

Phoenixes and Dragons
an exhibition of Chinese costume from the Qing Collection
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Panel text

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**Introduction to the Collection
and the collector**

The collection of Chinese textiles held by the University of Leeds was predominantly collected by Professor Aldred Barker, the third Professor of Textile Industries (1914-1933).

On retiring from the University of Leeds, Barker was offered a position at Chiao-tung University, Shanghai, arriving there in October 1933 with his son Kenneth. The following year he spent several months touring the textile industries of China and Japan, publishing his findings in '*The textile industries of China: their present position and future possibilities*'.

Barker met former students of the University of Leeds, who assisted his tours of Chinese manufacturing.

Professor Lo Ting Yu of Peiping University had studied at Leeds University in 1907-09, during which time he had donated 'Chinese silk fabrics and embroidered silks' to the Textile Museum (along with fellow student Wong Ka Luen). One of Barker's recommendations was that Shanghai should have a textiles museum:

'The possibilities of Shanghai as the most wonderful "emporium" of the Far East might then be exploited in the interests of the Chinese Textile Industries.'

It is thought that apart from a few pieces given by the Chinese students, the majority of the Qing Collection was amassed by Barker and his son in the mid 1930s, as by 1937 he was already loaning them to the University of Leeds for exhibition.

Also exhibited are a small number of Chinese pieces collected by Louisa Pesel (well known as a collector of Mediterranean embroideries). Although widely travelled in Egypt and India, it is not thought that Pesel herself travelled to China.

Silk sericulture

The origins of silk rearing (known as sericulture) and manufacture are inextricably linked to China. Early success was partially due to a monopoly of knowledge of production.

Silk worms are raised from larvae and fed mulberry leaves for several weeks. When the silk glands are full of liquid, the caterpillars anchor themselves to a fixed spot in advance of spinning their cocoons, a process which takes a few days. The silk strands are naturally held together by sericin, a natural glue. The completed cocoons are placed in boiling water which softens the sericin and loosens the fibre, with the strands of fibre brought together and reeled. The procedure is, of course, fatal to the caterpillar within.

The Silk Route

By the Han dynasty (206BCE – 220CE), a socially and economically sophisticated society had emerged, and trade in manufactured silks with nations to the west had evolved, reaching the eastern Mediterranean and imperial Rome via the long arduous channel known as the “Silk Road” or “Silk Route”. The term, coined in the nineteenth century, is misleading as no single route was taken, and the various routes were not developed solely for the purpose of trade in silk. Trade developed first through a search for larger horse breeds for the cavalry.

Trade with countries to the west thus developed. Caravans going east carried precious metals, gems, ivory and glass; caravans travelling westwards were loaded with ceramics, jade, lacquer work, furs and silk.

Silk Manufacture during the Qing dynasty (1644 – 1911)

In the early years of the dynasty much was done to encourage textile production, including favourable taxation in order to promote recovery from economic decline and warfare. As a result, silk production increased significantly to match the expansion in demand from both domestic and foreign markets. Production was carried out either domestically (predominantly for home consumption), in independent factories or, in the case of high quality production, by state-sponsored manufacturers.

By the late Qing dynasty, a gradual decline in silk processing took place, with cotton being a substitute in the home market, while the demand for raw silk replaced finished products in the west as mechanised weaving developed.

Costume in the Qing Collection

The Qing Collection in ULITA consists of over 200 pieces of embroidery and woven textiles. The majority of pieces were created during the Qing dynasty (1644-1911), predominantly in the late- nineteenth century or early- twentieth century.

The collection includes 14 examples of costume, including male Dragon Robes and female jackets, but also several skirts and ornate collars. Many fragments of clothing are also displayed, including sleeve bands, rank badges and dragon robe panels. Mixes of embroidery and woven braids are evident in many pieces, with the suggestion that older panels were reused for ornamentation.

Symbolism in Qing dynasty textiles

A wide range of motifs can be found in traditional Chinese visual arts, including mythical animals, plants and fruits, natural phenomena, man-made objects, abstract patterns, and various calligraphic signs. Three important sources for motifs and symbols were derived from Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism.

Compositions were frequently regulated by the imperial court or simply restricted by tradition (a strong force throughout the Qing dynasty). In many cases, subtle meanings were conveyed by the use of combinations of auspicious motifs or designs.

The most frequently used mythological animal motifs were the dragon (or '*long*') and the phoenix (or '*fenghuang*').

Dragon robes

The dragon (or '*long*') is China's oldest mythological creature, and featured on ancient bronzes. The dragon was deemed to be charged with '*yang*', the positive principle of the cosmos, and was selected as a symbol of the emperor. Dependent on the ranking of the wearer, dragon motifs depicted on costumes would have five, four or three claws. Five-clawed dragons were reserved only for the emperor and high-ranking officials.

Chinese dragons have always been regarded as divine mythical creatures associated with water and rainfall, which bring prosperity, abundance and good luck, and were used commonly in the full range of Chinese visual arts.

A particular class of Chinese garments became known in the West as 'mandarin robes' or 'dragon robes', because they were worn at court.

On many occasions the decorated cloth itself was sewn into rectangular panels and sold to western buyers.

Dragon motifs are associated with certain compositional arrangements. Often, in the lower part of the design a large section of stripes is included, representing the earth. Depicted above these are waves representing the seas, and positioned centrally is a stylized mountain motif. Above are depicted cloud-filled skies, with one or more pairs of dragons facing each other, between them is a flaming pearl. Throughout this upper layer are various good luck and longevity symbols, especially bats.

Rank badges or Mandarin squares

During the Qing dynasty regulations for the use of certain motifs and symbols in costume and other everyday objects were complex, and sets of bewildering rules indicate what was applicable for use by different social classes. It is doubtful whether these were always followed in practice.

Both civilian and military officials, and their wives, were required to wear cloth rank badges attached to the front and back of their upper garments. This practice had its origins in the Ming dynasty.

Round badges, depicting dragon motifs, were the choice of imperial nobility. Civil officials were required to wear square badges depicting various bird motifs, and military officials were required to wear square badges with animal motifs.

The ranking for each were as follows:

- 1st rank: **white crane** for civil officials
unicorn for military officials
- 2nd rank: **golden pheasant** for civil officials
lion for military officials
- 3rd rank: **peacock** for civil officials
leopard for military officials
- 4th rank: **wild goose** for civil officials
tiger for military officials
- 5th rank: **silver pheasant** for civil officials
black bear for military officials
- 6th rank: **egret** for civil officials

panther for military officials

- 7th rank: **mandarin duck** for civil officials

rhinoceros for military officials

- 8th rank: **quail** for civil officials

rhinoceros (again) for military officials

- 9th rank: **paradise flycatcher** for civil officials

sea horse for military officials

Embroidery

Although silk production was predominantly a female occupation, by the late Imperial period women in higher class households rarely spun and wove. Needlework was considered a worthwhile occupation for women, and many spent long hours creating lace or embroidery.

During the Qing dynasty various styles of embroidery developed regionally, and a wide variety of embroidery techniques were employed:

- *Ping xiu* or flat embroidery (satin stitch) is one of the most common stitches in Chinese embroidery. It results in a smooth and even all-over texture.
- *Tao zhen* (interlink stitch) is similar to brick stitch and is of ancient origin. This technique creates a subtle colour gradation.
- *Can zhen* (mixing stitch or shading stitch) is used to produce a dense smooth surface with numerous shades.
- *Xian wen zhenxiu* (line-stitch) is the term given to stitches for pattern outlines.
- *Gun zhen* (rolling stitch) is known as “stem stitch” in the West, and was used for fine lines.

- *Ding xian xiu* (holding-thread embroidery) is known to us as “couching”, where a heavy thread, sometimes metallic, is held on the surface of the fabric by fine stitches. It can be used as an outline or to fill.
- *Suo xiu* (lock embroidery) also known as “chain stitch” is one of the oldest decorative stitches in Chinese embroidery.
- *Da zhi* (seed stitch or French knot) was often used to depict flower stamens or grouped tightly for solid texture.
- *Nasha* (stitch over gauze) is a type of counted thread work on an open weave fabric similar to tent stitch.
- *Luan zhen xiu* (free-stitch embroidery) is a technique used to imitate painting.

Tapestry-woven textiles

During the Qing dynasty, tapestry-woven textiles (also known as *ke-si*) were manufactured mainly for the imperial court and other upper-class uses.

Ke-si (cut silk) is a tapestry-type fabric, which like Western tapestry is a plain-woven structure but, in the absence of interlinking of adjacent weft threads at the joining of two colours, lengthways slits are evident.

In the production, the warp threads were laid out and an original painted design was placed underneath; the weaver would then paint the design outline on the warps. Generally fine undyed warps and coarser dyed wefts were used. The production was time-consuming, taking over a year to complete sufficient fabric for a garment.

Brocades

Brocade is a woven silk where the weft threads making the pattern are carried across the width of the design using shuttles. The long floating wefts can be cut off, or left to float across the back of the material.

A two-layered draw loom was worked by two people to produce complex designs. The weaver at the loom worked the shuttle and treadles, while the weaver on the top of the loom pulled up the warp threads according to the pattern.

This complex production of figured weaving was able to produce fabric with large, colourful and well-rounded patterns.

Velvets

The Qing dynasty is also noted for the production of velvets, principally for apparel. Black, purple, brown, blue and pale green were among the dominant colours, with patterning often featuring symbolic creatures such as dragons, phoenixes, butterflies and bats.

Female garments

Women dressed according to the rank of their husband. There were specific costumes for wives or mothers of ranking officials. Dress for weddings, funerals and birthdays were also dictated accordingly. Silk, fur, gold, pearls, jade and other precious stones could only be worn by empresses and high ranking females.

An important characteristic of female Qing dynasty costumes were the rich ribbon decoration on borders, where the number and quality of borders was an indication of the value of the total garment.

By the 1920s, women's dress had changed, as the *qipao* was adopted, a close-fitting dress with a high neck and slits up the sides. This practical modern design reflected a period of liberation for women, and the influence of Western culture.

The twelve symbols of authority, known as the "twelve imperial symbols", were depicted on robes. These include:

- the Sun ● the Moon ● a Constellation of three stars ● a Mountain motif
- a pair of dragons ● a pheasant ● a pair of bronze cups ● water weed ● grain ● a flame ● an axe ● and a symmetrical geometric symbol know as fu

Female symbolism

The Chinese phoenix, or '*fenghuang*', is the sacred bird of Chinese mythology and is generally depicted in a form similar to an ornamental pheasant or peacock. It was deemed to be charged with yin, the negative principle of the cosmos, and was adopted as the symbol for the empress. Birds were often favoured as a female symbol. Embroidered examples reflected the art of realism in nature, with each feather being meticulously stitched to create a vivid effect.

Butterflies evoke spring, young love and happiness, while certain flowers favoured for female apparel included the peony (wealth), the lotus (continuity / purity), the chrysanthemum (longevity), the plum flower (resilience), and the crab-apple flower.

Male garments

Male clothing changed radically with the conquest of the Ming dynasty by the Qing in the mid- seventeenth century. Chinese men were obliged to wear the clothing and hair-style of the Manchu conquerors, who were ethnically and culturally quite distinct from the majority Han-Chinese population. Many features of Manchu male dress were related to their horse-borne culture: the skirts of robes were split and the upper parts of garments were relatively tight-fitting, and they often wore a sleeveless jacket known as a 'riding-jacket' (*magua*). The horse-shoe cuffs covering the hands are also a Manchu feature.

Robes were usually deep blue or black. The yellow dragon robes were reserved for the emperor and nobility.

Skirts

The skirt consisted of a piece at the front wound round to the back. Large flared skirts were popular among the ruling classes, with the waist moving higher up the body and the bottom of the skirt at floor level. These heavy skirts were weighed down by embroidered panels and decorative borders.

Pleated and panelled skirts were worn by women, usually embroidered or stencilled (sometimes using real petals or leaves). Red skirts, common amongst young women, were known as 'pomegranate skirts', while green skirts were associated with lotus leaves.

Trousers or leggings could be worn under a skirt or gown by both males and females; the shape and styles changed over the period, becoming larger in the later Qing.

Collars

The collar or *peijian* (shawl) gradually moved from a functional garment to ornamentation. During the Qing dynasty regulations dictated that court apparel included a matching shawl or collar. There were collars for both winter and summer.

A popular design was the cloud shawl, or cloud cape, which depicted four stylised clouds pointing in each direction to bring good luck. This was originally developed from a feathered cape. It was usually worn by young women of social status, and was intricately embroidered with flowers, insects and scenes.

Collecting in the West

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century new styles in Western art and design (including fashion), along with developments in transport and increased foreign travel, came together to foster an interest in the collection of 'Oriental' artefacts.

Barker himself travelled in India and the Americas before he moved to China. Sir Michael Sadler, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Leeds during Barker's Professorship, wrote of meeting the explorer Sir Aurel Stein on his travels to India, and being given advice on where and when to buy mandarin robes.

Chinese and Japanese costumes were seen as exotic additions to the Western wardrobe. Female robes complemented the aesthetic movement, while fancy dress was popular amongst the upper classes.

Celebrate 50 years of East Asian Studies at Leeds

In the autumn of 1963 the Department of Chinese Studies at the University of Leeds took in its first students under founding Professor Owen Lattimore.

In the fifty years since then, East Asian Studies at Leeds has expanded to include Mongolian, Japanese, Thai, South East Asian and Asia-Pacific Studies. Over 1,500 students have graduated from East Asian Studies at Leeds, and have gone on to succeed in a wide range of careers and other enterprises.

This exhibition is part of a series of events, culminating in October 2013.

More information can be found at

www.leeds.ac.uk/arts/info/125190/50th_anniversary_of_east_asian_studies

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