me to, both for their innovative features and to indicate the nature of current Silindung Valley textile fashions.

Nai Ganda's Ragi Botik (ill 2), Harungguan (ill 3), and Silinggom (ill 4) are examples of textiles which were popular at one time in the past. The Ragi Botik and the Harungguan once had