



SOBER LUXURY: THREE EXAMPLES OF LATE KESI SILK TAPESTRIES IN THE NÁPRSTEK MUSEUM

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ABSTRACT: The Chinese silk tapestry called *kesi* represents a traditional method of weaving with distinguished visual effects. Based on ancient Near East weaving techniques it developed in China during the late first millennium into a unique and highly appreciated applied art. *Kesi* tapestry was woven with small bobbins on frames. It resembled embroidery, but it is distinguished by its typical aesthetic appeal, its delicacy and time-consuming labour of the weaver. Its use ranged from decorative hangings to men's and women's clothing. The *kesi* hangings functioned visually as paintings. Its aesthetic and social meaning merged with that of painting. Examples of the Chinese silk tapestry from the late 19th and the 20th century in the Náprstek Museum show three technological and visual possibilities of the technique. A rank badge worn on a coat of a Chinese official during the late 19th century, a 1920s–1930s dress of a fashionable lady, and a souvenir hanging from the second half of the 20th century.

KEY WORDS: China – Chinese aesthetics – Chinese applied arts during the 19th century – Chinese applied arts during the 20th century – weaving methods – tapestry – silk – Chinese dress – Chinese rank badges – *qipao* dress

The Chinese silk tapestry known as *kesi* represents a method of weaving whose intricate designs provide a striking visual effect different from other textiles. For its unique aesthetic features and time-demanding craftsmanship, it has been highly valued for centuries. *Kesi* is a remnant of the ancient contacts between China and the Near East via the Silk Road, yet it nonetheless remains a living art form produced even today in China and the Himalayan region, and sold worldwide on the arts and crafts market.

Ancient as well as more recent examples of *kesi* tapestries are widely found in museum collections. The most common examples are the mandarin robes of Chinese scholars and members of the bureaucracy, which were often executed in *kesi* tapestry.

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This paper is devoted to three examples from the *kesi* collection in the Náprstek Museum in Prague. I have chosen these examples to show the visual appeal of *kesi* technology. The examples were particularly chosen from the large collection for they show clearly the development of the craftsmanship since the late 19th century. The resemblance of *kesi* to painting is often mentioned in scholarly as well as popular studies, and my aim is to analyse why this technique has been so highly acclaimed for its aesthetics. My research was based not only on the objects of the Náprstek Museum, which provided me with the material for theoretical research, but also on my own experience as an embroiderer and weaver, and my own attempts at *kesi* weaving.

The Origin

An extensive study of the origins of *kesi* was written by Schuyler Cammann (1912–1991)². Cammann dates the arrival of the technique to Chinese territory to the “first half of the tenth century” (Cammann 1948: 107, 108), and he places its origin in Central Asia, or even in the Near East. The technique was later developed by the Sogdians, and it was known to the Uighurs and the Khitans (Cammann 1948: 91, 107). Especially, the Uighurs during the Song dynasty (960–1279) were well-known for their craftsmanship (Kuhn 2012: 290), Linguistic analysis of the term *kesi* written in Chinese characters confirms this hypothesis: Cammann concluded that the characters used for writing must be a phonetic transliteration of a foreign word, namely Arabic or Persian, depicting a certain kind of silk textile fabric or dress (Cammann 1948: 95–96). Today, the term *kesi* (or *k'o-ssu*) is usually translated as “carved silk” (Cammann 1948: 93), a reference to the “slits” in the weave caused by the technology of weaving.

Since the earliest accounts in Song dynasty sources, the *kesi* textiles were lauded for their beauty and life-like depiction of animals, flowers, plants and human figures. *Kesi* techniques brought a visual appearance and aesthetic appeal different from loom-woven textiles. As opposed to the repetitive patterns woven on looms, the technology of *kesi* created both tiny intricate designs resembling embroidery and large pictures visually similar to paintings. Loom-woven textiles required complicate technology to control the patterning, but *kesi* is rather simple, though its weaving demands a lot of skill on the part of the weaver. *Kesi* is woven today with small bobbins on frames resembling embroidery frames, and the same utensils are described in historical sources (Cammann 1948: 90–91).

Technology

As stated above, the frames for *kesi* weaving resemble embroidery, whereas bobbins are used during loom weaving. Embroidery is executed by thread on a piece of fabric, weaving creates the fabric. Loom weaving creates many types of complex weaves. For example, one of them, “brocade”, resembles embroidery to an untrained eye, although the patterning is loom-controlled. A supplementary weft thread is used to create a pattern that gives the appearance of embroidery; it creates the pattern on the right side, while on the back side the supplementary weft “floats” loosely on the fabric. The

² „Notes on the Origin of Chinese K'o-ssü Tapestry“. In *Artibus Asiae*, Vol. 11. No. 1,2 (1948), pp. 90–110. Accessed 6. 1. 2012. Online www.jstor.org/stable/3248125

supplementary weft either runs from selvage to selvage or is cut away and left only in places where it creates the pattern. The main weft runs from selvage to selvage.

Kesi technique looks like embroidery or brocade, however its technology is unique. Unlike brocade, the weft does not run from selvage to selvage. The weft threads of various colours run back and forth only on pattern areas. When two opposite weft threads of two different colours “meet” in one place, one weft thread turns around one warp thread and goes back, whereas the other weft thread turns around the other warp thread and goes back, which produces a “slit” between the two areas of different colours. These slits are visible when the areas of different colours are large in size or the slit runs perfectly vertically. These slits are a distinctive characteristic for the *kesi* weave.

The delicacy of the *kesi* weave was enabled by the use of fine silk threads. Silk thread was used for weft, whereas a thicker thread (for example cotton) can be used as warp. Examples from the Náprstek Museum show abundant use of metallic thread of golden colour for the weft, which was made of thin metallic foil, paper painted with golden or silver colour, or paper with glued metallic foil twisted around a silk or cotton thread. According to the composition of the metallic foil, the colour of the thread varies from shining golden to rusty copper. Although it may seem that the thread is really “gold”, compositions of copper, silver and gold were mostly used.³

Kesi is distinctive for simplified forms and minimal modelling of the design (Kares n.p.). Although the design may be very delicate and finely executed, a certain flatness, due to the limited employment of shading, characterizes the aesthetic appeal of *kesi*. The technology of *kesi* weaving created shadings only in horizontal strips. However, painted details and shading were often added, as we can see from the examples discussed further. Details were painted on a large woven area, and shading was added to enliven the colour and add depth to the flowers and plants. On one hand, this method can be interpreted as a deterioration of the formerly elaborate weaving technique, because the intricate details ceased to be woven and began to be painted. On the other hand, *kesi* thus becomes, both technologically and aesthetically, a genuine hybrid between weaving and painting.

Aesthetic appeal

Kesi's visual semblance to painting was studied by Jean L. Kares⁴. She points out that *kesi* hangings functioned visually as paintings (Kares n.p.), depicting topics that belonged to traditional Chinese painting genres. Large *kesi* works, which from a distance resembled scroll paintings, were hung on the walls in wealthy houses (Kuhn 2012: 460). Small pieces such as book covers were appreciated in the privacy of a gentleman's studio. However, close examination of *kesi* works revealed a delicate and time-consuming labour of weavers. *Kesi* works were very costly, and their usage was based both on their role as an art form similar to painting, as much as on their cost and luxurious appearance. Traditionally, *kesi* works were ideal gifts within diplomatic and

³ Nord, Anders G. and Kate Tronner. „A Note on the Analysis of Gilded Metal Embroidery Threads“. *Studies in Conservation*, Vol. 45, No. 4 (2000), pp. 274–279. Accessed 6. 1. 2012. Online <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1506864>

⁴ Kares, Jean. „Translation of Medium: *Kesi* Meets Painting“. *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*. Paper 106, 2008. Accessed 31. 5. 2012. Online <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf/106>

court circles (Mailey 1961), though *kesi* textiles were also used for clothes and dress accessories. During the late Qing era, the *kesi* textiles nevertheless represented a sober and simple luxury, as compared to other fabrics. The power of *kesi* was hidden in the audience's knowledge of its cost and value rather than in its appearance. There were more flamboyant and opulent fabrics; eye-catching brocades and shimmering golden thread embroideries that were visually more appealing than the discreet beauty of *kesi*.

***Kesi* textiles in the Náprstek Museum**

The museum's collection of *kesi* comprises 46 items. Clothes and dress accessories are dated mainly to the second half of the 19th century. Eighteen items belonged to the collection of 207 Chinese and Japanese textiles owned by Růžena Trnožková, and they were donated to the museum after her death in 1936.⁵ Some of the late 19th century *kesi* examples appeared in the museum from the 1960s to 1980s. The majority of these later acquisitions were sold by private owners, though some were purchased from the "Klenoty" ("Jewellery") shops, a state-owned network established during the 1950s and open until the early 1990s. Under Communist rule, the "Klenoty" shops were the one place for Czech citizens legally to buy "luxurious" and "Oriental" goods, which also included antiquities and well-made copies. Unfortunately, the archival documents dealing with the "Klenoty" network kept in the National Archives of the Czech Republic are still not open for research.

The majority of the collection represents clothes and dress accessories, while the rest consist of various fragments.

Thirteen examples of *kesi* are represented by official male dress, the so-called dragon robes, and the semi-official female one-piece dress worn by Manchu women in the late Qing China. Seventeen items are "rank badges", dated on the basis of design to the period after 1850. The rank insignia were worn by the members of the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing dynasty (1644–1911) bureaucracy to indicate one of nine official ranks.⁶ The badges, squares approximately 30 x 30 cm in size, were worn on the front and back parts of the official surcoat. The rank badges were decorated with woven or embroidered design of an animal or bird according to one of the nine military or civil service ranks.

The examples from the late Qing period represent *kesi* with painted details. The quality of weaving is uneven. There are items neatly woven, while other pieces are of lesser quality. Some pieces are worn out, with loosened and tattered threads.

Painted details and shading were used on dress, rank badges and dress accessories. Usually, a large area is executed in one colour, and the details and shades are then painted. Outlines are often painted in black ink, as well as long narrow lines that are difficult to weave, such as depictions of bird feathers and rocks. Painted shading in red or blue is used mainly for flower petals and clouds. Besides painted shading,

⁵ The list of items is kept in the administrative documentation in the Náprstek Museum. According to an adjacent letter written by her lawyer, Mrs. Trnožková was the widow of a "general director", and the items were collected by her deceased husband. See Heroldová, Helena, „Rank Badges from the Chinese Collection of the Náprstek Museum“. *Annals of the Náprstek Museum* 32 (2011): 87–138, and Heroldová, Helena, „‘Golden lilies’ from the Collection of the Náprstek Museum, Prague, Czech Republic“. *Annals of the Náprstek Museum* 28 (2007): 79–116.

⁶ More about the collection of woven and embroidered rank badges is in Heroldová, Helena, „Rank Badges from the Chinese Collection of the Náprstek Museum“. *Annals of the Náprstek Museum* 32 (2011): 87–138.

occasionally there are a few examples of horizontal woven *kesi* shading. There are also examples of fine metallic threads employed for weaving either the background (for example for rank badges or fan cases) or designs such as flower roundels and stylized Chinese characters.

A group of six pictorial hangings with scenes from traditional Chinese painting is dated to the second half of the 20th century, was sold to the museum by private owners. The hangings are small pieces, approximately 40 cm by 30 cm. They are neat and finely executed with thin metallic thread of golden colour and silk threads in beige, blue, black and red colours. Even small details are woven, and only tiny details like faces are painted.

Rank Badge

The rank badge (inv. no. A1786, Fig. 1) represents a *kesi* from the second half of the 19th century.⁷ The badge was donated to the museum in 1961, and comes from the collection of Professor Rudolf Dvořák (1860–1920), rector of Charles University in Prague in 1915–1916, polyglot, translator of fundamental works of Chinese philosophy into Czech and founder of Chinese studies in Bohemia.

The rank badge is lined with a broad embroidered border made of hems of a woman's jacket or dress. Remakes such as this were quite common in the early 20th century, when rank badges were remade into pillows and women's purses or handbags, and sold to customers in European markets.

The original rank badge is 19 cm by 18 cm large. It is sewn from two parts, which means that it was originally worn on the front side of a man's dress. At its centre is the image of a crane, which represents the 1st civil rank according to the system of nine civil and nine military ranks of members of the bureaucracy in late imperial China. The white crane with spread wings and typical tail feathers is perching on a rock symbolizing the land above the sea, represented by tumbling weaves and diagonal lines. This decor appeared on rank badges after 1850, and it serves today as a source of date ascription (Jackson and Hugus: 268). Around the crane, the auspicious motives of clouds and a selection of Buddhist and Taoist symbols including a fish, a vase, an umbrella, a sword, crutches and a flute, a gourd, a fan, a canopy, as well as bats, the sacred fungus of longevity (*Polyporus lucidus*), peony, *prunus*, and narcissus flowers are displayed in a circular design. The sun, an indispensable element in rank badges design, is placed in the left position in the design which means that the rank badge was worn by a man. Around the central design, there is a narrow rim with *kesi* woven in a swastika pattern.

The rank badge is designed in golden, white and blue colours with hints of red. The background is made of golden metallic weft thread. The crane is white with a red head feathers, while the sea, rocks and auspicious symbols are mainly in various shades of blue with white and red details.

The golden metallic background is rather loose. The weft thread is worn out and tattered, and the plain weave is clearly visible. Large areas of silk *kesi* design are woven in one colour, namely white or blue. The outlines and details are painted with black ink (see for example the feathers on the crane's body and wings or outlines of auspicious

⁷ For rank badges, see Jackson, Beverly a David Hugus. *Ladder to the Clouds. Intrigue and Tradition in Chinese Rank*. Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 1999.

symbols). Shading in red and blue is used to enliven the flowers and the flying bats. The details in red and the sun are woven with red weft thread. However, the close examination brought me a “technological” surprise. The clouds are presented in light blue, dark blue and black colour in a complex shape with many tiny curves that makes one wonder how fine the weaving must have been. However, a closer look reveals that the clouds are executed only in two colours – light and dark blue, while the black parts are painted.

Qipao Dress

The *qipao* (inv. no. 46674, Fig. 2) donated to the museum by a private owner in the 1980s represents a very well preserved example of a female dress dated according to its style to the 1930s. It is a modern Chinese *qipao*, a very fashionable one-piece garment that came into vogue during the second decade of the 20th century. As opposed to the traditional Chinese female clothing, it represented a “very daring style, revealing the shape of a woman’s figure as never before” (Garrett: 147). Originally, it comes from a body-hugging one-piece Manchu female dress worn during the Manchu Qing dynasty (1644–1911). After the fall of the dynasty, during the first years and decades of the Republic, the *qipao* was tailored more and more tightly fitting. The modern version developed in the 1920s is a long dress with slender and fitting shape, short and long sleeves, high-cut stiff collar and long slits along both sides of the skirt. The dress opens on one side, and is fastened by small frog knots or buttons. *Qipaos* made of cotton were for everyday use, though there were also exquisite silk fashionable examples worn by famous socialites, movie stars and wives of high-ranking officials. *Qipaos* were printed, embroidered or woven. They were decorated with traditional embroidery motives, but woven or printed *qipaos* often sported modern designs.

The example from the Náprstek Museum collection is made of light blue *kesi* fabric with white and yellow-green hydrangea flowers, *prunus* flowers and butterflies. The dress is underlined with dark blue twill weave silk covered with a design of large areas of tiny white squares executed in a tie-dye technique resembling Japanese *shibori*. Traditionally, the *shibori* patterns were achieved when the selected areas of fabric were tightly bound with a thread. Then the fabric was dyed, but the bound areas remained undyed.

The tie-dye technique gives the dress a certain Japanese flair. Additionally, though the design of butterflies and *prunus* flowers is traditionally Chinese, the hydrangeas are flowers celebrated traditionally in Japanese as well as Chinese art.

The *kesi* fabric is made of plain-weave silk, and the large flowers of hydrangeas as well as *prunus* and butterflies are woven in white silk. The flowers’ shading is painted, as are the details such as the lines and dots on butterflies wings and *prunus* flowers, which are of black, blue, reddish and yellow-green colour. However, the leaves, *prunus* buds and small butterflies’ wings are woven in yellow, green and red silk.

The dress gives a very neat and fresh feeling of sober luxury. The light blue colour of the fabric together with its hidden dark blue and white underlining creates a visually appealing contrast. Although the underlining and the *kesi* fabric represent two different techniques, they are well matched together. The overall appearance of the dress expresses a subdued elegance and discreet luxury.

Hanging

The item no. A17169 (Fig. 3) is one of the set of four *kesi* hanging presented to the museum during the 1980s by a private owner. Three of them show similarities in technique and overall appearance, and came probably from a single source.

The hanging I have chosen for its aesthetically pleasing nature as an example is a rectangle 37 cm by 25.5 cm. It depicts a landscape designed in shades of blue, grey, ochre, brown, green, and black, with large areas in metallic thread of golden colour that represents the water surface. Woven shading in long horizontal strips is used for hills and rocks.

The motif of mountain and river scenery is well known from Chinese painting for centuries. In the centre of the composition there is a pine tree standing on top of a rock in the foreground. On both sides there are rocks and hills whereas the space between them represents the water, either a lake or a river. On the background there are clouds symbolizing the vast space of the sky above the landscape. The vastness of the sky is associated with a religious symbol: the pagoda on a distant hill. In the foreground, the village houses represent the world of human beings while the solitary traveller in a fisherman's boat slowly passes the houses towards the distant sky. Full of symbols, hints and allusions based on the long history of Chinese literature, philosophy and visual culture, this image appears in plenty of versions in traditional Chinese painting. Here it is presented on a small-scale format of a decorative textile hanging. One may ask whether the former owner who donated it to the museum realized the culture history behind the simple scene or did he/she see it only as a beautiful object. Did the hanging either serve some everyday purpose such as a place mat under a vase or tableware in a contemporary living room or was it given a culturally more elevated status when it framed, glassed and mounted on a wall as a "painting"?

Conclusion

The above-mentioned examples from the collection of the Náprstek Museum represent one weaving technique used in various social and cultural contexts within Chinese tradition. Here we have a rank badge from the end of the 19th century worn on the dress of an official as a sign of his position in a governmental hierarchy of the Chinese empire. Then, there is a modern fashionable garment worn by an emancipated lady during the 1930s. The most recent example is a decorative hanging, perhaps a souvenir or an official gift to a Western visitor of China, dated to the second half of the 20th century.

All three objects are woven in the traditional Chinese tapestry technique called *kesi*. Although one technique is used, the objects provide a different aesthetic appeal. The craftsman's skill, the quality of materials as well as the purpose of the object are intertwined into various visual results. The rank badge represents a social symbol of a very high-ranking member of the society. However, it seems not to have been very well executed. It is damaged now, and its damage witness the low quality of its material, especially the metallic thread which is now worn and loosened. The painted details show that they were used as a substitute for a more elaborate and more time-demanding weaving. The repetitive composition of its design confirms that the rank badge was produced during the late days of the Chinese empire when the former glory of its imperial official was almost over. On the other hand, the female dress represents a very high-quality and neatly rendered handicraft. There is a lot of painted shading and details on the *kesi*, but the painting serves the obvious aesthetic purpose, enlivening the colours of the woven hydrangea flowers and adds depth to its flower petals. The sober colours of the dress match well with the *kesi* design. The final result gives a picture of discreet luxury and elegance. As for the contemporary decorative

hangings, they are delicate and high-quality work with traditional topics. Aesthetically, they are based upon the ancient *kesi* textiles (Mailey 1961), and a certain flatness of the design with simplified motifs and simple but bright colours refer to traditional models.

The discussed examples from the Náprstek Museum cover one century in a centuries-old tradition of *kesi* weaving. They show the strong points of its aesthetics as well as shortcomings in its technology, and no less provide an outline of its development: the approach defined by its well defined visual simplicity that emphasises the weaving, and the refined and sophisticated approach that combines weaving and painting.

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Fig. 1: Rank Badge, Inv. No. A1786.



Fig. 2: *Qipao* Dress, Inv. No. 46674. Photo by Jiří Vaněk.

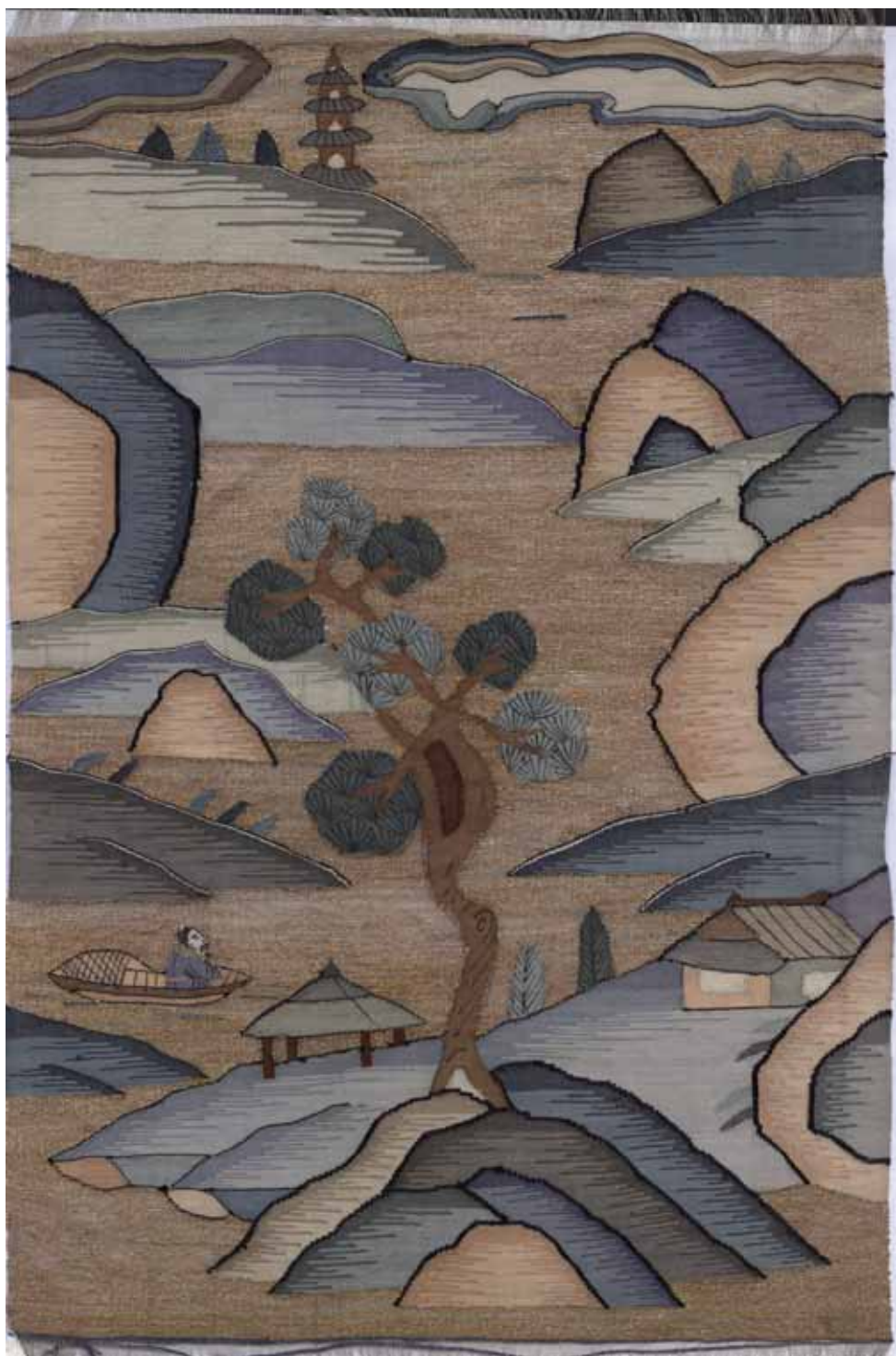


Fig. 3: Hanging, Inv. No. A17169.