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Rachel Silberstein

University of Washington, rsilber@uw.edu

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The Social Fabric: Deep Local to Pan Global

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Other People's Clothes: The Second-Hand Clothes Dealer and the Western Art Collector in early Twentieth-Century China

Rachel Silberstein
rsilber@uw.edu

A particular historical moment made it possible for North American and European museums to form collections of Chinese dress: Qing dynastic collapse, and the ensuing rise of imperialism and tourism. When the Manchu regime fell in 1911, the market was flooded with the possessions of wealthy families forced to liquidate their assets, and these objects - porcelain, robes, jades, paintings and furniture - continued to be sold through the next two decades. Dress was one of many objects whose circulation and valuation was transformed by the arrival of the foreign buyer, and their understanding of “Chinese art.” To understand how Chinese dress was framed in this early, formative period of collecting Chinese material culture, and in turn, how these dress objects were deployed to make certain conclusions about Chinese society, this paper reconstructs the process by which they were collected, catalogued, and displayed.

The paper begins with the second-hand clothes dealer, a key mediator in enabling this object transfer. Commercial and guild records show how second-hand clothes markets developed in numerous large Chinese cities from the mid-late Qing onwards, and their growing guild organization during the late nineteenth-century and early Republic period. The sector benefitted from dynastic collapse and political upheaval, but the foreign buyer also provided an important source of demand.

By the fall of the dynasty, Western conceptions of Chinese art had developed considerably, with new sites for producing and circulating knowledge about Chinese objects in Europe and North America, and a fast growing volume of connoisseur knowledge. Using the example of S.M. Franck & Co and Yamanaka and Co, two important dealers of dress and textiles, I show the development of extensive networks whose systemized object transfer depended upon middle men like the second-hand clothing merchant to maintain object supply.

Chinese dress possessed different facets of appeal for the early twentieth-century Western customer or collector, yet how did the acquisition of old Chinese clothes by Western buyers managed to operate outside what fashion curator, Alexandra Palmer, identifies as “the pejorative connotations of the second-hand clothing market” and instead signal “elitism and connoisseurship” in this period?¹ Through analysis of the different strategies utilised to maintain a narrative that permitted the purchase of used dress objects of Chinese men and women, I argue these strategies underline the tension between the ideal being constructed in the museum and the reality on the ground in the second-hand clothes shop. This tension ultimately derived from the encounter of the second-hand dealer with the Western collector; and the two different modalities of worth each side found in the object.

As Chinese dress objects transferred through the second-hand clothes trade on to museums, department stores and global expositions, these differences became increasingly salient. Analysis of early 1930s and 1940s museum catalogues - the first real impetus to establish

¹ Alexandra Palmer and Hazel Clark, “Introduction” in *Old Clothes, New Looks, Second Hand Clothing*, eds. Alexandra Palmer and Hazel Clark (Oxford; New York: Berg, 2005), 173.

knowledge systems around Chinese dress and textiles - reveal the challenges of confining objects like court robes and rank badges into the category of art. Thus, the encounter of collectors and second-hand dealers constituted a conflict between two very different ways of reading the object, or in the terms of James Clifford's Art-Culture system, different ways of assigning value to locate objects within specific museum and market contexts. By contrasting connoisseurship texts with close analysis of pawnshop texts, I compare the collector's evaluation with the parameters of materiality, workmanship, and geography through which Chinese dealers assessed garments. In so doing, the paper explores how foreign buyers changed understandings of second-hand Chinese dress, and more fundamentally, what this history tells us about how objects transition different modalities of worth.

Bibliography

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