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Victoria and Albert Museum

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STUDIO AND SOIREE:
THE USE AND MISUSE OF CHINESE TEXTILES IN A EUROPEAN
SETTING

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George Smith's painting, 'The Rightful Heir', exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1874, serves as a melodramatic introduction to this paper. Sombre-suited gentlemen are depicted sitting around a table studying the disputed will. Two frightened ladies in crinolines and a small boy in a velvet suit confront the wicked usurper who is wearing a Chinese dragon robe. This angry Victorian was not unique in his choice of dressing gown.

The dragon robe, familiar from museum collections all over Europe and North America, was used in China in the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as an hierarchical garment. It was worn by bearers of rank in the Chinese bureaucracy. Its salient features are the hem design of stripes representing water with turbulent waves above, mountain peaks rising from the water and symmetrically-placed dragons among clouds covering the main body of the garment. It closes to one side with spherical buttons on shanks fastening through loops. The robe, when worn correctly, was part of an ensemble that included a plain dark overgarment with a rank badge sewn to back and front. This overgarment concealed all but the hem and the horsehoof-shaped cuffs of the dragon robe.

The furious relative in the genre painting by Smith is as far as he can be from the dignified mandarin of popular imagination. How was it that these meritorious administrators' uniforms, particularly the dragon robes, came to be transmitted to English drawing rooms even before the fall of the Chinese empire, and what made them especially attractive to Europeans?

To answer the first part of that question, how they came to Europe, we should note three points. First, a Chinese who had been given rank and office in the civil service did not have his dragon robe ensemble bestowed on him as part of his appointment. He, his family or a benefactor had to purchase the robes. They could be more or less grand according to his means. They could be especially ordered or bought off-the-peg. So, in a sense, they had always been commodities and although this was not how the foreigners who bought them as souvenirs wished to see them, it did make them available. Secondly, there were plenty of them. Twenty thousand civil and military officials helped govern the country during the Ming dynasty and the number was not much fewer during the succeeding Qing dynasty, from which most of the extant dragon robes come. Thirdly, their use was not confined solely to officials. Bridegrooms traditionally wore the

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 accepted 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 salestalk probably convinced the buyer otherwise. The majority of these garments are adequately but not supremely 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 and 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 wisely-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 oriental carpets, 'western societies have a longstanding cultural interest in the Other'. Foreigners came to localise in dragon robes 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 native 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 tasselled 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 these Chinese garments. It informs us that 'these robes form some of the most beautiful examples of Chinese needlework. Used in the original shape, 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. The shape is entirely unknown in the annals of traditional Chinese dress. 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 flamboyant wraps were first ordered by traders from Latin America and that the style may, in part, be based on the Mexican 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 eighteenth century has not, as yet, produced a single representation of an embroidered and fringed shawl like those which here concern us. We may put forward a tentative suggestion that Chinese 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 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 increasing political and economic subordination to the West. Dragons, bamboos and pagodas are combined and recombined to emphasize a stereotyped 'mysterious' East'.

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. Their 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 stands 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 Médrano in Paris with Picasso characteristically clothed one of his models in a Chinese shawl in this portrait of 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 Schlöndorff'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 proof that Chinese shawls continue 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 concerned with 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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