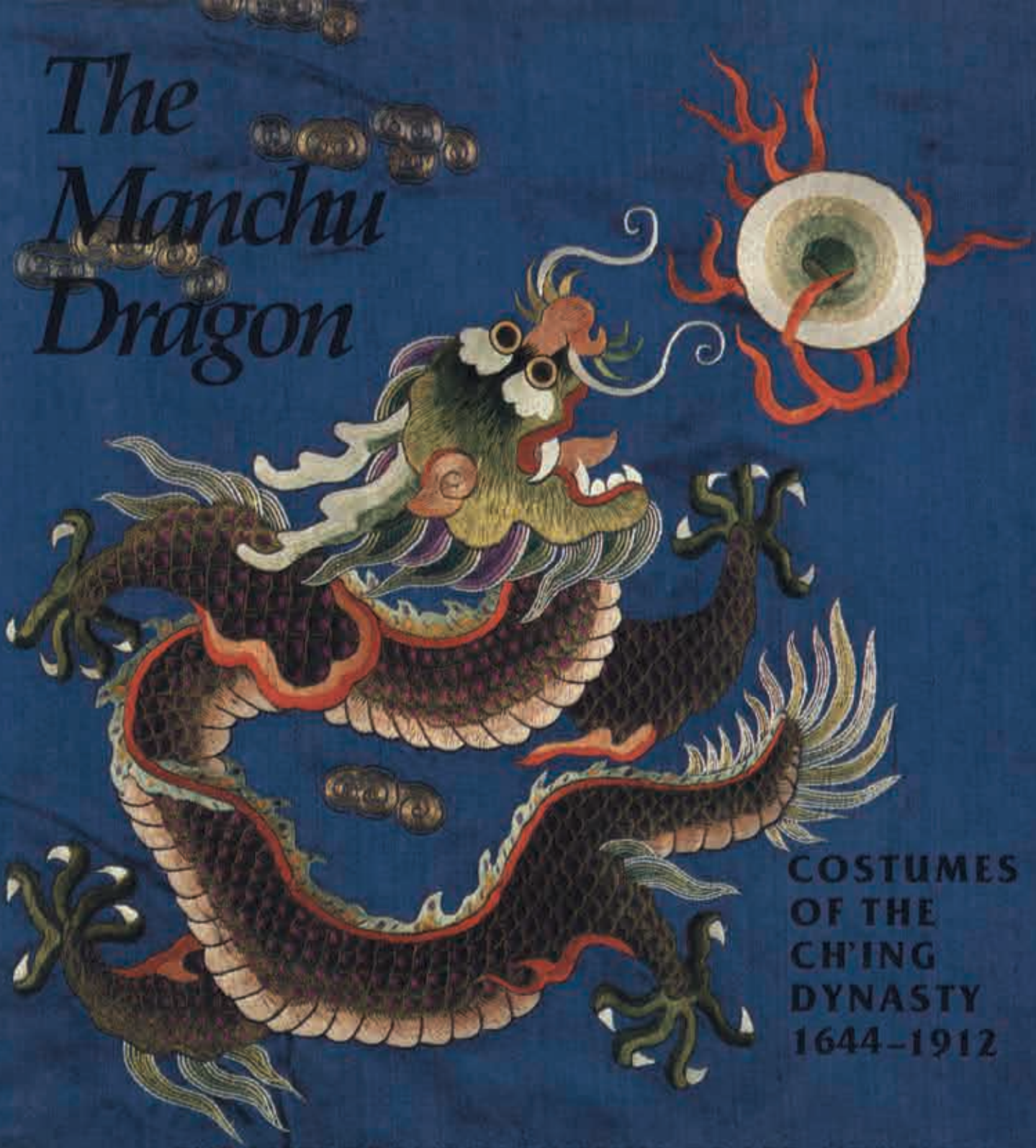
The Manchu Dragon



COSTUMES OF THE CH'ING DYNASTY 1644–1912

THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, NEW YORK

The Manchu Dragon

COSTUMES OF THE CH'ING DYNASTY 1644–1912

JEAN MAILEY

Curator, Textile Study Room

Accompanying the exhibition

THE MANCHU DRAGON: COSTUMES OF CHINA— THE CH'ING DYNASTY

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ON THE COVER: Ninth dragon from underflap of late Ch'ing dragon robe. Robe, blue satin embroidered with river pearls, coral beads, silks, and couched, wrapped gold and silver yarns. L., nape of neck to hem, 55 in. T'ung-chih period (1862–74). Gift of Robert E. Tod, 1929 (29.36)

BACKCOVER: The flowery bird, sixth of the twelve sacrificial emblems woven into the emperor's dragon robe. According to some scholars, the twelve emblems together represent the qualities of a good Confucian ruler. Detail of robe on page 17

FRONTISPIECE: Ancestor portraits with women and some men dressed in costumes of Ming style. Such portraits were apparently made throughout the Ch'ing period. A similar portrait bears an inscription that dates it to the 1890s. Ink and color on paper, 62¾ × 45⅛ in. Gift of Mrs. F. L. Hough, 1969 (69.100)

Detail of dragon robe on page 22

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Confronted dragons. The dragon is almost always shown in some form of the symbolic universe framework of land, water, and clouds and in a pose that illustrates one or another of its numerous aspects: rampant, ascending, descending, or running, as here. Detail of summer robe of state on page 19

Foreword

IN THE LAND of jade, everything seems possible and, in many ways, more vivid than life—the sky bluer, the air stronger with contrasts from poetry to violence. China: a vast land of orchids, Mongolian tigers, gardens, palaces, dazzling smiles, and raucous laughter, forests of camellias, birds of every color, wide seas of ponds filled with lotus petals. From the towns and villages, copper chimes and bronze bells ring out across the extraordinary landscapes. Don't forget the unique and beguiling panda bears and the other pleasures the Chinese have given us, such as ice cream, fireworks, and pasta.

We show here in our exhibition magnificent embroideries from the Ch'ing dynasty (1644–1912). This is the period when the Manchus ruled China. They swept down from Manchuria in what is now northern China in the seventeenth century and toppled the native Chinese dynasty, the Ming. They were outsiders, but quickly took up the customs and styles of the people they had conquered, never losing their own freshness

and energy, which sustained them into this century.

These embroideries are of the most remarkable colors. When the Manchus say red, they mean it in seven different tonalities. When they put a green willow on perhaps three inches of exquisite silk, there are four shades of green worked into the fabric. There is little variation in the silhouettes, but they all have the mood of luxury and leisure.

Leisure is a very big point. The Manchus had strong minds, strong wills—they led the way and followed no one—and were filled with the exquisite refinement of luxury. They surrounded themselves with large inlaid sofas with embroidered pillows, hand-painted curtains of satin or silk gauze, and lovely girls playing on reed flutes. The scholar had a beautiful porcelain pillow to hold his wrist as he worked at his desk covered with a satin tablefront. It was all endlessly pretty and charming.

The famous dowager empress Tz'u-hsi (1834–1908) was the possessor of a dazzling smile and an extraordinary presence. A very shrewd woman, she did not wish to own anything that anyone else could possibly possess—it must be one of its kind. According to Princess Der Ling, lady-in-waiting to the empress and chronicler of her court, Tz'u-hsi owned the greatest collection of precious stones in existence in her time. There was Queen Victoria's valuable collection and that of the czarina of Russia, but it is said that Tz'u-hsi's was more amazing than both these put together. She was obsessed with pearls, and thought diamonds no more valuable than glass. Her jades had the quality of fantasy—there was nothing like them anywhere else in the world. She wore three sets of jade bracelets—smooth and flawless. She used jade chopsticks tipped in gold. She ate from jade plates if the food was not too greasy—otherwise the plates were of gold or silver.

All this took place in the land of jade—

DIANA VREELAND
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The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Historical Background

The Manchus were originally Mongol and Tungusic forest tribes from northeast of the Great Wall of China. They hunted, fished, and trapped for a living and traded ginseng and sable furs with Ming garrisons on the Liaotung peninsula. As the more successful tribal chiefs established farms and estates in the frontier zone between themselves and the Wall, an agrarian civilization similar to that of China grew up. By 1644, the time of the Manchu invasion of China, Manchu tribesmen had learned how to mine and smelt iron for tools and weapons. Their tribal organization was highly structured. For some time the Ming garrisons controlled these tribes more or less successfully by playing one against the other and giving various preferments and titles in the Ming army. Dragon robes and dragon silks were very acceptable diplomatic gifts and bribes to the Manchus, as to all their neighbors.[1]

Seated youth holding a jasmine spray (?) Manchu family album leaf. Color and ink on paper. 13⅛ × 14⅝ in. Probably K'ang-hsi period (1662–1723). Anonymous Gift, 1952 (52.209.3d)

The Manchus Organize

Success in intertribal fighting brought Nurhaci of the Aisin Gioro clan to the head of a growing confederacy of clans; it also brought him the Ming title of brigadier general, conferred by the Chinese. To control his followers and perpetuate the confederacy of many tribes, Nurhaci organized his troops into 300-man units which, in turn, formed into banners (Chinese *ch'i*) identified by the color of their standards. In 1615 the *ch'i* were subdivided to create a permanent total of eight Manchu banners.

Backed by the military organization thus produced, Nurhaci was able to proclaim himself supreme chieftain of all the Tungusic tribes of Manchuria. In 1616 he founded the Latter Chin dynasty, recalling the name of the Ju-chen dynasty of his ancestors, which had conquered the Northern Sung, and challenging the Ming dynasty. He succeeded in driving most of the Ming forces out of the Liaotung peninsula before he died in 1626.

Nurhaci's successor, Abahai, formally adopted the name Manchu for his people,[2] gradually centralized command of the powerful Manchu forces, and attracted Chinese border generals and their subordinates into the Manchu elite. (The Manchus had always appreciated and desired to acquire both the Chinese Confucian orientation and the Chinese expertise in firearms and artillery, learned from the Portuguese.) By now eight Mongol and eight Chinese banners made up part of the Manchu forces. Emboldened by border victories, Abahai renamed the Manchu empire *Ch'ing* ("the pure"). When he died, his younger brother, Dorgon, commander of the White Banner, carried on Abahai's policies and acted as regent for his young son, Shun-chih.

The Manchus Rule China

At this same time a rebel leader, Li Tzu-ch'eng, captured Peking. The Ch'ung-chên emperor committed suicide. Under General Wu San-kuei, the Ming border garrison guarding the approaches to the Great Wall moved south to defend Peking. Both Dorgon and the successful rebels attempted to bribe the Ming forces to join them. Dorgon's offer of a princely rank in the Manchu Ch'ing hierarchy and his promise to punish the rebels prevailed. General Wu joined the Ch'ing forces, allowing the Manchus through the Great Wall.

Dorgon and his army entered Peking on June 1, 1644. His first decree to the Chinese people read in part:

> Now [the Ming] has been extinguished by roving bandits, and its service [to heaven] is a thing of the past. . . . The empire is not an individual's private property. Whosoever possesses virtue holds it. The army and the people are not an individual's private property. Whosoever possesses virtue commands them. We now occupy [the empire]. . . .[3]

The Manchus ruled China for the next 268 years (1644–1912).[4] Their first emperor was Dorgon's nephew, the young Shun-chih (r. 1644–61), brought down from Manchuria.

Succeeding emperors K'ang-hsi (r. 1662–1722) and his grandson Ch'ien-lung (r. 1736–95) were among the greatest in Chinese history.

Early Manchu Costumes and Customs

Some firsthand reports on the Manchus during their early years of success have come down to us. A Chinese gentleman in Yang-chao saw Prince Yü leading the Manchu troops in pursuit of fleeing Ming soldiers in southern China:

> A young man of about thirty, wearing a Manchu hat, red clothes and black satin boots, came riding by. He had a breast-plate of the finest mail; his horse was beautifully caparisoned, and he was attended by a large suite. His features, though Tartar, were extremely handsome; he had a strong chin and a high forehead.[7]

A Dutch trade embassy entering southern China on a mission to the early Ch'ing court had more to report. They wrote of a Manchu field officer:

> this young King was mounted upon a Dapple Gray Horse, with his Quiver of Arrows fastened about his middle, and his Hanger by his side. The coat he had on was lined with Sables, and the wrong side outward; He wore a Red Cap lined with Sables, and behind (which declared the Royal Dignity . . .) hung the end of a Peacock's Tail; The Saddle-Cloth was Gold Tissue embroidered, and about the horse's Neck hung three great Tassels which touched the ground. . . .[8]

The Dutch visitors enjoyed several more or less formal parties. A Manchu general whom they called the viceroy of Cathay invited them to his palace for dinner. He received them wearing a lemon-colored robe embroidered with dragons, a peacock feather in his hat, an archer's ring on his thumb "as was the custom of the Manchus," and sitting on a carpet thrown over a square dais. "Several young and beautiful ladies" were present, an agreeable Manchu custom.[9]

At a second party given by his secretary during the general's absence, the Dutch were entertained "besides the variety and store of well condimented dishes, . . . with a Farce of various Entries, Masquerades, Dancing in the shapes of Lions, Tygers and Leopards. . . ."[8] The general's mother looked in from time to time. "She was very neatly and richly dressed after the Tartar Fashion, middle-sized, slender, of a brown complexion, of a pleasing and taking countenance."[9]

When the Dutchmen reached Nanking on their journey north to Peking, they were again entertained by ruling Manchu officials, but their most vivid encounter occurred when they were "riding out one day to take the Air and to view the City."[10] At the gate of the old imperial court

> sat a great Tartar Lady, with her servants waiting upon her, about forty years of Age: She very civilly sent our Interpreter to invite the Embassadours into her House. . . . She was very debonair and free, looked upon our Swords, and much admired their bending without breaking; she took the Ambassadours Hat and put it on her own Head, and unbutton'd his Doublet almost down to his Waste: Afterwards she led the way into the house, and . . . brought us to her apartment, where we

found her standing with her Daughter about half her age, waiting our coming in great state.

The Daughter was clothed in a Violet-coloured Damask Gown, and the Mother in Black Damask, and had both them their Ears hung with Rings; their Hair braided and twisted about the Heads with Strings of Pearls, but over their hair they wore little caps made of Reed, with a Tassle upon the crown of Red Silk. Their Cloths reached down to their Heels, tyed about the middle with a broad Ribbon, and buttoned down from the Neck to the Waste: Their Shoes were of Black Leather, their faces unmask'd without any Painting. They had us into a large withdrawing room unfurnished, only a few Benches covered with Silk, upon which they desired us to sit. They drank to us several times in their liquor made of Beans, which is very strong, but agrees wondrous well with their constitutions. They set before us some of their Sweetmeats, much entreating us to Eat, excusing the meanness of this Entertainment, Her Husband being absent.[11]

In 1905, close to the end of the Ch'ing dynasty, Katharine Carl's remarks upon the vast difference in status and manner still apparent between Manchu and Chinese women reinforces the impression of the elevated status of women conveyed in the scene above. Unlike the Chinese daughter, whose birth was considered a misfortune, the Manchu daughter was welcomed (though she could not sacrifice to the ancestors, as could her brother). As long as she remained unmarried, she ranked with her brother and took precedence over his wife. She preceded even her mother, for she was of the blood, and her mother of "another family." She could run her brother's household, as she was a born relation, and his wife only acquired. Even after she married and became a member of another family, she could continue dictating to her brother's household. Her father could not make a disposition of his property without her consent. She could remain single, if she wished, or marry late in life if she so desired. In either case she was looked up to by her own family and well regarded by the world at large.[12]

Katharine Carl found Manchu women "not as literary as the Chinese but . . . [with] more social qualities . . . brighter conversationalists, being both witty and gay."[13] Such ladies were still wearing the long unbelted robe with the same riding-coat cut as that of Manchu dragon robes. Their feet were unbound and often large, clad in either platform shoes or embroidered flat slippers. According to Katharine Carl, "the Manchu ladies use much more discretion in wearing jewels than the Chinese ladies. The latter will sometimes wear as many as fifteen bracelets on each arm, and the number of jewels they put in their coiffure seems to be limited only by the space they have at their disposal."[14] Of the Manchu coiffure, she says: "Formerly all Manchu ladies who have marvelous hair carried the hair itself out from this coil [wound flat on top of their heads] over a golden, jade, or tortoise-shell sword-like pin, into a large-winged bow. The Empress Dowager and the Ladies of the Court have substituted satin instead of hair, for this wing-like construction, as being more practicable and less liable to get out of order. So satin-like and glossy is their hair that it is difficult to tell where it ends and the satin begins."[15]

Katharine Carl's observant artist's eye makes her account of her years with the

Mother and daughter. Manchu family album leaf. Ink and color on paper. 13⅞ × 14¾ in. Probably K'ang hsi period (1662–1723). Anonymous Gift, 1952 (52.209.3)i

dowager empress Tz'u-hsi, when she was commissioned to paint the imperial portrait, a gold mine of information on life in the Ch'ing court near the end of the dynasty. Of young Manchu nobles she says:

> The Manchus are a taller race than the Chinese and more athletic-looking. They are fond of exercise, indulge in riding, archery, etc. and do not look down upon a military career as do the Chinese. It is said that polo playing . . . originated among the Tartars. . . . They wear the ordinary

Seventh-degree civil official in dragon coat with mandarin duck rank badge worn over dragon robe. Leaf from a booklet of paintings of Ch'ing court officials. Watercolor on paper. 10⅝ × 6¼ in. 19th century. Gift of Martin S. Rosenblatt, 1957 (57.109g)

Chinese costume, and though it is said "the shaven head and the wearing of the queue" were instituted as marks of degradation for the Chinese . . . the Emperor himself and all the Manchu nobles shave their heads and wear the queue! They wear satin boots with white kid soles. Their hats, in summer of finely woven straw, and of fur in winter, have the crown covered with a tassel of red silk, surmounted by the jeweled button denoting their ranks. From this button stands out, almost at right angles, a jade-mounted aigret, mixed with the peafowl feathers if they have attained that rank. In winter, they wear splendid sable short coats. Except these sable topcoats, fur is never worn on the outside of a garment in China, but is used only as a lining.[9]

Katharine Carl goes on to describe them at the circus at the Summer Palace:

They wore the splendid summer Court costume, embroidered in the double dragon, reaching below the knee. They were tightly belted in around the waist, and very full and ample across the shoulders, giving the men the appearance, at least, of broad shoulders, and enhancing their already fine figures. . . . The belt buckle, the handsomest ornament worn, was of carved jade, ruby quartz, or of beautifully chased gold set with precious stones. They were then wearing a profusion of ornaments dangling from their belts—embroidered cases for fans, chop-sticks and knives, and many other ornaments besides the watch, an indispensable adjunct to every Chinese gentleman's costume. This is worn hanging from the belt in a handsome, embroidered case with an open front, so that the elaborate case, generally studded with jewels, beautifully enameled, or curiously incised, could be seen. This case had a sort of fob attachment made of silken cord, woven into quaint designs and finished generally with a wonderfully carved piece of jade, ruby quartz or some other curious stone.[10]

Early Ch'ing court robe with imperial five-clawed dragons and variations on the longevity character (the hundred shou). Silk and metal tapestry (k'o-ssu). L., nape of neck to hem, 56 in. Bequest of William Christian Paul, 1929 (30.75.5)

The Confucian gentleman-scholar, ideal of both Manchus and Chinese, would have worn the long, slim informal robe of the same cut as the dragon robe, but in a darker, more austere fabric, and would have been practicing beautiful calligraphy in his study rather than attending a circus.

Manchu Dragon Robes and Court Robes

The most distinctive Manchu innovation in costume is touched on earlier in this article in the description of the robe of the viceroy who entertained the Dutch trade ambassadors in Cathay. The Manchu dragon robe survives in far greater numbers and variety of colors and of materials than any other Chinese garment. It has been studied extensively by many sinologists (Priest, Cammann, Fernald, Vollmer, Capon). In striking, deliberate contrast to the voluminous robes of the Ming dynasty, the Manchu version is a long, slim garment with closely fitting sleeves and slits in front and back of the skirt. Horsehoof cuffs and a horizontally ribbed mid-sleeve section, usually of contrasting material, further characterize this garment. It was worn tightly belted. John Vollmer interprets the ornament of what we might call the standard form as follows:

The *ch'i-fu* is a schematic diagram of the universe. . . . The lower border of diagonal bands and rounded billows represents water; at the four axes of the coat, the cardinal points, rise prism-shaped rocks symbolizing the earth mountain. Above is the cloud-filled firmament against which [five-clawed] dragons, the symbols of imperial authority, coil and twist. The symbolism is complete only when the coat is worn. The human body becomes the world axis; the neck opening, the gate of heaven or apex of the universe, separates the material world of the coat from the realm of the spiritual represented by the wearer's head.[8]

In *The Illustrated Catalogue of Ritual Paraphernalia of the Ch'ing Dynasty (Huang ch'ao li-ch'i t'u-shih)*, a famous set of regulations governing official costume commissioned by the Ch'ien-lung emperor in 1759, the introduction explains this form:

Manchurian crane, symbol of longevity. Detail of robe at right

We, accordingly, have followed the old traditions of our dynasty, and have not dared to change them fearing that later men would hold us responsible for this, and criticize us regarding the robes and hats; and thus we would offend our ancestors. This we certainly should not do. Moreover, as for the Northern Wei, the Liao, and the Chin as well as the Yuan, all of which changed to Chinese robes and hats, they all died out within one generation. Those of Our sons and grandsons who would take Our will as their will shall certainly not be deceived by idle talk. In this way the continuing Mandate of our dynasty will receive the protection of Heaven for ten thousand years. Do not change our traditions or reject them. Beware! Take warning![9]

Alan Priest, who, with Pauline Simmons, made the pioneer stylistic chronology of these dragon robes, interpreted "the old traditions of our dynasty" to refer to the Ch'ing dynasty rather than to nomadic backgrounds, and therefore found in this passage proof that the dragon robe in its nine-dragon form started with the Manchu dynasty in 1644. Other scholars have more or less accepted Priest's stylistic sequence, but place the nine-dragon robe in 1759 with Ch'ien-lung's statements. A careful comparison of these illustrated regulations with existing formal costumes may sometimes provide information as to the rank of the wearer and the place and season of use of a certain garment. But Chinese color

Chuba. *Tibetan robe composed of two gold-ground k'o-ssu dragon robes and pieces of 18th-century floral satins. Such robes were worn by the Tibetan lay aristocrats for the New Year's and Devil Dance ceremonies. Silk, wrapped gold, and wrapped peacock-feather filaments. L., nape of neck to hem, 62 in. Rogers Fund, 1962 (62.206)*

names, while evocative, are numerous and difficult to correlate with colors of existing costumes. For instance, even the yellow called "imperial" seems to have many variations. Also, some examples appear to have no parallel in this record of the dress of a vast official hierarchy.

Earlier and bolder forms of dragons on the few remaining robes of early Ch'ing date or style, surviving most often somewhat remodeled in the lay aristocrat's robes (*chubas*) of Tibet, suggest something of the magnificence of the dragon robe before its standardization.

A special category of standard dragon robe surviving in relatively small numbers has twelve or occasionally fewer small so-called sacrificial emblems symmetrically placed on the body of the robe: the sun on one shoulder, the moon on another, the constellation over the chest dragon, the mountain over the back dragon, the symbol of distinction (*fu*), the ax head, paired dragon-pheasant, waterweed, libation cups, flame, and plate of millet. These emblems date back to the Han dynasty (206 B.C.–A.D. 220), and are thought to have ornamented the robes of the emperor at the great yearly sacrifices performed by him as intercessor for his people between heaven and earth. Their symbolism has been variously interpreted and possibly changed from age to age (see Priest, Cammann, Vollmer).

Emperor's twelve-symbol dragon robe. Silk and wrapped-gold tapestry (k'o-ssu). L., nape of neck to hem, 57 in. 18th century. Rogers Fund, 1932 (32.23)

LEFT: Dragon grasping the flaming pearl of cosmic knowledge—or, according to some interpretations, the thunder disk. The latter interpretation emphasizes the dragon's role as the bringer of rain. Detail of robe above

Summer robe of state with twelve symbols. For a boy emperor, probably T'ung-chih (r. 1862–74). Silk gauze embroidered with colored silks and couched, wrapped gold. L., nape of neck to hem, 46 in. Rogers Fund, 1945 (45.37)

Summer robe of state, probably worn by a high-ranking court official. Silk gauze embroidered with colored silks and couched, wrapped gold. L., nape of neck to hem, 54 in. Second half 19th century. Rogers Fund, 1964 (64.234)

The coat worn over the dragon robe on court occasions bore only insignia of rank—imperial-dragon roundels on front, back, and shoulder of the emperor's coat and rank badges indicating civil or military rank on the front or back. Badges indicating civil rank contained designated single birds in the same symbolic setting dragons occupied on the dragon robes; on the badges indicating military rank, single designated animals replaced birds. Cammann has done the definitive work on these. Lower ranks had other insignia. Court coats, in the short form established by the eighteenth-century edict, are believed to be a Manchu innovation. A very small number of these survive, probably because the highly decorative insignia could be easily removed and were very interesting to collectors. A great many rank badges survive.

The most formal court robe of all, which exists today in very small numbers, is the so-called robe of state (*ch'ao-fu*); it was worn by the emperor and possibly by his highest officials at the great yearly sacrifices. Manchu origins of the robe are strongly emphasized by Cammann and Vollmer, who see in it a short riding jacket combined with a skirt with a pleated top, but a skirt initially composed of two "aprons." The skirt was nomadic in origin, but formed the traditional Chinese skirt by Ch'ing times. The long, fitted sleeves and horsehoof cuffs are a logical part of the picture. The contrasting mid-sleeve section, horizontally ridged, has been variously explained. It might be that an active wearer could more easily have bent his arm at this

(left): First-degree civil official in dragon coat with Manchurian crane rank badge worn over robe of state. Leaf from a booklet of paintings of Ch'ing court officials. Watercolor on paper 10⅞ × 6¾ in. 19th century. Gift of Martin S. Rosenblatt, 1957 (57.109a)

Man wearing coat with tiger rank badge signifying that he is a fourth-degree military official. Manchu family album leaf. Color and ink on paper 13⅛ × 14¾ in. Probably K'ang-hsi period (1662–1723). Anonymous Gift, 1952 (52.209.3c)

point while the cuffs continued to shelter his hands from view at court ceremonies, in accordance with long-standing Chinese practice. Like *chubas*, these robes were originally made from the Ming dragon robes or silks distributed as bribes or exchanges by Ming officials in border garrisons or among chieftains of various nomadic tribes.

Imperial women's formal court attire also reflects Manchu background. It is composed of a full-length long-sleeved coat, also with horsehoof cuffs, and with shoulder bretelles suggesting a long sleeveless coat originally worn over it. Vollmer relates this to both the Manchu sleeveless coat and a narrower, shorter vest worn over court coats to display rank and insignia in the Ming period.

Both men's and women's formal coats were worn with separate flaring collars, which Vollmer sees as descendants of "the larger family of steppe garments with back collars which convert into hoods."[3]

Emperor's twelve-symbol dragon robe with geometric field diaper in yellow counted stitch on red silk gauze. Embroidered ornament in satin stitch, over a thin vine or thong at edge of design areas, and couched, wrapped gold. L., nape of neck to hem, 56 in. 18th century. Purchase, Joseph Pulitzer Bequest, 1935 (35.84.8)

RIGHT: *Detail. Bats, symbolizing happiness, sport over wave border*

The tremendous effect the formal assemblage of a court in such costume could have is reflected in the dazzled report of the Dutch trade embassy quoted above as they progressed north from Canton. They finally reached "incomparable Peking," which the new dynasty had recently proclaimed capital city of China. After an eleven-page description of the complex of imperial palaces—the famous Great Within (*Ta Nei*), with its entrance court "which contains four hundred paces in the square . . . lined on sides with a strong guard, all of them in rich Coats of Crimson-coloured satin"[12]—the Dutch visitors give an account of the pomp surrounding an audience with the first emperor of the Ch'ing dynasty, Shun-chih:

> On each side of the Throne stood 112 Souldiers, each whereof bore a several [colored?] Flag, and likewise wore coloured Habits suitable to his Ensign, only they all had Black Hats, with yellow Feathers. Next to the Emperor's throne stood twenty-two Gentlemen each with a rich Yellow Skreen or Umbrillo in his hand; next stood ten other persons, each holding a Gilt Radiant Circle in his Hand ressembling the Sun; next to these stood six others with Circles imitating the Moon at Full; after these, were standing sixteen other persons with half Pikes or Poles in their hands, hung full of Tassels of several colours; near these stood thirty-six more, each holding a standard curiously adorned with Dragons (the Emperour's coat of Arms) and other such Monsters after the Chinese fashion. And in this manner were both sides of the Emperour's Throne Guarded and Adorned adding an infinite number of Courtiers, all of them in very rich Habits, all of one Colour and Silk, as if a Livery, which added very much to the splendour of the place.

Detail of emperor's twelve-symbol dragon robe. Blue silk warp twill with ornament in couched, wrapped gold and silver yarns, except for the embroidered pale blue eyes of the dragons. L., nape of neck to hem, 56¾ in. 18th century. Gift of Lewis Einstein, 1954 (54.14.2)

Informal and Ceremonial Costume

Before the steps leading up to the Emperour's Throne, stood on each side six snow-white Horses most curiously tricked and adorned with rich embroidered Trappings and Bridles. . . . [Highest officials went up and] fell on their knees and bowed their Heads nine times to the ground whilst delightful Music, both Vocal and Instrumental, filled up the Vacancies of Mute Ceremony. . . .

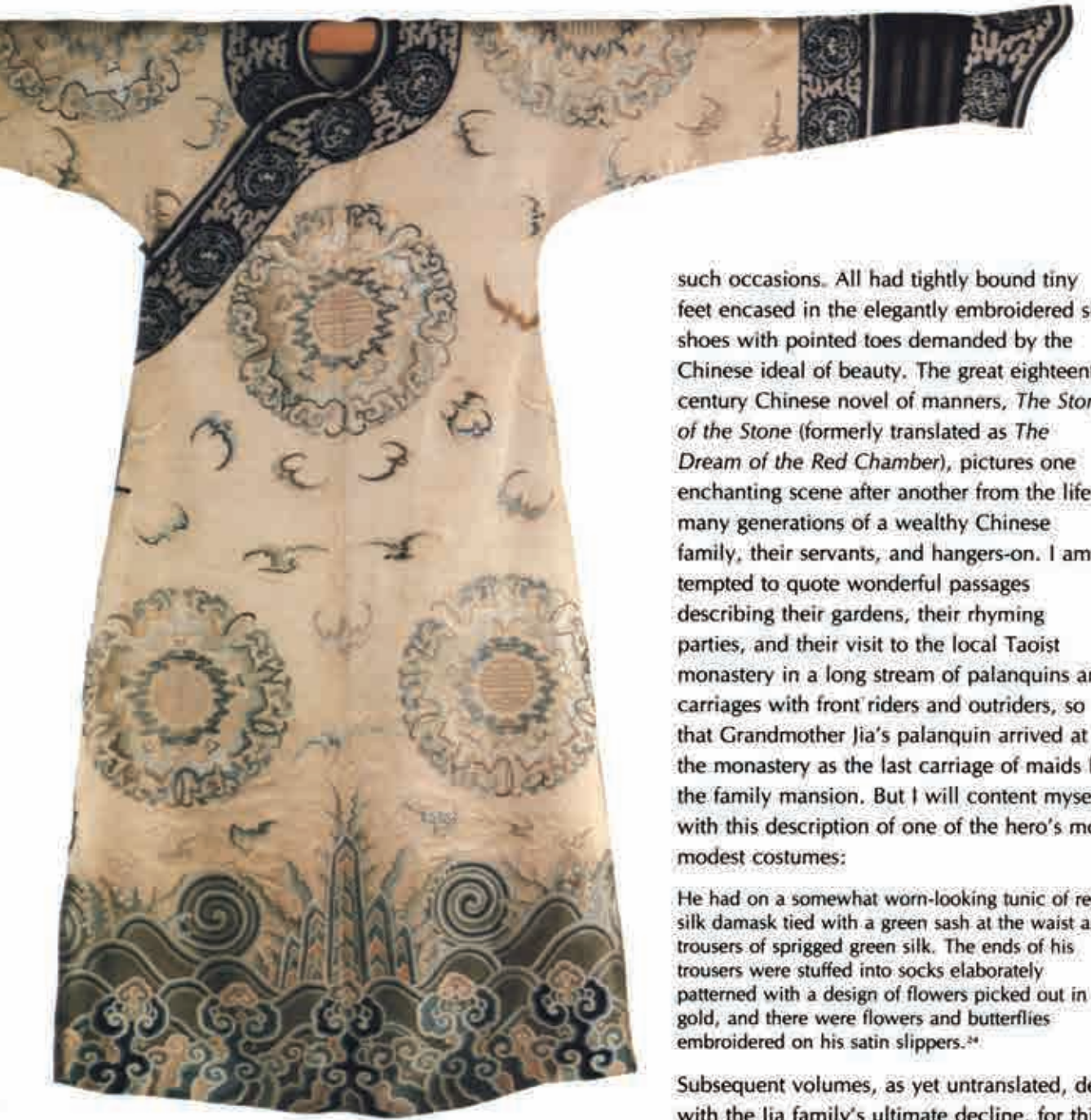
Of the "Vice-Roys, Princes of the Blood and all other great officers of the Court," the Dutch reported:

These Grandees wore one Sort of Habit, which was extraordinarily rich; they had Blew Satin Coats on curiously interwoven with Golden Dragons and Serpents (the Emperour's Blazonery); they had Caps embroidered with Gold, and dekt with Diamonds and other Precious Stones, which signified their degrees and qualities.

They even glimpsed the emperor for a second—"young and of fair complexion, of middle height, and well proportioned, cloathed and shining all in clinquant Gold."[24]

Very much a part of the opulence of surviving Ch'ing costume, though, are the traditional Chinese garments, which had, long before the Manchus arrived, incorporated nomadic influences from earlier contacts, both friendly and invasive. The Chinese ladies "behind the orchid door" and far from the court in Peking wore loose silk trousers and wide-sleeved loose jackets sometimes embroidered by themselves. All ladies in China, whether Chinese or Manchu, were trained from childhood to embroider. On festive occasions like birthdays or family sacrificial rites, they donned over the trousers a skirt formed of "paired aprons," to use Vollmer's term. Only at weddings, funerals, or court functions would they wear dragon robes like their husbands', but with side slits on the skirt and profile dragon bands above the mid-sleeve section.

Some Chinese ladies wore the voluminous red court robes of the previous dynasty on



Bat medallion robe, from the tomb of Prince Kuo-ch'in Wang and his household. L., nape of neck to hem, 54 in. 18th century. Anonymous Gift, 1943 (43.119)

such occasions. All had tightly bound tiny feet encased in the elegantly embroidered silk shoes with pointed toes demanded by the Chinese ideal of beauty. The great eighteenth-century Chinese novel of manners, *The Story of the Stone* (formerly translated as *The Dream of the Red Chamber*), pictures one enchanting scene after another from the life of many generations of a wealthy Chinese family, their servants, and hangers-on. I am tempted to quote wonderful passages describing their gardens, their rhyming parties, and their visit to the local Taoist monastery in a long stream of palanquins and carriages with front riders and outriders, so that Grandmother Jia's palanquin arrived at the monastery as the last carriage of maids left the family mansion. But I will content myself with this description of one of the hero's more modest costumes:

> He had on a somewhat worn-looking tunic of red silk damask tied with a green sash at the waist and trousers of sprigged green silk. The ends of his trousers were stuffed into socks elaborately patterned with a design of flowers picked out in gold, and there were flowers and butterflies embroidered on his satin slippers.[34]

Subsequent volumes, as yet untranslated, deal with the Jia family's ultimate decline, for this moralistic work incorporates Confucian, Buddhist, and Taoist thought.

Auspicious symbols of the feminine aspect of the universe, happiness, summer, and fertility. Detail of a court lady's informal jacket. Colored silks and couched, wrapped gold. Jacket, L., nape of neck to hem, 40 in. Late 19th century. Anonymous Gift, 1946 (46.134.7)

Ecclesiastical Robes

Also a spectacular group within traditional Chinese costume of the Ch'ing period are the beautiful ecclesiastical robes from both the Buddhist and the Taoist churches. Buddhist priest robes, long rectangles with a single gusset near one end, continued to reflect the toga shape—an aspect of the Greek heritage left in northern India by Alexander of Macedon and his men and seen on the first statues of the Buddha. When the Buddhist religion made its way into China in the troubled days after the fall of the Han dynasty (A.D. 220), this form seems to have come with it. It was worn over an unadorned straight robe. Its stylized divisions represent the patched robe the Buddha donned when he left his life of wealth to comfort the poor and deprived. The Taoists, originally alchemists, whose religion seeks a direct intuitive accord with the forces of nature, allowed themselves a freer approach in designing their robes. Their garments, usually poncho-shaped, are variously decorated—with the eight trigrams, the yang and yin, and a pagoda shape surrounded by esoteric pearls and symbols whose meaning is unknown. The earliest Taoist priest robe in the exhibition borrows heavenly dignitaries and guardian kings from the Buddhist church and groups them on clouds interspersed with flying Manchurian cranes against a heaven of golden yellow cloud damask.

Detail of k'o-ssu robe for high dignitary of the Taoist church. Robe, L., nape of neck to hem, 56 in. 18th century. Gift of Florance Waterbury, 1943 (43.144)

Costumes from the Theater

The theater has been very important in the Chinese world for many centuries. The forms of Chinese theater ranged from bands of traveling players and acrobats who entertained in small villages to the local companies proudly supported by provincial capitals and the theater of the imperial court. The dowager empress Tz'u-hsi, a woman of ambiguous reputation, loved to play the role of Kuan-yin, the bodhisattva of mercy. Conventions strange to us governed the acting, but we can recognize at once the dazzling beauty of the costumes. In the case of the imperial theater, these are of the most sumptuous materials.

Buddhist priest robes are composed of a patchwork of precious gold brocaded silks. Court ladies' robes of embroidered satin have wide pleated skirts and long pointed sleeves to accentuate dance steps. Holding their own in this brilliant group are the theatrical versions of the dragon robes introduced by the Manchus.

Detail of a jacket, part of a theatrical costume for the role of a Buddhist nun. "Poverty" patches cut from various silks and piped in black are applied to white satin ground. The white satin border contains an unreal inscription in couched, wrapped gold. Jacket, L., nape of neck to hem, 33½ in. 19th century. Gift of Alan Priest, 1962 62.27.2

Making Silk

A word should be said about silk—the luxurious fiber that the Chinese kept exclusively for themselves for thousands of years. Sericulture, the cultivation of the domestic silkworm, is an enormously complex and fascinating process. Archaeological evidence from the Shang-period tombs north of the Yellow River shows that sericulture and silk weaving were both well established in China nearly two thousand years before the birth of Christ. A fossilized silk cocoon and fragments of plain weave with geometrical patterns in warp floats, impregnated in the patina of Shang bronze sacrificial vessels, were discovered early in this century and published by Vivi Sylwan, a pioneer Swedish textile scholar.

The presence of a single cocoon of a domesticated silkworm (*Bombyx mori*) is proof of the establishment of an amazing and elaborate routine. The silk filaments of the *Bombyx mori* cocoon are long and supple enough to form threads many yards long when a few are twisted lightly together. But to produce the filaments the silk moth must be shepherded through a complicated life cycle. This takes about fifty-four days in central China, less time in the south.

Silk moths lay their eggs on sheets of paper. Eggs reserved for the next year's crop

of silkworms are washed and dried and hung up in folded paper on the walls of special houses away from smoke and dampness. Eggs laid at a given time are kept together so they will hatch together and begin to spin their cocoons at the same time. They hatch, as a rule, when the first leaves of the white mulberry, their chosen food, burst forth in April. About a week before this, the rolled folded papers of eggs are taken from the wall into a warmer part of the house, or even warmed in the padded garments of their owner.

As soon as the tiny hairlike caterpillars, measuring less than an eighth of an inch, are hatched, they are placed in trays of chopped mulberry leaves. For about thirty-five days, they are kept warm and sheltered from drafts through various stages of feeding and moulting. Then they rise to a semierect position, indicating that they are ready to spin their cocoons. They are transferred to straw trusses called silkworm hills, where they begin to spin, extruding a stream of liquid silk from glands on either side of their bodies. As the worm moves his head in a figure-eight motion to form his cocoon, these streams emerge coated with sericin, a sort of binder. They come from the spinneret at the worm's head as a single filament which quickly hardens. It takes five days to complete the cocoon.

In the process of sericulture, selected chrysalises are allowed to develop, break their cocoons at the appointed time, and fly away as moths, to pair and lay eggs for the next generation. But most cocoons are removed from the trusses and immersed in hot water before having their silken coverings reeled off. The immersed cocoons are stirred with a bamboo comb until the ends of the master filament from each cocoon have been caught by the silk operators. The operators unwind a few yards of imperfect silk from the surface and attach the ends of the master filament to the reeling aparatus, which in preindustrial days was turned by a foot treadle. Silk filaments were reeled from groups of six to thirty cocoons, then very lightly twisted to form threads of the desired thickness. A single cocoon can produce a filament several hundred yards long.

As part of the ancient custom of yearly sacrifices, when the emperor sacrificed to the patron of agriculture at the beginning of the farming season and performed the attendant "Spring Plowing" ceremony, the empress offered a sacrifice to the patroness of silk worms at her altar in the northern part of the Sea Palaces. Then the empress and her attendants plucked a few mulberry leaves and handed them to the ladies in charge of the silkworms.[2] According to Katharine Carl, these so-called guardians of the cocoons held an honorary office much sought by the highest ladies in the land as a mark of imperial favor.

A touching story by Mao Tun called *Spring Silkworms* (*Ch'un Ts'an*), written in the early days of the Chinese Republic, shows that in a small village in southern China this traditional industry was still an important part of the

Decorative roundel from a woman's informal robe. Silks and couched, wrapped gold on silk plain weave; ground dyed pale blue. Robe, L., nape of neck to hem, 44 in. 18th century. Rogers Fund, 1963 (63.141)

Decorative roundel from a woman's informal robe. Waves, rocks, and clouds symbolize the universe; peaches, longevity; berries, fortitude; and bats, happiness. Robe of strié silk plain weave with ornament in couched silk twist and wrapped gold. L., nape of neck to hem, 43 in. 18th century. Gift of Mrs. Lee R. Steiner, 1965 (65.37)

country's agricultural life. While all such ancient traditional occupations of Chinese life carried on, the Ch'ing dynasty rose to great heights under the K'ang-hsi and Ch'ien-lung emperors and then gradually declined. A refusal to advance with the modern world, internal conflict, and increasingly unfortunate contacts with aggressive Western powers in the nineteenth century resulted in the fall of the dynasty in 1912. But the Manchus left their mark, not only on the Middle Kingdom, but, through their years in China, on most of the rest of the world. In the field that concerns us here, the Manchu dragon robe is the best known and most collected of all articles of Chinese costume, and the austere lines of informal Manchu costumes have an elegance that is especially appreciated today.

Notes

1. Cammann, *China's Dragon Robes*, p. 23.
2. The word is of unknown origin. Manchuria was named after the Manchus; not they after it. Wakeman, *The Fall of Imperial China*, p. 82, fn. 2.
3. Quoted in Wakeman, p. 81, from Hsiao I-shan, *Ch'ing-tai t'ung-shih* (Taipei, 1963), vol. I, p. 279.
4. By 1644 Manchus comprised the original Chien-chou Ju-chen, the Hulun tribes, some Manchu-Mongol tribes, and outlying groups like the Solons, Dakurs, and Hulunbuir.
5. Collis, *The Great Within*, p. 61.
6. Nieuhoff, *An Embassy from the East India Company* . . . , p. 43.
7. Ibid., p. 45.
8. Ibid., p. 46. Collis, who quotes this from Nieuhoff's account, comments, "These animal dances are to this day a feature of the courts of the Shan Sowburas . . . and are Mongolian not Chinese in taste."
9. Ibid., p. 46.
10. Ibid., p. 83.
11. Ibid.
12. Carl, *With the Dowager Empress*, pp. 221–22.
13. Ibid., p. 222.
14. Ibid., p. 220.
15. Ibid., p. 9.
16. Ibid., p. 223.
17. Ibid., p. 224.
18. Vollmer, *In the Presence of the Dragon Throne*, p. 16. According to Cammann (p. 24, fn. 2), the term *ch'i-fu*, meaning "ritual or auspicious robe," first appeared in the Chinese classics in the *Chou-Li*, but died out. It was revived in the eighteenth century by the antiquity-loving Ch'ien-lung emperor.
19. Quoted in Vollmer, p. 30. Capon (*Chinese Court Robes* . . .) says the date of completion of the regulations is not known, but it was toward the end of 1760. They appeared in print for the first time in 1766.
20. By a law of 1655, the higher lamas of Mongolia and Tibet who had the title of *Gefung* were allowed to wear dragon robes; four-clawed dragons were allowed only by special permission of the emperor of China (Cammann, p. 172).
21. Vollmer, p. 39, quoting Gervers, *The Hungarian Szür* (Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto).
22. Nieuhoff, pp. 125–26.
23. Ibid., p. 127.
24. Cao Xueqin, *The Story of the Stone*, vol. II, p. 8.
25. Brodon and Mitrophanow, *The Moon Year*, pp. 66–67.

Butterflies. Detail of woman's informal jacket of silk and metal tapestry (k'o-ssu) with some painted details. Jacket, L., nape of neck to hem, 27 in. Late Ch'ing period (c. 1900). Gift of Florance Waterbury, 1945 (45.125.15)

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