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**Cross-cultural Commemoration:  
Historical Chinese Patchwork Inspires a New Tradition in America**

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This paper reports on preliminary research into the relationship between a certain historical Chinese patchwork garment, the *baijia pao* (百家袍) or “one hundred families robe,” and a recent commemorative practice within the community of American adopters of Chinese children, the making of “One Hundred Good Wishes Quilts.”

**Baijia Pao, “One Hundred Families Robes”**

For centuries, Han Chinese mothers made patchwork *baijia pao*, “one hundred families robes,” as gifts for their sons to celebrate auspicious birthdays (for example, one month, one year, or three years).<sup>1</sup> Ideally, the robe’s patchwork body was constructed from fabrics donated by numerous local well-wishers, the so-called “hundred families.” The fabrics, symbolizing the combined strength of the donors, were believed to help the young boy resist or deflect evil spirits and ghosts.



**Figure 1. Han Chinese Boy’s Robe (“One Hundred Households Robe”), late 19th century, embroidered silk with silk and metallic threads. Image courtesy: Saint Louis Art Museum, Gift of Julius A. Gordon and Ilene Gordon Wittels in memory of Rose Gordon, 112:1989.**

<sup>1</sup> Saint Louis Art Museum, catalog entry for accession number 112:1989.

A number of baijia pao exist in both public and private collections, including the Saint Louis Art Museum, the Field Museum in Chicago, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Chinese Clothing Art Museum at Donghua University in Shanghai, and in several private collections in Hong Kong. These extant garments give us an overall picture of the garment's typical characteristics. The robe's hundreds of silk patches take the form of tessellated shapes, including squares, triangles, hexagons, and diamonds. The fabrics are usually silk damasks in a range of colors, sometimes featuring typical woven motifs such as clouds or geometric fretwork ("thunder lines"). While the tessellated shapes give an overall effect of uniformity, the half-dozen garments that I have examined in person display shape and measurement variations from patch to patch, pointing to the human (and therefore, imperfect) hands involved in their creation.

Makers often embroidered auspicious symbols on the baijia pao to grant the wearer even greater spiritual protection. These symbols often include the twelve signs of the zodiac, the Eight Buddhist symbols, the *ba gua* (eight-sided representation of the Daoist trigrams), and the *wu du* ("five poisons," an ironically propitious set of symbols).

This garment in the collection of the Saint Louis Art Museum, Saint Louis, Missouri, is a long-sleeved baijia pao robe whose outer shell is made up of pieced (patchwork) hexagons (figure 1.) The hexagon patches—numbering about 155—are composed of over a dozen different silk damasks ranging in color from lemon yellow to sea foam green, magenta to deep purple, and tan to black. Each patch is adorned with an embroidered motif executed in silk, primarily using three stitches: satin, couching, and Peking knots—though other fancy stitches are present as well. Most of the motifs constitute unique, non-repeating patterns. Some of the designs include yin yang, ba gua, *fu* and *shou* characters for good luck and longevity, human figures, floral arrangements, insects, and fish.

Other artistic media contribute to our understanding of baijia pao, most notably *kesi* slit tapestry. A Ming dynasty *kesi* fragment at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and an early Qing dynasty *kesi* curtain panel at the Beijing Arts and Crafts Museum depict boys at play, some of whom wear diamond-, square- and hexagon-patterned baijia pao.<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that textiles were not the only objects or forms of art that featured the so-called 'Hundred Boys' motif. In fact, it is a common one in a variety of media, including ceramics and scroll painting; its popularity derives from the fact that it represents the wish for abundant, healthy sons.

## Patchwork in China

Although patchwork is less common in China, or perhaps less commonly appreciated, than other forms of textile art, understanding its history helps to discern the meanings inherent in baijia pao robes. One of the strongest Chinese associations with patchwork is the *jia sha*, or Buddhist priests' robe. Jia sha were patchwork robes derived from the Indian Buddhist *kasaya* robe, *kasaya* being the Hindi word for "dirty color" or multi-colored. The *kasaya* was inspired by the historical Buddha's wearing of patched garments as a rejection of material wealth; scriptural texts such as the Vinaya Pitaka urged monks to do the same to symbolize their own dedication to asceticism.<sup>3</sup> As Buddhism spread into China in the first century of the Common Era, *jia sha* and other liturgical textiles made of patchwork accompanied it.

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<sup>2</sup> Xiuzhen Zhao, *Beijing Wen Wu Jing Cui Da Xi*, Di 1 ban. (Beijing: Beijing chu ban she, 2000), 182–183.; Metropolitan Museum of Art, accession number 36.65.30.

<sup>3</sup> Chung Young Yang Embroidery Museum, *Design : When the Lines Meet* (Seoul: Chung Young Yang Embroidery Museum, Sookmyung Women's University, 2005), 201.

The jia sha was made from patches cut from silk fabrics given to priests, often by wealthy patrons, who donated them out of charitable impulses but also in order to gain spiritual merit. Although the practice began as a way to show humility and detachment from worldly goods, jia sha and other Buddhist patchwork textiles became lavish albums of each age's finest fabrics.<sup>4</sup>

Patchwork was not solely identified with Buddhism. One of the Daoist Eight Immortals, Lan Caihe, was sometimes illustrated wearing a patchwork robe. In addition, the Metropolitan Museum of Art possesses a group of Qing dynasty imperial theatrical robes, several of which were made for the roles of both Buddhist and Daoist priests; all of them are patchwork.<sup>5</sup>

The baijia pao, therefore, fits into the Asian tradition of patchwork garments as objects with mystical or religious properties. And while very few published sources refer to baijia pao, those that do agree that they were made for boys as spiritually protective garments. Chinese textile collector and specialist Valery Garret writes that one traditional Han Chinese custom was to “present the mother with small pieces of silk and embroidery for her to sew together to make the child a jacket, all those contributing thus joining in to wish the child good fortune and protection from evil.”<sup>6</sup> Elaborating on this notion, Chinese textile scholar John Vollmer writes that the making of baijia pao, “evokes Buddhist practice . . . but seems to have developed from more ancient beliefs and customs that sought to protect children from evil.”<sup>7</sup> It is clear that the baijia pao was a talismanic garment, protecting its wearer from unseen forces that could harm him.

### **One Hundred Good Wishes Quilts**

More recently, the baijia pao appears to have inspired a new tradition called the “One Hundred Good Wishes Quilt” (OHGWQ). (Figure 2.) American parents in the process of adopting a child from China solicit pieces of fabric from family and friends, which they use to construct a bed quilt that celebrates and welcomes their new child. OHGWQ websites frequently cite Chinese tradition as inspiration and use the Chinese term *baijia bei* (百家被), or “one hundred families quilt” to describe their projects, suggesting and/or constructing a link between the traditional Chinese baijia pao and this new form of commemorative patchwork.

Baijia pao, however, are largely unknown in the West, as are most other Chinese folk textiles. Westerners are most familiar with imperial garments like dragon and phoenix robes. Therefore, this new practice, apparently inspired by the baijia pao or a related tradition, is surprising. As noted above, the owners of One Hundred Good Wishes Quilt websites often use the Chinese term *baijia bei*, or “one hundred families quilt” to describe their projects. The similarity of this term to baijia pao points to a

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<sup>4</sup> John E. Vollmer, Myrna Myers (Gallery), and Neuhoff Gallery, *Silks for Thrones and Altars: Chinese Costumes and Textiles from the Liao Through the Qing Dynasty* (Paris: Myrna Myers, 2004), 114.

<sup>5</sup> Metropolitan Museum of Art, accession numbers 30.76.26, 30.76.7, 30.76.8

<sup>6</sup> Valery Garret, *Chinese Dress: From the Qing Dynasty to the Present* (Tuttle Publishing, 2007), 181.

<sup>7</sup> John Vollmer and Art Institute of Chicago, *Clothed to Rule the Universe: Ming and Qing Dynasty Textiles at the Art Institute of Chicago* (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 2000), 69.



*Figure 2. A One Hundred Good Wishes Quilt made to celebrate the adoption of a child from China. Image courtesy: Kathy Walker.*

connection between them, but as this is largely an online phenomenon, and therefore decentralized, it is difficult to trace its origin. Most of the websites simply state that the making of the baijia bei is an old Chinese tradition and offer no other documentation for it. It is in fact possible that the baijia bei is an old practice, but none so far have been found in museum collections or notable private collections. Indeed, what is most important is that the makers of OHGWQ believe that it is an old Chinese tradition—that they identify with the “Chinese-ness” of the practice. One of the possible sources could actually be mid-twentieth century American novelist Pearl S. Buck, who wrote popular fiction based on her experiences in China as the daughter of missionaries. Her novel *Imperial Woman*, about Ci Xi, the late-Qing dynasty Dowager Empress, recounts the commissioning of a baijia pao:

She must offer the child as an adopted son, by symbol, to other powerful families in her clan. . . . From the head of each of the highest one hundred families in the Empire, she required a bolt of the finest silk. From the silks she commanded the palace tailors to cut one hundred small pieces and from these make a robe for her child. Thus he belonged, by symbol, to one hundred strong and noble families, and under their shelter the gods would fear to harm him.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Pearl S. Buck, *Imperial Woman; a Novel* (New York: J. Day Co, 1956), 56.

Whatever the origin, for most adoptive parents the making of the baijia bei, or OHGWQ, is a way for them to welcome their new child into the family. And indeed, this is a familiar activity for many Americans—commemorative quiltmaking has a long history in the United States. In a nation that was comparatively recently settled, people often migrated, filling in the sparsely populated regions of the country and in the process, leaving friends and family behind. Making a quilt to mark the occasion and remind the recipient of her home community was a way of maintaining emotional ties despite physical separation. Welcoming new children into a family, thanking a religious leader, or marking the anniversary of an organization among many other events also became worthy inspirations for the making of a commemorative quilt.<sup>9</sup>

By combining the Chinese tradition of baijia pao, therefore, with the longstanding American one of commemorative quiltmaking, makers of One Hundred Good Wishes Quilts are creating a unique liminal space of cross-cultural exchange. Preliminary research based on the analysis of dozens of OHGWQ websites has shown that in making the quilts, the makers are attempting to address complex issues of cultural and national identity, but also to accomplish other goals such as: coping during the long adoption process; finding or creating support communities; and developing metaphors and meanings for their quilts and their adoption of a Chinese child.

*Addressing Cultural and National Identity.* One Hundred Good Wishes Quilts sometimes display stereotyped images of Chinese culture, aligning them with the Western historical tendency towards *chinoiserie*, overly simplified and romanticized visions of the East. Individual fabrics often feature cute children in Chinese style clothing or are adorned with standard symbols such as panda bears and dragons. Sometimes, symbols from other Asian cultures are mixed in, for instance Japanese kimono robes. These examples of cultural appropriation and culture mixing might indicate the fabric donor's and/or the maker's limited understanding of Chinese culture. The interviews I've done with quiltmakers to date, however, have shown that parents typically are genuinely interested in learning about Chinese culture. Though they may have stereotyped images to begin with, they indicate an enthusiasm for deepening their understanding of China. Further research may show that making a OHGWQ represents a first step in parents' journeys towards helping their child create a hybrid identity, one that combines a more sophisticated and nuanced understanding of their culture of birth with that of their adopted culture.

*Coping and Processing.* Many OHGWQ websites and parents I've interviewed have indicated that making a quilt is a way to deal with the stresses of the frequently long adoption process. Some parents wait five or more years before all their paperwork goes through and they are finally able to bring their child home from China. One blogger humorously expressed her motivation for beginning a OHGWQ: "I figured while we wait for LOA [letter of acceptance] this would be a perfect time to start, plus the retail therapy [i.e. shopping] has to stop LOL [laugh out loud]!"<sup>10</sup>

*Creating Support Communities.* Online communities have been a crucial mode of support for adoptive parents. One of the founders of the yahoo.com OHGWQ group reported that she created the message board in 2002 because when she was adopting her first daughter from China, there weren't many place to commiserate with other parents.<sup>11</sup> The yahoo.com community as well as other organizations' websites and individual blogs have served as 21st century meeting places. They have also made the coordination

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<sup>9</sup> See, for instance: Carolyn Ducey and Jonathan Gregory, *What's in a Name: Inscribed Quilts* (Lincoln, NE: International Quilt Study Center & Museum, 2012).

<sup>10</sup> "Mugsyboo," [http://mugsyboo.typepad.com/my\\_weblog/2011/08/index.html](http://mugsyboo.typepad.com/my_weblog/2011/08/index.html); accessed 11/30/12.

<sup>11</sup> Interview with author, October 29, 2012.

of OHGWQ projects easier and more open to participation from people from all over the country and world. They have even served to solicit financial (not just emotional) support for families who have needed help during the adoption process. Finally, multiple businesses have sprung up around the OHGWQ, offering a range of products and services to those who need assistance with the process of making a quilt.

*Making Meaning.* Understandably, many parents have viewed their One Hundred Good Wishes Quilts as metaphors for their adoption of a child from China. The patchwork nature of quilts easily lends itself to ideas of bringing different people and cultures together to create something new, something full of deep emotion and incredible potential. One parent expressed these ideas on her blog this way:

“I mean can you imagine it? Wrapping a child, whose beginnings certainly did not have much ‘welcoming,’ into a new family and a new home and community, with such love?! The quilt will be the literal embodiment of all the love and welcoming that every child deserves.”<sup>12</sup>

Further research into the individual and cultural meanings of One Hundred Good Wishes Quilts will hopefully help us better understand the trajectory leading from the old Chinese tradition of making talismanic *baijia pao*, “one hundred families robes,” to this new American practice of making a quilt to welcome adoptive Chinese children into their new homes.

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<sup>12</sup>“Ordinary Miracles & the Crazy 9,” [http://mugsyboo.typepad.com/my\\_weblog/2011/08/index.html](http://mugsyboo.typepad.com/my_weblog/2011/08/index.html); accessed 11/30/12