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IMPERIAL DRAGON IN THE ROARING TWENTIES: QING DYNASTY DRESS RE-MADE

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ABSTRACT: The study focuses on the methodology of research on recycled clothing. Two Chinese Dragon Robes from the collection of the Náprstek Museum were re-made as a men's jacket and a woman's evening dress. Both examples are described, analysed and interpreted from two points of view: as authentic Dragon Robes in its original Imperial China setting, as well as newly made clothes in the context of the early 20th century Western culture.

KEY WORDS: China – Qing Dynasty – clothing – Dragon Robes – Twelve Imperial symbols – Chinoiserie – clothing recycling – clothing research methodology

Introduction: Recycling Textiles

Previous detailed study about the collection of Dragon Robes kept in the Náprstek Museum, focused on a material depiction accompanied by a theoretical frame dealing with their social role, as compared to the so-called “organisation dress” worn by members of contemporary organisations where uniformed clothing is required (Heroldová 2016). The construction and design of Dragon Robes were enacted by the Qing dynasty Imperial edicts, and the modern “organisation dress” is often directly set (for medical staff, for example) or required by the rules of conduct within the organization (men's and women's suits for management). The aim of the comparison was to point out the role of the garments in the social hierarchy that transcend different cultures and periods in history.

The uniformed garment such as the Qing dynasty Dragon Robes and the contemporary organisation dress separates the individual from the others outside the organisation, as well as creates the sense of unity within the organisation.

The above-mentioned study was based upon the description and analysis of 31 Dragon Robes kept in the Náprstek Museum. However, there are two examples

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that were not included in the study due to their style. One Dragon Robe was re-made into a men's jacket, and the other one a ladies' evening gown. Nevertheless, because both garments can be described as 20th century Western style clothes based on Chinese Dragon Robes, they can become the subject of study for Chinese influences on Western clothing in particular, as well as on textile recycling in general.

Both garments represent examples of recycled clothes. Recycling is a common way of making new clothes from original garments. New clothes are made from used fabrics either from a lack of new material or for aesthetic reasons. Valuable and beautiful textiles were often re-made. However, the recycled garments nowadays pose problems to museum curators. It is difficult to date, especially if it is made of parts from various geographic regions and periods of times. A recycled garment is also difficult to sell in the antiquities market, and it is at best sold only as curios. Although recycled garments are found in museum collections, contemporary studies about Chinese clothing rarely deal with it. Usually, the recycled garment is mentioned as the example of destruction.

Paul Haig and Marla Shelton in the chapter *Unfinished and Otherwise* in their study *Thread of Gold: Chinese Textile Ming to Ch'ing* noted that fragments of beautiful and ancient Chinese textiles and garments are commonly used in fashion and interior design. However, they especially mention the desirable result of recycling if the textile is not destroyed and is employed in its whole. For example; scholar-official "rank badges" re-made to women bags and purses. However, re-modelled, re-cut, re-made, and re-constructed garments (such as "the consort's robe ... made into a cocktail dress") is destroyed and devalued for museum collections and antiquities markets (Haig – Shelton 2006: 288, Fig. 296).

If we believe that recycling means destroying, a recycled garment is thus reflected as a lost connection with the past. Simply speaking, only the intact, original garment represents the trustworthy, genuine connection with the past, and only such an object is worth of study.

However, this paper will argue that recycled clothes cannot be judged with pity, to be viewed as only a destroyed, but once valuable, ancient and beautiful item. Recycling rescues used and damaged garment for further use, and nowadays for further research. Moreover, recycling opens a new range of questions. Clothing, much the same as other objects of material culture, was originally produced for a relatively short-term use, a few years, perhaps decades. Recycling gives a new life to used items, and recycled garment gain new context and new meaning.²

The collection of Chinese textiles in the Náprstek Museum was established in the late 19th century and in the first half of the 20th century when the collectors were interested mainly in genuine, original textiles and garment. Therefore, there are only a few examples of recycled clothing and accessories. One example is represented by a lady's handbag made of two "rank badges" – square-shaped badges worn on their top coats by scholars-officials during the Qing dynasty. Similar handbags are often found in museums and private collections, and are still sold in the antiquities market. However,

² Recycled clothing becomes a new focus for scholars and museums. This trend is already captured by museum exhibitions. Recycled clothing including one of the Dragon Robes depicted further in this study (Dragon Robe/men's jacket) was exhibited in the part entitled "Orientalism" in the exhibition "Retro", held in the National Museum, Prague (17 July 2016–31 May 2017). The permanent exhibition "StrawGold: Cultural Transformations Rendered Visible" (Museum der Kulturen Basel, 25 October 2014) deals with recycled materials including textiles and clothes.

in the collection of the Náprstek Museum the handbag represents rather an oddity. If it formerly did not belong to a large private collection of Chinese items given to the museum in 1961, it would hardly have become a part of the museum collection.³

Therefore, the majority of items in the collection of Chinese textiles and garments in the Náprstek Museum represent the genuine and original objects. However, there are examples of recycled clothes that deserve our attention because they open a methodological question: *should they be analysed as a genuine ancient Chinese garment, or as a recycled, new one*. The following study is thus devoted to two examples of recycled Chinese garments that are depicted and analysed according to both of their contexts: the original, and the new one.

The Original Dragon Robes

Dragon Robes represent the dress of the members of the Qing dynasty bureaucracy (1644–1911). After the Manchus conquered the territory of the Ming dynasty, China became greatly populated by ethnic Han inhabitants. Due to this, the Manchu emperors established rules that defined the Manchus and the Han. These rules included a dress code for the Imperial family and officials.⁴ The dress code combined Manchu and Ming Chinese traditions. The cut of the garment was based upon Manchu traditional clothings, whereas the prescribed design was influenced by the previous dynasties imperial clothing. Buddhist, Taoist and various visual motifs came from the Chinese Han tradition.

The cut of the Dragon Robes were a simple “A-style”, with long, narrow sleeves with large cuffs that were extended beyond the wearers outstretched hands fingers. The front of the robe was made from two overlapping parts with small buttons on one side.

The Dragon Robe designed for male wearers (wives of officials also shared the right to wear the same dress with rank symbols as their husbands during important occasions) had high slits on each side and in the mid front and mid back. These slits run in the side and middle seams, as the left and the right parts of the garment were sewn together in the middle seam. The front and back side of the robe was cut in one piece, and as a result, the robes had no shoulder seam. The sleeves, cut from the same fabric as the body were short. The long narrow sleeves made of different fabric, usually black or dark blue in colour were added, and these were finished with large cuffs. The neckline was round and close to the neck. The neckline and overlapping opening were hemmed with large hem.

Dragon Robes were made of twill or satin silk weaves. Summer robes were made of light gauze. The robes were either embroidered with silk threads and gold-work or adorned with in-weave brocading techniques. The colour of the robes was prescribed

³ See Heroldová 2011. The draw-string handbag is made of two embroidered rank badges with the images of leopards that indicate the 3rd military rank. According to its design, the rank badges are dated to the period after 1850, mostly probably to 1890s. The handbags made of Chinese textiles regularly appeared in the European markets, and the similar handbags were produced since the early 20th century through the 1920s and 1930s. The handbag belonged to the collection of Chinese items collected by Rudolf Dvořák (1860–1920), linguist, historian and translator who established Chinese studies in Bohemia.

⁴ The dress code was published in 1796 in a vast encyclopedic work *Huangchao liqi tushi* 皇朝礼器图式. (Illustrated Regulations for the Ceremonial Paraphernalia of the Imperial Court). Garment is depicted in the volume entitled “Hats and Robes” (*Guanfu* 冠服). For detailed study, see Medley 1982.

by the Imperial regulations. In the 19th century, the officials' Dragon Robes were usually brown and dark blue, sometimes purple. Shades of yellow colors were for the Emperor and the Imperial family.

Decorative as well as symbolic motifs were also prescribed by Imperial regulations. The dominant visual motif represented eight dragons: three large dragons with twisted bodies were placed on the front, three at the back and two dragons on the shoulders. The ninth dragon was sometimes added on the hidden overlapped front part of the robe. Dragons were depicted among the clouds, together with Buddhist and Taoist symbols as well as auspicious symbols. About one third of the Dragon Robe in its bottom part was decorated with deep water design with turbulent waters. In its waves religious and auspicious symbols were placed. The most important symbol of the sacred mountain representing the Earth rested in the center of the robe in the waves.

In addition to the above-depicted design, the Emperor's Dragon Robe was embellished with Twelve Imperial symbols (*shu'er zhang*). The same Twelve Imperial symbols appeared on the Emperor's court robes.⁵ The origin of the Twelve Imperial symbols is not entirely clear. Some of the symbols probably originated during the first millennium BCE (Garrett 1999: 4, 53). Since the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) emperors wore them on their garment (Dickinson – Wrigglesworth 2000: 79). The symbols of the Sun and the Moon appeared on the robes worn by the Mongolian rulers of the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368). The official portraits of the emperors of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) show them wearing yellow colour robes with dragons and two rows of symbols on the front part. Early Manchu emperors, however, probably avoided the Imperial symbols, and the symbols reappeared later during the Qianlong emperor era (1711–1799) when the encyclopedia *Huangchao liqi tushi* was published (Dickinson – Wrigglesworth 2000: 79; Cammann 1947: 9–16). Same as the origin of the symbol is unclear, their interpretation is also difficult (Dickinson – Wrigglesworth 2000: 82). In general, they are nowadays interpreted as the symbols of a perfect ruler, or as the ceremonial, sacrificial and cosmological symbols (Dickinson – Wrigglesworth 2000: 82).

The Twelve Imperial symbols are placed on the Dragon Robes in three imaginary concentric circles. On the bottom of the robes front, two vases with images of a tiger and a monkey (the astrological element of metal) and an aquatic plant (water element) are depicted. However, on the back of the garment there are sixty grains (wood element), and flames of fire (fire element). Above these, (on the front part of the robe) there is an axe (Justice and the emperor's power to punish) and two opposite lines called the *fu* design (perhaps a symbol of the rightful decision. The design on the robes back continues with two small dragons and a bird called a Flowery Creature, or a Phoenix (the symbol of the Emperor and the Empress). The last imaginary circle is placed on the shoulders, where there is the Sun and the Moon. The front of the robe shows a constellation of three stars (the centre of the Heavens), and finally, the last image (located on the garments back) is of the mountain representing the Earth.⁶

⁵ Court robe (*chao fu*) represented the most formal dress for the Emperor and his officials. Court robes were worn for important state occasions. Their cut was rather archaic, with a narrow body and sleeves and a wide pleated skirt. The Twelve Imperial symbols were located on the body. Dragon Robes (*mangpao*, *lungpao*, also called "festive" and "auspicious" robes *jifu*) represented the second level of the dress code, i. e. less formal style worn during "routine administrations" (Dickinson – Wrigglesworth 2000: 44).

⁶ About the position of Twelve Imperial symbols on various types of robes, interpretation of the symbols in detail, see Dickinson – Wrigglesworth 2000: 79–92.

Example 1. The Original Garment: Dragon Robe with Twelve Imperial Symbols

The Dragon Robe with Twelve Imperial symbols from the collection of the Náprstek Museum is made of yellow silk satin adorned with rich colourful embroidery. According to the shape of clouds it can be dated to the end of the 19th century⁷. Between the clouds there are bats embroidered in red colour. Turbulent waters on the bottom part of the robe are formed by intertwined waves. The robe is lined in blue silk.

Example 1. The Recycled Dress: Men's Jacket

The men's jacket based on a Dragon Robe with the Twelve Imperial symbols is relatively well preserved, even if it shows definite signs of wear, judging by loose threads in the shoulder area. The jacket was purchased in 1973 from an antiquities shop "Klenoty" ["Jewellery"]. These shops sold jewellery, antiquities as well as imported commodities from African and Asian countries that had good political and commercial contacts with the Communist Czechoslovakia since the 1950s to the early 1990s. The shops provided contemporary products, good replicas, and also genuine antiquities.

From a first glance, the jacket appears to be a genuine Chinese garment with its rich embroidery and gold-work dragons. However, closer examination reveals that the jacket is a recycled garment, and the recycling significantly changed the appearance and the meaning of the garment. The original Dragon Robe was cropped in the central seam and along the sides. As the result, the central dragons placed in the chest of the jacket were badly damaged, and the head of the dragon on the front part was almost destroyed. The deep water design on the bottom part of the robe was cut out, and the fabric was used for constructing new sleeves and a standing collar.

Six little pieces of the fabric were inserted on the back part right under the neckline, and several other narrow strips were added to the underarms. Reconstructing the sleeves and the standing collar with the deep water designed fabric seems a reasonable solution, but the six narrow strips inserted on the back were probably unnecessary. However, there is a possibility that the original Dragon Robe was damaged in the neckline area and mended with the six narrow strips of fabric. The front part of the dress was also modified. The original hem was cut away, and the front overlap got a completely new shape with narrow piping and little metal buttons.

Reconstruction of the dress has significantly changed the placement of the Twelve Imperial symbols. From the original twelve, only ten were left. Symbols on the bottom and middle parts of the garment remained unchanged, with the exception of the symbol *fu* consisting of two curved lines that was partially cut away and partially hidden under the red fabric piping. However, the symbol of three stars and the symbol of the mountain on the front and back under the neckline were completely cut out.

Although the jacket has an appearance of a genuine Chinese garment, the close examination reveals significant intervention to the construction of the garment, which led not only to the damage of the original placement of dragon motifs and Twelve Imperial symbols but also to the corruption of its meaning. However, the strenuous effort given to the reconstruction of the garment shows the attempt either to create

⁷ Dragon Robes can be dated approximately according to the shapes of clouds depicted on them, see Priest 1943: 44.

a new dress or to rescue the ancient one. Unfortunately, the initial purpose is not known, and we only guess that the original dress was probably recycled for the Western market. Whether the jacket was recycled as a luxury home garment, as was the case of many imported Chinese and Japanese robes at the first half of the 20th century, cannot be resolved.

Example 2. The Original Garment: Gauze Dragon Robe

The original Dragon Robe was made of blue silk gauze⁸ with gold-work and embroidery in blue, purple and white colours. The robe did not have slits in the middle seam.⁹ The Dragon Robe carries the usual decor of dragons amongst dense clouds, together with bats, cranes and Buddhist symbols of eternal knots. The deep water design with turbulent waves with Buddhist and auspicious motifs such as wish-granting scepters, fish, coins, and architecture motifs occupies the bottom part of the robe. The turbulent waves are placed above the deep waters design. However, unlike the common Dragon Robes, the deep water design with slanting strips of various colours runs in one direction across the entire width of the robe, towards the top left from the viewer's point of view. Usually, the slanting strips of deep waters head from the right and left sides to the center and meet in the middle seam. Close examination of the embroidery shows the the robe was embroidered after the garment was sewn up. Due to the wrong placement of the deep water design we may assume that the Dragon Robe represents a faulty product.

Example 2. The Recycled Garment: Ladies' Dress

The women's/ladies' dress made from the Summer Dragon Robe has a slightly slim cut and short sleeves. The dress is not lined, and with its length of 120 cm, it reaches approximately below the knees of an average female body. The most significant alternation represents gathering of the fabric on the hips with metal golden colour fasteners embellished with flowers and snakes. The original hem around the neck and on the front part is cut away, and the overlapping front opening forms a distinctive cleavage hemmed with thin blue silk fabric. Due to these alterations the dress has lost the original toughness of the gauze Dragon Robe, and the reconstructed ladies' dress gained pliability and softness.

The dress is made in the style typical for the 1920s. The silhouette is relaxed and at the same time close-fitting, with a deep cleavage and accentuated hips. The exquisite gauze with its rich pattern and gold-work dragons is visually striking. Similar evening and party dresses were fashionable in the so-called "roaring twenties" in Europe and represented a frequent offer for customers of European fashion houses of the period.

Unlike the above-depicted example of the men's jacket, the purpose of the Ladies' Dress is well defined, because it represents a fashionable evening dress. Unlike the original Dragon Robe with Twelve Imperial symbols, the original summer Dragon Robe was probably an originally faulty product sold to a Western market where it became recycled as a woman's dress. The quality of the embroidery, however, shows the Chinese provenance of the original summer Dragon Robe.

⁸ Gauze was used for summer Dragon Robes.

⁹ Dragon Robes without the slits were worn by wives of the Qing dynasty scholars-officials.

Conclusion: Recycling Textiles and Various Contexts

Two garments from the collection of the Náprstek Museum seem to be easily interpreted as examples of recycled clothes. Both are originally Chinese Dragon Robes. One robe was sold in the Western market, probably as a genuine Chinese dress, and the other one was re-made into a Western style ladies' gown. The man's jacket, originally the Dragon Robe with Twelve Imperials symbols, was purchased in a shop that sold antiquities as well as modern replicas imported from Asia. The Ladies' Gown was purchased privately from a collector in the 1960s, and it probably belonged to the owners' family for several decades. The jacket looks like a genuine Chinese garment, but closer examination proves that the original robe was modified, the original design of dragon and Imperial symbols was damaged, and as the result, the original meaning of the dress was completely lost.

Western customers were probably charmed by the vibrant embroidery and gold-work, but they did not recognise the original meaning of the robe with its Imperial symbols. Nowadays we can not determine when and why those modifications were made, and for what purpose the jacket served. The Ladies' Gown represents an example of the 1920s fashionable dress based on colourful Chinese garment. Chinese inspiration was in vogue during the period, and leading fashion designers such as Paul Poiret, Callot Soeurs and House of Worth were inspired by Chinese design and dress construction (Fukai 2004: 98–113). Although the purpose of the Ladies' Gown is clearly defined, we cannot say with certainty where the recycled gown was made. The original Dragon Robe is of Chinese origin, but whether in China or in Europe the later changes were made cannot be stated.

Both examples can be seen as damaged and devalue Chinese clothes as well as attempts to create a new garment. Both new garments have a distinctive Chinese flair in its style (men's jacket) or design (Ladies' Gown). However, with the definition of the Chinese style the differences between the two robes become evident. The men's jacket continues in the original style of the Dragon Robes, where the Ladies' Gown represents a playful variation on the topic. Although the man's jacket was probably sold as a genuine Chinese dress, the Ladies' Gown represents a fashionable chinoiserie chic. Chinoiserie, in its broadest sense of meaning combined Western aesthetic feelings and vision about China, and with its "dramatic mixture of facts and fantasies" (Bolton 2015: 25) served an imaginary window to the other culture. Playfulness and fantasy was important part of chinoiserie aesthetic that was easily grasped by the fashion designers.

The above-depicted examples thus represent garments that fall into two historical and social contexts. Both are based upon Chinese Dragon Robes from the late 19th century. Both had their distinctive meaning as garment of scholars-officials during the Qing dynasty. Both were recycled and appeared in the Western market in the 20th century. However, one probably served as an example of genuine Chinese clothing, while the other one represented the Western fantasy about China.

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Catalogue



Pl. 1

Inv. No. 29088

Dragon robe with Twelve Imperial symbols/man's jacket

Acquisition „Klenoty“ [“Jewellery”], 1976

Length 125 cm

Silk satin, embroidery, goldwork, lining

References (dragon robes with Twelve Imperial symbols):

Dragon robe of an imperial consort, embroidery on gauze, dated approximately 1875 (Garrett 1999: Plate 10, Garrett 2007: Fig. 66).

Dragon robe, kesi weave, late 19th century (Garrett 1999: Plate 17, Garrett 2007: Fig. 23, Fig. 24).

Photo by Jiří Vaněk.



Pl. 2
Inv. No. 29088
Back part



Pl. 3

Inv. No. 29091

Summer dragon robe/ladies' dress

Purchased from a private owner, 1968

Length 120 cm

Silk gauze, embroidery, goldwork

Photo by Jiří Vaněk.



Pl. 4
Inv. No. 29091
Back part