

EMBROIDERED FIGURES:
COMMERCE AND CULTURE IN THE LATE QING FASHION SYSTEM

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“If all the clothing handed down for generations had never been sold to dealers in secondhand goods, their annual sunning in June would have been a brilliant and lively affair. You would move down the path between bamboo poles, flanked by walls of silk and satin – an excavated corridor within an ancient underground palace buried deep under the ground. You would press your forehead against brocades shot through with gold thread. When the sun was still here, this thread was warmed by the light, but now it is cold.”

Zhang Ailing (1920-1995), “A Chronicle of Changing Clothes”, 1943

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ABSTRACT

Contrary to Westerners' long-maintained denial of fashion in Chinese dress, recent scholarship has provided convincing textual evidence of fashion in early modern China. Research into this fashion commentary has complicated our understanding of Chinese consumption history, yet we still know little about fashion design, production, or dissemination. By prioritising the textual over the visual or material, this history remains confined to the written source, rather than asking what objects might tell us of Qing fashions. Though many fashionable styles of dress survive in Western museums, these are rarely considered evidence of the Chinese fashion system. Instead museum scholarship remains influenced by twentieth-century interpretations of Chinese dress as art; dominated by dragon robes and auspicious symbols, oriented around the trope of the genteel Chinese seamstress. Within this art historical account, nineteenth-century women's dress has been characterized by decay and viewed with disdain.

This thesis questions these assumptions through the study of a group of late Qing women's jackets featuring embroidered narrative scenes, arguing that in this style - regulated by market desires rather than imperial edict - fashion formed at the intersection of commerce and culture. Contrary to the prevailing production model in which the secluded gentlewoman embroidered her entire wardrobe, I position the jackets within the mid-Qing commercialization of handicrafts that created networks of urban guilds, commercial workshops and sub-contracted female workers. By drawing the contours of Suzhou's commercial networks - a region renowned for its embroidery - I demonstrate how popular culture permeated the late Qing fashion system, and explicate the appearance and conceptualization of the embroidered scenes through contemporary prints and performance. My exploration of how dramatic narrative was represented in female dress culture highlights embroidery's significance as a tool to reflect upon contemporary culture, a finding I support by recourse to representations of embroidery as act and object in Suzhou's vernacular ballads and dramas. Thus, these little-studied jackets not only evidence how fashionable dress articulated women's relationship with popular culture, but also how embroidery expressed contemporary concerns, allowing a re-appraisal of women's role as cultural consumers and producers.

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- 6.2. “Eight portraits of Historical Personages” (*Lishi renwu gushi batu* 歷史人物故事八圖) Yangliuqing
Source: Wang Shucun and Li Fuqing, *Sulian cang Zhongguo minjian nianhua zhenpin ji*, no.148
- 6.3. *Baishe chuan* dice game (*shuangliu* 雙六)
Source: Hiroshi Higuchi, *Chūgoku hanga shūsei*, no.232
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Source: Wang Shucun and Li Fuqing, *Sulian cang Zhongguo minjian nianhua zhenpin ji*, no.169
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Source: Maria Rudover, *Chinese Popular Prints*, no.101
- 6.6. “Wenji returns to the Han” (*Wenji gui Han* 文姬歸漢)
Source: Wang Shucun, *Zhongguo minjian nianhua shi tulu*, p.275, no.283
- 6.7. Zhuo Wenjun listens to her lover, Sima Xiangru, playing the *qin* beneath the moon, *Yuefu hong shan*
Source: Ji Zhenlun, *Xinkan fenlei chuxiang taozhen xuancui Yuefu hong shan*, pp.636-637
- 6.8. Scenes relating to the theme of Love (*jengqing lei*)(clockwise from top left)
- “Playing the Zither” (*qin tiao* 琴挑) from *Yu zan ji*
Source: J5.4 (Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1982.466.1)
 - “Oriole listens to the Zither” (*Yingying ting qin* 鶯鶯聽琴) from *Xi xiang ji*
Source: J3.4 (Minneapolis Institute of Art, 51.19.35)
 - “Oriole listens to the Zither” (*Yingying ting qin* 鶯鶯聽琴) from *Xi xiang ji*
Source: J1.1 (Rhodes Island School of Design, 37.044)
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Source: Denver Museum of Art, 1977.446.1

Chapter 7

- 7.1a. “Fortune and Longevity in Full Measure” (*Fushou shuang quan* 福壽雙全)
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Source: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, acc no.14.40.335
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Source: J8.1,6 (Royal Ontario Museum, 910.65.21); Qian Decang, *Gailiang quantu Zhui bai qin quan*
- 7.3. Gong Jing and Madame Shi
- “After Taking in (the Concubine)” (*Hou na* 後納) embroidered roundel
Source: J8.8 (Royal Ontario Museum, 910.65.21)
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- Source: Suzhou Kunju Yuan performance in Beijing, 2011
- 7.4. Scenes from “Beating the Princess” (*Da jin zhi* 打金枝)
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 - b. purse (*qian bao* 錢包)
- Source: *Shanxi xiqu cixiu*, no.37, 39
- 7.5a,b,c,d. Roundel details from the “Water Garden” Robe (right to left)
- Source: Nelson Atkins Museum, 35-279-107; 35-279-104; 35-279-54
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- Source: Shan Guoqiang, “Gentlewoman Paintings of the Qing Palace”,
- 7.7. “Du Ruiniang enjoys Golden Thread Pond” (*Du Ruiniang zhi shang Jin xian chi* 杜蕊娘智賞金線池)
- Source: *Yuan qu xuan tu*, p.162
- 7.8a. Porcelain dishes decorated with scene from *Golden Thread Pond*, ca. 1650-60
- Source: Sir Michael Butler, *Treasures from an Unknown Reign: Shunzhi Porcelain (1644-1661)*, no.62
- 7.8b. Porcelain dish decorated with scene from *Golden Thread Pond*, ca. 1650-60
- Source: W. B. Honey, *Guide to the Later Chinese Porcelain*

EXPLANATORY NOTE

- ◆ If a narrative is mentioned in the text and appears in one of the jackets, this is referenced by jacket number and, if applicable, scene number, for example J1.2.
- ◆ All measurements are in cm.
- ◆ Jacket roundels are ordered according to the numbering detailed in Figure 3.1.
- ◆ L = length, W = width, D = diameter.

Emperors of the Qing Dynasty:

Shunzhi 順治 (1643-1661)

Kangxi 康熙 (1661-1722)

Yongzheng 雍正 (1723-1735)

Qianlong 乾隆 (1736-1795)

Jiaqing 嘉慶 (1796-1820)

Daoguang 道光 (1820-1850)

Xianfeng 咸豐 (1850-1861)

Tongzhi 同治 (1861-1875)

Guangxu 光緒 (1875-1908)

Xuantong 宣統 (1908-1911)

Museum abbreviations:

AIC, Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, USA

DAM, Denver Art Museum, Denver, USA

Met, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, USA

MFA, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, USA

MIA, Minneapolis Institute of Art, Minneapolis, USA

PEM, Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, USA

PMA, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, USA

RISD, Rhode Island School of Design, Rhode Island, USA

ROM, Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, Canada

V&A, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, UK

PART 1. HISTORIES AND DISCOURSES

HISTORIES OF CHINESE DRESS AND FASHION

1. INTRODUCTION

In 1930s China, railway-diggers unearthed the tomb of Qing Prince Yun Li (1697-1738), seventeenth son of Kangxi (1662-1723), and half-brother of the Yongzheng Emperor (1678-1735).¹ The tomb contents - robes, porcelains, and Buddhist texts - quickly passed from local officials and small-time dealers on to foreign art galleries, supplying museums and private collections in Europe and North America, and by 1934, when Beijing-based curator Laurence Sickman saw the robes, many had been deconstructed and repurposed as mats, runners, and even “a throw for some Westerner’s Steinway”. For Sickman, the numerous dragon robes, however altered, remained of great value in establishing stylistic chronologies for Chinese imperial dress, a key concern for scholars of that time, and he “rescued” the robes, purchasing the group on behalf of the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas. Within this group was an embroidered satin women’s robe, which had once been worn by one of the Prince’s two wives but survived in just three large fragments. In contrast to the tones of power and majesty conferred upon the dragon robes, this robe was given a rather different emphasis; named “Ladies in the Garden or the Water Garden” it was lauded as “delicacy and refinement ... a melody of grace and charm” (Fig. 1.1a,b,c).²

This thesis seeks to reposition objects like the “Water Garden” robe. Rather than “grace and charm” I will argue that it was high fashion; more properly recognized as the earliest known example of the

1 Originally called Yinli, he changed his name to Yunli for fear of offending the Yongzheng emperor (Yinzhen). A Buddhist scholar, calligrapher and collector, he was made a prince of the second degree (*junwang*) in 1728, first degree prince (*qinwang*) in 1733, and died childless during his nephew, the Qianlong emperor’s reign. See Sun Wenliang, *Manzhu daidian* (Shenyang: Liaoning daxue chubanshe, 1990), p.118. Interest in Yunli has been revived by two recent historical dramas filmed in China: *Bubu jingxin* (Startling with every step) and *Hongong Zhenhuan zhuan* (Legend of Imperial Concubine Zhenhuan).

2 Described in Lindsay Hughes set of articles on the so-called Kuo Ch'in Wang textiles (“The Kuo Ch'in Wang Textiles”, *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, Sept 1943 and Feb 1945), p.130.

“figural roundel” jacket, a nineteenth-century style in which embroidered roundels and borders were used to frame scenes taken from drama and novels. Instead of “delicacy and refinement”, the style actually evidences how Chinese women of the mid-late Qing period - influenced by the contemporary prints and performance - utilized the technology of embroidery to bring figural narratives onto their clothed bodies. Accordingly close study of this style allows an exploration of the significance of both fashion and popular culture for women in Qing China.

From the cloistered gentlewoman to the working courtesan, merchant’s wife to lady’s maid - women living in nineteenth-century China were surrounded by narrative: spoken idioms representing virtue and vice through historical figures, play excerpts performed for festivals and celebration, *nianhua* woodblock prints hung in halls to welcome guests, carved wood railings to adorn wealthy houses and temples, shadowed silhouettes of paper-cut window inserts, oral ballads that sung of tragic lovers. Many of these visual and performance forms have been the focus of recent studies that have demonstrated how social and geographical factors influenced both the choice and the telling of the narrative. Following literary theory, this scholarship has highlighted the contemporary repercussions of narrative - the ways stories could be “manipulated for changing times”.³ The variety of visual and material forms allowed narratives to be both re-told and re-shaped, providing women with a potentially vital means of comprehending and expressing their concerns. Given such potential, it is surprising that the media perhaps most intimate to women, that of textiles and dress, has been rather disregarded as a carrier of narrative, much overshadowed by its decorative companion of auspicious motifs. Yet, narrative appears to have provided an important theme in Chinese women’s textiles; for example, a literati-styled embroidered painting (*xin hua*) “Zhaojun’s departure for the frontier” by the seventeenth-century Gu-style embroiderer Han Ximeng (Fig. 1.2) or a Shaanxi folk style embroidered roundel showing a scene from *Huo yan ju* (The Flaming Foal) (Fig. 1.3). These examples form two

3 Shane McCauseland and Ling Lizhong, *Telling Images of China: Narrative and Figure Paintings, 15th-20th Century from the Shanghai Museum* (London: Scala, 2010), p.61. I follow here the basic definition of narrative provided by H Porter Abbot: “the representation of an event or series of events”, for qualification of these definitional elements see *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), chap.2.

social poles of the Qing spectrum of embroidered narrative: this thesis examines another example from that spectrum - the figural roundel *ao* - a jacket style characterised by the use of roundels and borders to depict narrative scenes: either single narratives like *The Story of the Western Chamber* (*Xi xiang ji*), *The Story of the Jade Hairpin* (*Yu zan ji*), or *The Legend of the White Snake* (*Bai she zhuan*), or else figural medleys which mingle individual scenes from different dramas and historical stories.

These highly decorative, formal jackets would have been worn on special occasions like festivals, birthdays, and weddings, outfitted with an inner jacket, vest, pleated skirt, stockings, and trousers, headwear, and jewellery to create a multi-layered assembly of colours, patterns, and textures. With their cloud collars, overlapping fronts, and long, wide proportions, their silhouette epitomized nineteenth-century fashions: the repeated, contrasting borders, and layers of diverse patterns and textures, each set within established zones of decoration. This style could not have been considered a virtuous mode of dress. As shall be seen, the normative discourse of Qing clothing was couched in terms of frugality and simplicity. Conservative male writers clearly had an aversion to the proliferation of bordered and embroidered dress surfaces, and if we are to believe the male writers of *biji* records, then women of this period dressed entirely in unadorned, hand-spun linen. Such Confucian morality clearly did restrain many women, for example Mrs Nie Zeng Jifen (1852-1942), describes how her father, an important statesman, forbade her from wearing jackets with wide borders or embroidered shoes.⁴ But novels, prints, and surviving objects all suggest that this position was not widely supported, and certainly not amongst the women of wealthy mercantile families or courtesan houses, whose relative lack of moral constraints appear to have positioned them foremost in leading fashions, one of the distinctive features of Chinese dress culture. Both the fashionable style, and the use of narrative themes associated with entertainment - the performance of narrative ballads or plays - suggest that courtesans might be likely wearers of this style.

4 Her father Zeng Guofan (1811-72) led the battle against the Taiping, see Zeng Jifen, *Testimony of a Confucian Woman: the Autobiography of Mrs Nie Zeng Jifen, 1852-1942*, trans. Thomas L. Kennedy, (Athen, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1993), p.96.

So it is not surprising that it is in a courtesan novel that we find a description of a woman wearing a figurally embroidered jacket in this style. *Feng yue meng* or *Dreams of Wind and Moon*, prefaced in 1848, and set in early nineteenth-century Yangzhou, tells of the relationships between five courtesans and their lovers. The description excerpted here comes from a scene where courtesan Fragrance gets changed in preparation for a day-trip with the men to whom she has just been introduced:

Then she changed into a new gown with a round collar piece of pale blue, eight treasure patterned imported crepe, edged with gold-couched black satin borders colourfully embroidered with figures and scenes from *The Story of the Stone*, double and triple edged trimming in yellow, green, and pale pink, and gold-plated cassia buttons. Over that she wore a pale-pink lined outer jacket with a round collar piece of deep blue, shiny imported camlet, edged with gold-couched white satin borders embroidered in the “three blues” with the squirrel stealing the grapes, with four-pointed “Four harmony as you wish” cloud heads, gold and silver trim in the three borders and three edges style, and gold-plated cassia buttons.⁵

This gives just a flavour of what is a strikingly detailed and lengthy catalogue of one stylish young women’s outfit: the entire dress description takes 629 characters, her fan’s description alone occupies 110. Specificity of detail serves a number of functions in this novel – indeed sometimes it appears to constitute a literary value in of itself - but it is through the extensive use of the highlighted attributes and adjectives detailing the minutiae of fashionable material culture - “Figures and scenes from *The Story of the Stone*”, “deep blue, shiny imported camlet” - that the characters are visualized for the late Qing readership.⁶

The conception of dress presented in this novel – fashionable hairstyles, imported textiles, decoration of dramatic scenes – is not how nineteenth-century Chinese women’s dress has been constructed in the twentieth-century Western museums that collected and preserved these jackets. Rather, as a style, Western dress historians defined this style as unofficial and informal, characterized by the attributes it

5 Hanshang Mengren, *Feng yue meng* (Preface 1848, first edition Shanghai: Shenbaoguan, 1883. Reprint. Jinan: Qi Lu Shushe, 1991), chap 5, p.28; translation adapted from Patrick Hanan trans., *Courtesans and Opium: Romantic Illusions of the Fool of Yangzhou* (New York: University of Columbia Press, 2009), p.39.

6 Obviously the fictional descriptions provided by this novel cannot be read transparently as journalistic record. But the fact that the novelist sought to clothe his characters in closely detailed dress, which is demonstrably accurate to the period and place in which the novel is set, makes this valuable evidence to be utilised whilst allowing for novelistic exaggeration. See Daniel Roche, *The Culture of Clothing: Dress and Fashion in the Ancien Régime*, pp.18-20 for further discussion of the usages of the novel in dress history.

lacked - a deficiency barring it from the more prestigious categories of imperial and regulated dress. This thesis will make the case that, contrary to this dismissal, it is precisely as an example of late Qing women's unregulated dress that the jackets present a valuable opportunity to explore a material culture *of* late Qing women, and to investigate processes little explored in relation to Qing dress: the commercial production of fashionable dress and the influence of popular culture upon women's dress design.⁷

Why did the anonymous author of *Feng yue meng* choose to visualize Fragrance wearing a dress adorned with narrative? After all, figural decoration is an unusual theme in dress more universally, and there is no evidence of narrative-adorned dress in China prior to the mid-Qing. So the popularity of this theme in nineteenth-century dress demands explanation. What did these narratives mean to their female wearers? What role did performance and celebration play in determining the content and format of these narratives? How were the jackets influenced by narrative representations in other visual media like porcelain, lacquer, and prints? What do the jackets tell us of the patterning interactions between professional embroidery workshops and print workshops? This thesis addresses these questions by investigating the jackets from different angles of discourse and consumption, design and production. By characterizing this style, I wish to understand why narrative becomes such a vital theme in textiles and dress of this period, and why it takes the form of the figural roundel jacket. I will demonstrate that the jacket's embroidered rendering of narrative speaks to the performed presentation of narrative in celebration and festival, to the visual presentation of narrative in prints and anthologies, and ultimately, to the potential of both dress and narrative in allowing women a means of exploring and understanding their identity. This little-studied jacket style not only evidences the influence of contemporary popular culture upon late Qing women's dress, but also the role that embroidery played in allowing women a means of recording, representing and reflecting upon these influences. By furthering our understanding of the ways in which women utilised

⁷ I employ here a distinction made by Craig Clunas in *Superfluous Things*, "a material culture *for* the women of the Ming period, but it cannot be taken for a material culture *of* Ming women, whose distinctive cultural patterns are submerged in the silence to which their subordinate status consigned them." (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004), p.56.

fashionable dress to express identity and cultural affiliations, the thesis makes a contribution to women's history and histories of material culture in China.

But to begin, I wish to return to the point where these objects were removed from Chinese society and placed in Western museums, in order to understand how nineteenth-century Chinese women's dress objects were classified and construed in this collection context, and how this has influenced how they were studied and deployed to make certain conclusions about Chinese society. And so, we start with another group of women – the early twentieth-century North American dress collectors, who first bought the jackets out of China. By reconstructing the process by which these objects entered Western collections, and probing collectors' motives and scholars' priorities, we will see how Chinese women's dress was framed and conceptualized in this early, formative period of collecting Chinese material culture, a framing that in many respects, still holds sway today.⁸

2. HISTORIES OF CHINESE DRESS: COLLECTORS AND MUSEUMS

The process by which objects once worn by nineteenth-century Chinese women came to enter Western museum collections of Chinese art is a fascinating topic in its own right, and one that exemplifies some of the key issues concerning early Western scholarship of Chinese material culture: the conflict between fine art and anthropology approaches, the clash between formalist and contextualist methodologies, the tension between the object as exhibited and the object as used. Here I contain my discussion to those aspects that reveal how this style of dress – fashionable, nineteenth-century, narrative-decorated – was understood within the art-historical context of Chinese dress studies that developed in the twentieth-century museum. I adopt here the historian James Hevia's conception of the “dense referential grids” that Chinese objects acquired as they transferred from Chinese society to Western collections: the “taxonomic categories, aesthetic schemes, and temporal

⁸ My definition of “framing” follows Culler's understanding of “signs” as “forms with socially constituted meaning”, which are “constituted (framed) by various discursive practices, institutional arrangements, systems of value, semiotic mechanisms” (*Framing the Sign: Criticism and its Institutions* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988) ix).

and spatial signifiers” they were given, the promotion of certain categories and signifiers over others, and how this formed not just a re-interpretation of the object, but also a re-appropriation.⁹

As Table 1.1a details, most of the jackets studied in this thesis were acquired by North American museums during the early-mid twentieth century as donations by Chinese art collectors. Where the identity of the donor is known, they were mostly female, affluent, and North American, and they purchased their jackets through three main routes: in China from dealers or markets; from British or American art dealers and importers; or from British or American department stores. A brief foray into these different channels will serve to provide an impression of the environment of collecting Chinese material culture during this formative period.

Compared to the Chinoiserie and China Trade of earlier centuries, the late nineteenth early twentieth-century was characterized by the collecting of “Imperial” objects as Western collectors and consumers eagerly bought into the ideal of elite Chinese material culture. Marked by the watershed moment of 1860 when Anglo-French forces sacked the Summer Palace, the quality and design of these imperial goods had a powerful effect on the art markets of London, Paris and the States. As the objects filtered into collections and museums through auctions and gifts, they formed the grounding categories of major Western museum collections, determining market desires for the next few decades. This demand was partially satisfied as the luxuries of impoverished Qing elites began to be sold by dealers in the antiques markets of Beijing and Shanghai in the 1880s, and when the Qing dynasty fell in 1911, the markets were flooded with the possessions of wealthy Manchu and Han families forced to liquidate their assets. Never again would these items be so accessible or relatively inexpensive, and this period has come to be seen as a golden age for collecting Chinese material culture. Geographer Eliza R Scidmore (1856-1928) described the Beijing markets as: “a permanent old-clothes bazaar surrounding the open market space, and the rows of alcove shops are so many silk-

9 Hevia, “Plunder, Markets, and Museums: the Biographies of Chinese Imperial Objects in Europe and North America”, *What's the use of Art? Asian Visual and Material Culture in Context*, eds. Morgan Pitlka and Jan Mrázek (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008) pp.129-141.

and satin-lined grottoes, all speciously dazzling with colour and tinsel. In the early morning the whole common is covered with piles of silk and furred and gorgeous garments...store-room(s) filled with official costumes, great curtains, palace and yamen hangings, and plunder.”¹⁰

For New England sisters Lucy Truman Aldrich (1869-1955) and Abby Greene Aldrich Rockefeller (1874-1948), enthusiastic collectors of Asian art, this presented a wonderful opportunity. Lucy was particularly interested in Asian textiles, and she made six trips to Asia between 1919-29. In September of 1919, she stayed in the Beijing house of Dr George E. Morrison, the former Peking correspondent of the London Times. Her diaries describe how Chinese merchants visited the house with “bundles of tapestry cushions, Taoist priest’s robes, embroidered hangings, and hundreds of examples of court robes of the Ch’ing dynasty, only recently dispatched,” and she bought a *kesi* cover, a mandarin hat, and some robes, including J4, objects she was to later donate to the newly established Museum of the Rhode Island School of Design. A contemporary of Lucy, Charlotte Hill Grant (1894-1973) was another important collector. She lived in Beijing between 1921 and 1935 with her husband, Dr. John Grant, and developed a passionate interest in collecting what she termed “personal requisites of court life in old China.” Like Lucy, she was in the right place at the right time with the right connections; assisted by her relationships with Manchu women like Princess Der Ling, Empress Cixi’s lady-in-waiting, Mrs. Grant was able to collect more than six hundred Qing robes and accessories, which were to form the permanent collection of the Textile Art Department of the Denver Art Museum.¹¹

Whilst both Lucy and Charlotte benefitted from direct access to China, for those lacking the financial security, social connections, and sense of adventure requisite to visit China, a system of transfer developed, spanning purchase and plunder, and connecting European and American art dealers with Beijing and Shanghai curio shop owners through agents and itinerant antique dealers and department

¹⁰ *China, the long-lived Empire* (London: Macmillan and Co, 1900), p.190.

¹¹ Her husband established the public health department at Peking Union Medical College. See Emma C. Bunker et al, *Secret Splendors of the Chinese Court: Qing Dynasty Textiles from the Charlotte Hill Grant Collection* (Denver: Denver Art Museum, 1981).

stores. S.M. Franck & Co and Yamanaka and Co were two dealers of this period particularly known for Asian dress and textiles. For example, J7 and J8 were sold to the ROM by Franck & Co, who imported objects from India, China, Japan, Turkey, and Persia between 1883-1937, and whose contribution to the formation of the V&A Museum collection has been well documented.¹²

Chinese dress objects were also available in the more accessible space of the British department store, important importers of embroidered robes and accessories from the late nineteenth-century onwards. J6, for example, was once bought from Liberty's of London (it still contains the Liberty's tag). It was given to the MFA in 1946 by Mrs Jesse H. Metcalf (1830-1895) who had married into a wealthy Rhodes Island family that were greatly involved in the RISD museum. Sarah Cheang's research has demonstrated how buying an object of Chinese dress from Liberty's placed another inflection - nostalgia for Britain's colonial past, the feminine and trivialized practice of shopping - onto the object.¹³ But these different spheres of consumption - museum, store, gallery - also shared a common discourse and conceptualization of Chinese dress. Liberty's & Co were one of the donors of Chinese dress to the 1935 International Exhibition of Chinese Art at Burlington House; their name is listed in the index of lenders alongside museums, galleries, and collectors. Similarly in their displays and marketing, the shopping space was often contiguous with the practices of the art museum and dealers. The Chicago department store Marshall Field held monthly displays with themes like "Oriental culture", every object sold was given a "research history ticket"; a typical example from the Art Institute of Chicago's collection read: "Silks from the Imperial Court and Mandarin Families, personally selected by Marshall Field and Company for the Pageant of China... Purchased from Tai Ku City of Shansi Province in 1935, 60 Years old".¹⁴ This framing of imperial power and exotic splendour is strikingly similar to the ROM's 1946 exhibition catalogues: "About 25 robes in the

12 They sent objects on approval to the Museum and curators also visited the warehouses to examine their most recent imports. See <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/people-pages/s.-m.-franck-and-co.-ltd./>, accessed 16th September 2011.

13 Cheang, "Selling China at the Department Store: Class, Gender and Orientalism", *Journal of Design History*, vol.20, no.1 (2007)

14 The Pageant was held in the same year as the 1933 Century of Progress Exposition, see Christa C. Mayer Thurman, "Introduction", *Clothed to Rule the Universe* (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 2000).

present collection claim to be from the wardrobe of the Empress Dowager herself. There is no proof of this, yet we cannot doubt that in a number of cases it must be true. Some of the dresses....could only be worn by an Empress.”¹⁵

For the early twentieth-century Western customer or collector, Chinese women’s dress contained many different facets of appeal. Embroidered Chinese robes were the latest trend, worn and furnished by bohemian high society in a variety of creative and deliberately non-conventional ways that sought to re-contextualize the object as creative performance.¹⁶ Their synecdochic reference to the “mysterious and romantic Orient” was alluring to Westerners disillusioned by the industrial revolution, offering a means of revitalizing contemporary design; collectors often donated objects to museums linked to design schools as “study collections” specifically directed the objects towards educational use: “The Chinese were masters of the art of dress design. For here are costumes which are remarkable for their simplicity of style, and yet which surpass all others in the world in their soft and sumptuous beauty of shimmering silk.”¹⁷ Yet, for all the purported exoticism attributed to the object, letters and catalogues reveal how many collectors, through the activities of collecting, classifying, and displaying, sought to “make the world one’s own”, an exercise guided by the cultural rules of their society, rather than that of the object’s.¹⁸ The primacy of collector over object is given a fitting record in the catalogue indices of the International Exhibition of Chinese art in London 1935-6, which enable the reader to search according to lender or painter, but not object, and thus, like the exhibition itself, reads as a celebration of the status of Lady David and Mrs Rockefeller, rather than the objects they exhibited.¹⁹

15 Fernald, *Chinese Court Costumes* (Toronto: Royal Ontario Museum of Archaeology, 1946), p.29.

16 Sarah Cheang, “Chinese Robes in Western Interiors: transitionality and transformation”, in *Fashion, Interior Design and the Contours of Modern Identity*, eds. Alla Myzelev and John Potvin (Ashgate, Farnham, 2010), pp.125-145.

17 Fernald, *Chinese Court Costumes*, p.9.

18 James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), pp.215-51.

19 *Catalogue of the International Exhibition of Chinese Art 1935-6* (London 1935).

That these robes were collected by Lady David and Mrs Rockefeller rather than their husbands - who after all, also collected Asian art - points to the highly gendered identity of embroidered dress. This was a medium that communicated the idealized Chinese gentlewomen, known in the West through the imagery of export watercolours and wallpapers which disseminated appropriate visions like ladies sewing in her boudoir, a vision reiterated by museum curators: “We remember that Chinese ladies of rank traditionally embroidered parts of their costumes in their courtyard gardens among their birds and flowers.”²⁰ These gender ideologies also played a key role in bringing these objects into the museum collection. It was often female curators who were instrumental in the exhibition and publication of Chinese dress – Jean Mailey, Helen Fernald, Pauline Simmons, Lindsay Hughes. Their ability to gain curator positions and publishing opportunities was partly due to the absence of male curators called into military service, but doubtless it was easier for women to negotiate the chauvinistic world of mid-twentieth-century museum management through the “minor arts” or “traditional female specialities” of textiles, furnishings, and prints.²¹ Similarly, at the level of the collector, women used their donations to break into the masculinized world of collecting, and to receive recognition for their social contribution and cultured identity. Lucy Aldrich’s acquisitions enabled her to become a major benefactor of the Museum of the Rhode Island School of Design, where J1 and J4 are housed, awarding her a degree of control over the museum that is hard to fathom today – allowing her to determine the space, the choice and theme of exhibition. Reading her letters to the RISD director, there can be little doubt about who controls the museum’s socio-economic capital:

My Dear Mr Edwards, I am writing you this so that there will be no misunderstanding about my proposed gift of \$3000 for the restoration of the Silk Room. If the Museum Committee decides to give up the same room for the exhibition of the silks, I am willing to spend \$3000 to put it in order as I would like to have it. *I am not giving \$3000 for the museum staff to arrange it as they please.*²²

20 Jean Mailey, “Ancestors and Tomb Robes”, *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin, New Series*, vol.22, no.3, (Nov 1963), pp.101-115.

21 See Chelsea Schlievert and Jason Steuber, “Collecting Asian Art, Defining Gender Roles”, *Journal of the History of Collections*, vol.20, no.2 (2008), pp.291-303.

22 Letter dated Feb 16th, 1950. Lucy Aldrich’s underlining, my italics (Lucy T. Aldrich Papers, RISD).

For Lucy Aldrich, her large collection of Asian textiles permitted her an arena of agency that, as an unmarried, childless, deaf woman, likely eluded her in other areas of her life. Through traditional female specialities like Chinese women's dress, her collection also allowed her a means of challenging women's exclusion from the often explicitly chauvinist arena of museums and auction houses.²³

At the level of the museum, substantial accessions like these newly established museums to establish a respectable collection and occupy a dominant position within their city's identity, granting them economic and cultural capital that continues to earn interest. Through these women's donations, Denver and Rhodes Island could compete, in civic pride and cultural clout, with other important collections of Chinese dress and textiles established in this period: the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Royal Ontario Museum, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. As Table 1.1a shows, the jacket style is fairly scattered across a large number of North American museums with each museum typically containing two or three examples of the jacket style within their collections.

The reality that the gain of these women and these museums was predicated on the loss of others does not appear to be something Western collectors dwelled on. Of course, for those actually present in China, close to the processes that were causing these luxury possessions to appear on the market, it was difficult to avoid the impact upon the owners of these same objects (even allowing for the characteristic separation of foreign neighbourhoods from Chinese in places like Beijing and Shanghai). In a letter to her sister from 1920 Canton, Lucy wrote of people being "so frightened by the recent fighting that all the treasures were packed to save them. I think that is the reason they are selling so much – they are frightened and think it is better to save them than to lose them."²⁴ Fortunately for those like a Mr Chong who had packed up his entire material life, Westerners like Lucy Aldrich were

²³ Christine Guth explores how American women collected and displayed Asian art during this period in "Asia by Design: Women and the Collecting and Display of Oriental Art", in *Journey's East: Isabella Stewart Gardner and Asia* (Boston: Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, 2009), pp.52-72.

²⁴ Letter dated Nov 30th, 1920 (Lucy T. Aldrich Papers, RISD).

on hand to “save” them; she spent nearly \$3000 on textiles, furniture and jade.²⁵ Despite undoubted knowledge of this turmoil, a disconnect runs through the travel records of Lucy and her contemporaries: little acknowledgement of the unfair balance of power and privilege, or consideration of their fortunate position, at the favoured end of an unequal exchange necessitated by civil war and famine, or that their souvenirs represented the loss of people who had once been rather like them – wealthy, cultured, and connected.

It is hardly surprising that collectors preferred to imagine the genteel Chinese lady sitting embroidering in her courtyard, rather than forced to sell off her material surroundings, which logically the Western purchase of these same objects implied; it is perhaps anachronistic to expect debate of these issues at this juncture. But the implications of recognizing what object biographer Edmund de Waal has called the “moment of fissure” - “when grand things are taken and when family objects, known and handled and loved, become stuff” - potentially was particularly problematic for body-bound objects like dress, intimately tied to the same Chinese bodies experiencing this turmoil.²⁶ These were objects sold by second-hand clothing (*gu yu*) merchants – as a bamboo ballad described: “As for other more valuable pieces of clothing, these are sold to distant and foreign lands where several times the (normal) profit can be made. Even ordinary items, once they have been washed, dyed or altered, then their sales can be improved - these are all techniques used by those in this business.”²⁷ Various strategies were utilised in order to maintain a disconnect - to permit the conscionable purchase of what was in essence, the used dress objects of Chinese women. One method was to displace the actual identity of the objects, to re-shape used clothing into another genre or object, and thus deflect the real context of original object.²⁸ As Sarah Cheang and Verity Wilson have demonstrated, Chinese embroidered dress was frequently reinvented or restructured – worn as fancy and theatrical dress or

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *The Hare with the Amber Eyes: A Hidden Inheritance* (Picador, 2010), p.252; Cheang, “Selling China”, p.11.

²⁷ Chi Zehui, *Beiping shi gongshangye gai kuang*, p.220.

²⁸ For an example of a re-make, see no.178, in Adolph S. Cavallo, *Textiles: Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum* (Boston: The Trustees, 1986), p.196, no.178, “Fragments of a Dragon Robe, Made into a Lettercase”, made “out of an old Chinese coat”.

dismantled and reformed into trimmings, borders, and cushions - both methods comprised an attempt to assert the cultural identity of the Western collector even as they toyed with the dress of the cultural other.²⁹ Another strategy was the use of specific discourses to narrate and understand the objects; that of the imperial court - “personal requisites of court life in old China”, or the use of figural tropes like the “Manchu lady” or “Chinese lady” - uncomplicated with further attributes such as place, age, or socio-economic position that might suggest the reality of the life behind the discarded dress object.³⁰

So women like Lucy made a clear separation between Chinese dress and Western dress, maintaining a divide between her annual trips to Paris to purchase seasonal fashions for her and her sister, and her shopping expeditions in Shanghai and Beijing. The latter were narrated as exotic and novel - Lucy wrote to her sister: “I wish you and John could have seen us in a little dark shop bargaining for jade or pawing over piles of evil smelling silks looking for something really old or worthwhile.”³¹ Rather than seasonal or fashionable, Chinese dress was “old” or “worthwhile” (in the artistic sense). It is highly significant that at the same juncture that the “insatiable appetite for Asian-style textiles” was reshaping Europe,³² so too does the characterization of non-changing Chinese dress begin to solidify. In contrast to earlier periods where Western observers had found as much similarity as difference, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as the discourse of Western fashion gathered place, Chinese dress came to be seen as fixed in time - described with attributes like static and regulated.³³ In 1904 Georg Simmel published an influential paper on fashion, theorizing that the “peculiar charm” of the foreign object was only of appeal to the “man of culture”: “This motive of foreignness, which fashion employs in its socializing endeavours, is restricted to higher civilization,

29 Verity Wilson, “Western Modes and Asian Clothes: Reflections on Borrowing Other People’s Dress”, *Costume*, no.36, (2002), pp.139-157; Cheang, “Selling China”, pp.8-9.

30 See the catalogue listings in Fernald, *Chinese Court Costumes*, pp.40-41.

31 Letter dated Nov 30th, 1920 (Lucy T. Aldrich Papers, RISD).

32 Beverley Lemire and Giorgio Riello, “East and West: Textiles and Fashion in Early Modern Europe”, *Journal of Social History*, vol.41, no.4 (2008), pp.887-916, p.895.

33 Ko, “Bondage in Time: Footbinding and Fashion Theory”, *Fashion Theory*, vol.1, no.1 (2003), pp.3-28; Finnane, *Changing Clothes in China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), pp.19-23.

because novelty, which foreign origin guarantees in extreme form, is often regarded by primitive races as an evil. This is certainly one of the reasons why primitive conditions of life favour a correspondingly infrequent change of fashions.”³⁴ Thus the popularity of dress styles that were new, different, and foreign, could only be claimed by the “higher civilization” of the West. This opposition was to become a vital distinction in articulating Western modernity, positioned in opposition to Chinese decline, and we will dwell further on these themes shortly in relation to defining Chinese fashion. For now, to return to Hevia’s “dense referential grids”: it is against this backdrop that we see the emergence of four dominant co-ordinates or ways of understanding Chinese dress that had a major impact on museum scholarship and collecting agendas. None of these paradigms were necessarily untrue some of the time, even if they were rarely all true all of the time, but as ideals, they exerted considerable influence, conditioning the study and interpretation of “Chinese Dress”, and preventing the participation of many objects which lay outside the frameworks examined in the following section.

Chinese Dress as “Imperial”

For most visitors to China, whether merchant, missionary, or diplomat, embroidered textiles provided an exotic, gendered, affordable souvenir, which might communicate some of their experience of China to others. For example, New England merchant Frank Woodbridge Cheney (1832-1909) wrote home: “I have sent by the John Jay a small package of embroideries. Please give a pair of slippers to each of the aunts. They were brought from the city of Suchau (Soochow) called the Paris of China. Shanghai is not a good place to pick up fancy articles. Most come from Canton and the prices are high.”³⁵ But around the mid-nineteenth-century, as Western imperialism grew increasingly powerful and predatory, and as increasing numbers of court objects appeared on the market, “imperial” began to prevail as a value-conveying attribute, and wealthy collectors aimed at building an imperially or

34 Simmel, “Fashion”, *International Quarterly*, no.10, (1904), pp.131-155, p.136; cited in Lemire and Riello, “East and West” p.15, n.51.

35 Antoinette Cheney Crocker, *Frank Woodbridge Cheney: two years in China and Japan* (Mass: Davis Press, 1970), p.51, letter 22, Shanghai, June 3rd 1859.

officially validated collection. Just as the entrancement with the Chinese handicrafts of embroidery and carving was tied to the dissatisfaction with the material fruits of the industrial revolution, so too was the disappearance of many of the European regal courts implicated in the “deepening fetishization” of court material culture.³⁶ But this bias towards the imperial and official in the collecting of Chinese dress was to circumscribe the field for most of the century, determining which objects received attention and which did not. As the lure of the imperial came to hold sway over dress collectors and museums, the construct of “Chinese dress” within the North American and Western European museum came to serve as a shorthand for imperial and official dress rather than something more representative of the wider population. Scholar-collectors like Carl Schuster (1904-1969), who deliberately set out to collect folk costume, were extremely rare, considered rather eccentric, and by all accounts rather ostracized from scholarly and museum circles.³⁷ Rather than considering the non-official and non-aristocratic classes who clearly had some wealth and freedom to participate in fashionable dress systems, knowledge in the field centred upon imperial individuals and institutions. Moreover, the elitism that held imperial robes to be more interesting, worthwhile, and relevant than non-regulated clothing also set a research agenda that marginalized women’s dress. Women outside the imperial system were afterthoughts in a narrative of power and status that prioritised the imperial and the male.

Chinese Dress as “Old”

As courtly objects came to dominate collecting agendas and more sophisticated valuation systems of this courtly material culture developed, collectors and museums created dynastic hierarchies. The Han and Song dynasties were held up as the zenith of excellence, with the nineteenth-century functioning as the mirroring mire. For dress collectors, what was most valued was imperial dress from earlier, more prestigious dynasties like the late Ming or high Qing of Qianlong and Kangxi, and the literature displays a marked insistence that their collections were preserving these periods of excellence: “Like

36 Clunas, “China in Britain: the Imperial Collections” in *Colonialism and the Object: Empire, material culture and the Museum*, eds. Tim Barringer and Tom Flynn, pp.41-51, p.468.

37 Edmund Carpenter, “Carl Schuster (1904-1969)”, *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, no.24, (Autumn 1993), pp.44-5.

so many Chinese textiles, we can date them “not later than Ch’ien Lung” and they are quite possibly earlier”.³⁸ Despite the typical absence of provenance information, objects increased their value through documentation attesting to their age, as for example Figur 1.4, an embroidered dragon panel, now in the ROM collection. The panel was removed from a furnishing or robe and remounted in the early twentieth-century with a blue floral border, and both Chinese and English inscription affirm the “Guarantee of Antique” that the embroidery is more than 100 years old. By comparison, nineteenth-century objects like the jackets bought to the fore the essential conflict Westerners had in facing the reality of modern China, caught between admiration for the lengthy and glorious Chinese historical past, and dislike of its chaotic and destructive present. Scholars like Schuyler Cammann promulgated a thesis of nineteenth-century decline, portraying nineteenth-century dress compositions as examples of decay: a Zeitgeistian reflection of the crumbling Qing empire - “a period of fast-declining taste.”³⁹

As a 1943 exhibition puts it:

If we examine these tapestries in chronological order, following in this way the development of this art from the Song dynasty when it produced its most perfect works, of which, unfortunately, we only meet with rather rare specimens, up to modern times, we shall see that, in spite of a technique that is even more refined, and in spite of a greater richness of material, decadence has been slow but inexorable.⁴⁰

In genres like porcelain and painting, scholars have begun to rewrite this narrative of decline, demonstrating the rich design evolution caused by widening vernacular markets and the transition in fashion epicentres from Suzhou and Yangzhou to Shanghai and Beijing.⁴¹ But the assumption of decline is particularly worthy of reappraisal in regard to late Qing women’s dress, distinguished by the influence of contemporary print culture and the application of foreign materials like American trimmings and British woollens.

38 Alan Priest and Pauline Simmons, *Chinese textiles: an introduction to the study of their history, sources, techniques, symbolism and use occasioned by the Exhibition of Chinese Court Robes and Accessories* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1931), p.20.

39 Schuyler Cammann, “Embroidery Techniques in Old China”, *Archives of the Chinese Art Society of America*, vol.16, (1962), pp.16-40, p.34.

40 *Exhibition of Chinese Imperial Robes and Chinese Brocades, Silk-tapestries and embroideries, 10th-19th centuries* (The China Institute, 1943), p.iii.

41 Stacey Pierson, *Chinese Ceramics* (London, V&A, 2009) esp.p.41, 73; Wan Qingli, *Bing fei shuailuo de bainian: Shijiu shiji Zhongguo huibua shi* (Guilin: Guangxi shifan daxue chubanshe, 2008).

Chinese Dress as “Art”

Whilst during earlier junctures, Chinese material culture had occupied an ambiguous position between fine art and anthropology, ultimately, as a much wider range of objects became available, including bronzes, jades, and mortuary ceramics; as collectors shifted towards more serious, systematic collecting, and museums gathered ever richer, larger collections; as a series of international exhibitions of Chinese art were held throughout the 20s and 30s in Europe, and later in America; the classification of an oddly wide range of objects as “Chinese Art” became dominant. Conn has argued that the displacement of the long-standing “curio” framing of Chinese material culture by art historical frameworks necessitated both the adoption of frameworks developed from Western art and the rejection of other possible frameworks of understanding.⁴² But for Chinese dress, the deployment of these chronological, formal, and stylistic categories was particularly vexatious. Whereas other areas of Chinese material culture like porcelain or painting that could be feasibly channelled into existing museum categories, Western dress had been excluded from major museum collections well into the nineteenth-century.⁴³ In fact the only museum site that legitimized the study of dress was the ethnographic collection, where anthropological scholars had long viewed dress as a crucial component of positioning cultural development, the agenda of the nineteenth-century anthropological enterprise.⁴⁴ But in order to participate in the new locations and resources of knowledge on Chinese art, curators and scholars of Chinese dress had to firmly reject any anthropological associations; instead they aligned themselves with the decorative arts, as Met curator Alan Priest opined, “Textiles surely belong to the minor arts if not mere crafts.”⁴⁵

42 Steven Conn, “Where is the East?”: Asian Objects in American Museums”, *Winterthur Portfolio*, vol.35, no 2/3, (Summer- Autumn 2000), pp.167-170; Warren I. Cohen, *East Asian Art and American Culture: A Study in International Relations* (New York: University of Columbia Press, 1992).

43 The V&A didn’t feature clothing in their catalogue until 1914 and these attitudes didn’t really change until the post-war period, when professional woman curators began to be appointed in the 1950s, see Lou Taylor, “Doing the Laundry? A Reassessment of Object-based Dress History”, *Fashion Theory: the Journal of Dress, Body, and Culture*, vol.2, no.4, (1998), pp.337-358; pp.341-2, 339.

44 Conn, “Where is the East?”, pp.166-168.

45 Priest, “foreword”, in *The Kuo Ch’in Wang Textiles*, Lindsay Hughes (The Gallery Press, 1945).

The 1930s and 1940s exhibition catalogues that comprise the earliest Western studies of Chinese dress demonstrate the challenges of confining objects like court robes and rank badges into the category of art.⁴⁶ Whereas in the study of painting and bronzes, connoisseurship methodologies could integrate documentary evidence inherent to the object – the seal or the inscription – this was not a productive investigation to adopt with the typically anonymously produced Chinese textiles and dress. In order to develop the “scholarly apparatus” of stylistic schools and chronological progressions that would enable the objects to be treated as art, museum curators like Priest and Fernald produced descriptive histories outlining stylistic evolution and shifts in imperial taste, based primarily upon formal analysis of the objects and the rare dated examples from tomb excavations. In the absence of accessible textual sources,⁴⁷ this attempt to categorize and order was clearly a difficult enterprise, one sometimes partly blamed upon the obstructiveness of the Chinese, unencumbered by the Westerner’s desire for “complete” understanding:

The worst of it is that, rigid as these regulations were, most of them were never written down, but were to a great extent transmitted by custom... the student has to deal with the most carefree explanations of scholars (many of them actually ex-officials) to whom it had never occurred to think about the why and wherefore of the clothes they themselves wore and with the yarns of Chinese dealers and teachers bent on pleasing their clients and entirely uninterested in accuracy. The result is that the Westerner, *with his passion for dates and cataloguing*, is in for a long period of sifting the material and testing the statements which have been made, before he gets anything like a complete survey of Chinese textiles.⁴⁸

The arrogant tone is revealing: only the Westerner possessed the intellectual capacities to make a “complete survey” of Chinese textiles, even if this survey was predicated upon and concerned with an essentially Western understanding of Chinese dress.

46 Priest and Simmons, *Chinese textiles*, 1931; *Imperial Robes and Textiles of the Chinese Court* (Minneapolis: Minneapolis Institute of Art, 1943); Priest, *Costumes from the Forbidden City* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1945); Fernald, *Chinese Court Costumes*, 1946.

47 Textual sources in the form of imperial histories were not properly used until the landmark publication of Schuyler Cammann’s *China’s Dragon Robes* (New York, Ronald Press Co., 1952).

48 Fernald, *Chinese Court Costumes*, p.2, my italics.

Chinese Dress as “Auspicious”

The desire to master the Chinese dress system is perhaps best revealed in the obsessive concern with auspicious symbols, carefully and repetitiously listed from the earliest catalogues onwards.⁴⁹ As Pierce observes, the curator’s ability to linguistically communicate the object awards an important sense of progress in the “material discrimination” of an object set. And given the lack of textual sources and the desire to order, the value placed on this vocabulary set is not surprising.⁵⁰ But the attempts by Western collectors and curators to grasp the communication of this symbolic system were grounded upon a conception of symbolism gained from literature like nineteenth-century flower language books, creating certain assumptions that appear rather dubious today.⁵¹

One belief was that decorative motives were always and necessarily meaningful, a feature which separated Western and Chinese craftsmen:

To decorate a surface solely for the sake of decoration is something that belongs to Western ways of thought: our patterns are usually without significance. With the Chinese artist, rightness of placing and felicity of spacing are instinctive; but these concerns do not exhaust his aim. In his mind there will be also some familiarity of association with custom, legend, poetry, or else a symbolism, not private or occult, but immediately apprehended by his public.⁵²

The very ubiquity of a motif like the bat or mandarin duck upon women’s dress suggests this incessant meaningfulness was rather unlikely; as Vainker concisely observes of Ming and Qing textiles: “In general, few motifs are devoid of meaning, and just as few are purposely used.”⁵³ Further,

49 One of the earliest is Bernard Vuilleumier, *The Art of Silk Weaving in China: Symbolism of Chinese Ritual Imperial Robes* (London: the China Institute, 1939).

50 Susan M. Pierce, *Museums, Objects, and Collections: a Cultural Study* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1992), p.22

51 On Victorian flower language books, see Beverley Seaton, “The Flower Language Books of the Nineteenth Century”, *Morton Arboretum Quarterly* vol.16, (1980), pp.1-11. The idea of a floral language is usually traced back to Classical roots in Greece and Rome, but nineteenth-century writers also often paid tribute to “Eastern” invention, usually placed in the Ottoman harems, but similar systems were thought to have existed in China and Japan, though writers struggled to access the inner feminine realms where they might learn this language: “The exclusiveness of the Chinese and Japanese races makes it difficult to obtain any reliable account of their floriographical symbols.”(John Ingram, *The Language of Flowers* (London: Warne, 1887), cited Seaton, p.8).

52 Laurence Binyon, “Introduction”, in Vuilleumier, *The Art of Silk Weaving in China*, p.iii.

53 Vainker, *Chinese Silk: A Cultural History* (British Museum Press, New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2004), p.149

scholars like Vuilleumier conceptualized and approached this symbolic system as operating within discrete arenas; he was primarily interested in symbolism within imperial confines, which he presented as immune from alteration or influence through their application and significance in other sectors of Chinese society: “the language of the “elite”, the image of the nobility, of honour, constituting, so to speak, for the robe an aristocratic cuirasse.”⁵⁴ But material culture rarely achieves such a hermeneutic sphere of isolated usage. Consider for example the various ways in which the late Ming courtesans Ma Shouzheng (1548-1604) and Gu Mei (1619-1664) used visual topoi like the orchid (*lanhua*). In their paintings and poetry, this symbol - conventionally held to represent love and beauty - was inflected with specific and individualized associations – the femininity and sexuality of the courtesan.⁵⁵ Their manipulation of the orchid genre awarded them socio-political gain, enabling their inclusion in the “male dominant visual discourse”, but from an iconographical perspective, it added new layers of signification to this symbol.

Vuilleumier’s work may be easily dismissed as Orientalist fantasy, belonging to past scholars and past scholarship, but aspects of this approach still linger today; contemporary catalogues of auspicious motifs continue to present an ahistorical account, and so implicitly deny the possibility of semantic shifts over time and through different usage by different socio-economic groups.⁵⁶ Indeed, any chart mapping motif to meaning implicitly suggests that the symbols were singular, rigid, unchanging, holding identical meaning for all who saw and used them. Yet many Chinese symbols are so broad in their semantic grasp that they resist any attempt to pin down more precise meaning, something central to their value as a means of communication. Consider a scene between lovers Wu Guniang and A’tian in the late Qing Suzhou *Wuge* ballad, *Wu Guniang*. A’tian has just purchased four

54 Vuilleumier, *The Art of Silk Weaving in China*, p.14.

55 Monica Merlin, “The Nanjing courtesan Ma Shouzheng (1548-1604): Gender, Space, and Painting in the Late Ming Pleasure Quarter”, *Gender and History*, vol.23, no.3, (Nov 2011), pp.630-652.

56 For example, Terese Tse Bartholomew’s *Hidden Meanings in Chinese Art* (San Francisco, California: Asian Art Museum--Chong-Moon Lee Center for Asian Art and Culture, 2006): though a wonderful reference tool and praiseworthy in its comprehensiveness and conception, it presents a synchronic analysis that little acknowledges the evolution of symbols through time and space; Clunas comments on the uniformly ahistorical presentation of auspicious motif catalogues in “Human Figures in the Decoration of Ming Lacquer”, *Oriental Art N.S.*, vol.32, (1986), pp.177-188.

embroidered handkerchiefs for Wu: “Each one embroidered with patterns, the patterns express his love”. Pleased by the gift, Wu examines the handkerchiefs carefully, explaining to A’tian how each design correlates to their relationship, for example, “The peony flower and the green leaf; flower cannot be separated from leaf. Together upon one path in life and death to the last.” A’tian is gratified, not just that his present is successful, but also that his love is so clever in articulating the meaning of these embroidered symbols.⁵⁷ If we are to understand auspicious symbols as a system of communication, then we need to recognize that this system was not static but rather evolved as its users manipulated its symbols (as far as semantic and social boundaries allowed), and that dwelling solely upon the “dictionary” meaning of a given motif cannot reveal the full range of motivations for a given decorative decision. This argument is just as valid for narrative imagery as auspicious motifs. Though in later chapters we will explore the many connections between late Qing women and dramatic culture, I do not wish to assert that the reason why a woman wore a jacket adorned with the *Chai chuan ji* narrative was necessarily because she imagined herself as Bitao, or because she too was engaged to a poor scholar (J10). Social convention and cultural habits likely played as critical role as an individual’s character or circumstance in determining the iconographic choice, whether mandarin duck or romantic drama. Without the socio-cultural context behind the interpretation of symbol placement, the decorative decision is divorced from the historical reality of Chinese women. For example, the increased application in textiles of gendered motifs like the mandarin duck or the whole host of symbols alluding to the birth of sons during the Ming, cannot be understood in isolation from concurrent shifts in gender constructions and relations in which “women’s productive work was veiled, their reproductive role became more dominant, both in elite philosophy and in ordinary life.”⁵⁸

The frameworks discussed above set out the boundaries of Western scholarship on Chinese dress, and it was with great difficulty that they accommodated the figural jackets. As examples of fashionable women’s dress, neither official nor regulated, late Qing rather than High Qing, determined by the desires of the market rather than the traditions of political symbolism, the jackets

57 Gao Fumin and Jin Xu, *Wuge yichan jicui* (Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 2003), p.214.

58 Bray, *Technology and Gender: Fabrics of Power in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p.263.

received little attention. Despite numerous examples located throughout American museum collections, the figural roundel style was never identified or studied as a stylistic group. And when the jackets did feature in twentieth-century museum catalogues, such listings tended to assume a generic interpretation of “figures in garden”.⁵⁹ Narrative imagery was essentially trivialized, as Jacobsen puts it in the Minneapolis Institute of Art catalogue: “Some of these miniature scenes may have been drawn from classic Chinese opera or romantic novels ... but such motifs had become highly conventionalized and devoid of much meaning by the nineteenth century.”⁶⁰ In marked contrast to auspicious symbols, there was little interest in figural motifs.

There are several possible factors behind this dismissive attitude. Firstly, Western art historians were influenced by Chinese literati art hierarchies in which narrative themes occupied a lowly position, tainted by the vulgarity of associations with professional painters. There was also the factor of the immediate past of the China trade: vast quantities of Chinoiserie porcelain and wallpapers portraying Chinese figural scenes, life and occupations - the lotus-footed lady or the badge-wearing official - arranged in syntax-less configurations, their meaning existing only in what these individual tropes represented in the larger assertion of Western understandings of Chinese civilization (Fig. 1.5).⁶¹ This experience with meaningless figural arrangements was often further compounded by the contemporary emphasis on the formal, sensuous experiencing of Chinese textiles. Where there is evidence of narrative textiles being used by Western collectors, they appear to have been displayed and presented so as to maximize their formal qualities of colour, shape, and texture, rather than narrative significance. For example, a narrative hanging in the Chinese Room at Isabella Stewart Gardner’s Fenway Court was positioned to highlight its graphic qualities, creating a distance that prevented the viewer from interpreting any narrative meaning (Fig. 1.6), their pictorial motifs

59 For an example of the ubiquitous “figures in garden setting” label, see Jacobsen, *Imperial Silks*, no.222, p.526, acc. RBL.51.424, actually scenes from *Xi xiang ji*.

60 Robert D. Jacobsen, *Imperial Silks: Ch’ing Dynasty Textiles in the Minneapolis Institute of Arts* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 2000), p.480.

61 Gill Saunders, “The China Trade”, in *The Papered Wall: the history, patterns, and techniques of wallpaper*, ed. Lesley Hoskins, (London: Thames and Hudson, 2005), pp.42-56.

“subordinated to the overall design” to “become shimmering, free-floating displays of alternating curvilinear and geometric forms in an interplay of gold and rich colours.”⁶² Nearby Western tapestries of biblical scenes and classical stories were treated very differently: since they were valued for their narratives, they were presented and catalogued accordingly – clearly labeled and positioned so that the viewer could identify the scene.⁶³

Qing Women and Cultural Literacy

It also may be speculated that part of the appeal of symbolism was in enabling a means of understanding the lives of Chinese women, who were then seen as uniformly illiterate - this was a period in which Dr W.A.P.Martin’s claim that in China “not one in ten thousand women can read” was widely circulated.⁶⁴ It was also a time when the education of Chinese women was seen as integral to the modernization of China: “The character of the great new China will be determined in no small measure by the women of the nation, and what these women will be depends very largely upon whether they receive education, and upon the type of that education”, and many American women joined Christian missions to bring literacy to Chinese women.⁶⁵ Perhaps the decorative reading of figural scenes and the prioritizing of auspicious symbols was grounded upon an early-mid twentieth-century conception of Qing women as illiterate and uneducated, only able to manipulate a limited set of symbols. As Ernest E. Leavitt Jr puts it in his 1968 *Silkworm and the Dragon*: “the literacy rate of China could never have been considered high, yet even the small children could read the “meanings” in nature and in the things around them.”⁶⁶ For this generation who confidently asserted “Symbolism was the very core of Chinese textile art”, it is no wonder that the jacket scenes seemed to hold little appeal; they could not be compiled into endlessly repetitive listings of Eight Buddhist Treasures and

62 Guth, “Asia by Design”, pp.52-72.

63 *The Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Fenway Court* (Boston: Mass, Merrymount Press, 1926), p.6, “Tapestry: Noah building the ark” (Brussels, XVI century).

64 Isaac Taylor Headland challenges this claim in *Court Life in China: the Capital, its Officials and People* (New York: Fleming H Revell Company, 1909), chap.22, p.365-6.

65 Margaret E Burton, *The Education of Women in China* (New York: Fleming H Revell Company, 1911).

66 Ernest E. Leavitt Jr, *The Silkworm and the Dragon* (Arizona State Museum, 1968), p.24.

the Twelve Imperial Symbols, for they referenced a far more vital, contemporary, and multivalent relationship with popular culture.

While this account of women's illiterate lives might be understandable for Western scholars writing in the mid-twentieth century, when the achievement and significance of Ming and Qing women's writing was little known, for researchers today this position is no longer tenable. In turning away from connoisseurship towards a more socially and culturally grounded understanding of Chinese women's dress, I seek to take advantage of the achievements of several decades of scholarship in women's history. This body of research has demonstrated the development of a reading public for women's works beginning in seventeenth-century Jiangnan,⁶⁷ and investigated publisher's directions towards this readership: publishing popular tales of romance and fantasy requiring lower-level literacy skills;⁶⁸ "explicitly gendered female" knowledge – recipes, patterns, and pedagogy circulating in the form of household encyclopedias, manuals, and almanacs.⁶⁹ It has shown the increasing visibility of women, and the role of festivals in legitimizing acceptable times and spaces for female tourists.⁷⁰ It has examined the sympathetic presentation of clever and capable women in late Ming and Qing fiction, women who often act without the assistance or advice of men, or even counter to men's wishes;⁷¹ and considered the writings of "cultivated women of the inner chambers" as sought-after authors, by the

67 Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers: women and culture in seventeenth-century China* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1994), esp.pp.1-67.

68 Anne E. McLaren, *Chinese Popular Culture and Ming Chantefables* (Brill: Leiden, Boston, Koln, 1998), pp.1, 67.

69 On late Ming examples of female-themed content (*guige shiyi*) in household encyclopaedias, see Ko, *Cinderella's Sisters: a Revisionist History of Footbinding* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2005), p.291; on embroidery manuals, see Grace Fong, "Female Hands: Embroidery as a Knowledge Field in Women's Everyday Life in Late Imperial and Early Republican China", *Late Imperial China*, vol.25, no.1 (June 2004), pp.1-58.

70 See Chang Jianhua, "Mingdai fangzhi suojian suishijieri zhong de nuxing huodong", *Zhongguo shi yanjiu*, *Hanguo*, vol.10, no.20, (2002).

71 See Jenna Wu, *The Chinese Virago: a Literary Theme* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1995); Louise Edwards, "Representations of Women and Social Power in Eighteenth-Century China: The Case of Wang Xifeng", *Late Imperial China*, vol.14, no.1 (1993), pp.34-59.

nineteenth-century, published independently and alongside male authors.⁷² It has shown that this publishing shift was accompanied by new ways of classifying and ordering women - “new constructions of womanhood” - that reflected the increasing variety of roles that women took on during this period.⁷³ But scholarship has little addressed how female material culture informs upon these developments. What light do the jackets cast upon these cultural shifts? Do the scenes present defining moments in the careers of Confucian exemplars and historical personages or more everyday characters? What do the jackets tell us of how Qing women understood powerful, assertive female characters like Madame Shi from *Man chuang hu* (J8), or Madame Bai from *Bai she zhuan* (J6), or more normative *caizi jiaren* beauties like Cui'E from *Zhenzhu ta* (J11)? Do the jackets take inspiration from visual best-sellers like *Xi xiang ji* found all over China, or more localized narratives found in regional repertoires? How do they utilize dress formats and embroidery techniques to interpret these tales?

In using the jackets to understand how embroidery offered women new possibilities of cultural production, I have followed Susan Mann's definition of cultural literacy, which well characterizes the range of educational levels and social classes possessed by Chinese women of this period: “Myths, stories, and symbols formed a cultural matrix prescribing gender roles for all women whether they could read or not.”⁷⁴ The women who wore these jackets may not have been able to read and write in the literary Chinese mode (*wenyan*), but they were not culturally illiterate. Employing this more nuanced approach to literacy allows us to recognise the cultural production constituted in the wearing of these jackets, and to use the vast range of dramatic stories told on these jackets as something more than mere “figures in gardens” – as evidence of the influence of popular culture upon Qing women,

72 For female poets, see Xiaorong Li, “Gender and Textual Politics during the Qing dynasty: the Case of the Zhengshi Ji”, *Harvard Journal of Asian Studies*, vol.69, no.1 (June 2009), pp.75-107; for female novelists, see Ellen Widmer, *The Beauty and the Book: Women and Fiction in Nineteenth-century China* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2006).

73 Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers*, pp.115-117; Harriet Zurndorfer, “Women in the epistemological strategy of Chinese encyclopedia: preliminary observations from some Sung, Ming, and Ch'ing works”, in *Chinese Women in the Imperial Past: New Perspectives*, ed. Harriet Zurndorfer (Leiden: Brill, 1999).

74 “The Education of Daughters in the Mid-Ch'ing Period”, in *Education and Society in Late Imperial China*, eds. Benjamin A. Elman and Alexander Woodside (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), pp.19-49, p.19.

their sophisticated relationship with narrative, and the role of fashionable dress in expressing this relationship.

It is in this context that the thesis positions the jackets, and I make two central claims. Firstly, I argue that the narrative tales referenced by the jackets provided an important means of understanding for late Qing women, and it is this dimension that explains why narrative becomes a decorative theme in Chinese textiles and dress of this period. The ability possessed by all successful narratives to interpret anew each generation's concerns - the "malleability" of narrative - is particularly relevant to the depiction of narrative upon dress, often invoked as the most personal and intimate of textile forms. In this light, it may be that argued that more significant than the choice of narratives upon the jackets is the simple fact that the dressed body had become a medium or performative space for the telling of stories. Thus we will explore how dress was employed as a vehicle for moral and social values, how and what the jacket's narratives signified in the lives of late Qing women, the auspicious significance and celebratory associations possessed by these scenes. Secondly, I contend that the figural roundel jacket should be understood as an example of late Qing fashion, and that the jackets were produced by professional embroiderers and tailors, who sought inspiration from contemporary visual depictions of narrative and aimed to satisfy a fashion-conscious, commercialized market. Accordingly, one productive route to understanding the development and design of this style is through the rubric of the Chinese fashion system, which governed how women's clothing was produced and consumed in this period. In the following section, I briefly review recent literature on Chinese fashion history in order to define the term fashion more closely.

3. FASHION IN CHINESE DRESS HISTORY

The formalist and connoisseurship histories that underpinned the study of Chinese objects during the early twentieth-century offered little harbinger of the socially and culturally grounded approaches to material culture that would transform the field by century's end. Anthropology revitalized the study of

material culture; positioning it as of inherent interest in providing a means for a social group to organize, comprehend, and display beliefs and practices, and thus allowing a means of investigating these belief systems. This approach reflected major shifts in other fields, in particular the transfer of interest in economic history from production to consumption,⁷⁵ and the adoption of structuralist approaches that enabled a higher value for the object - now just as valid to the historical investigation as written or spoken evidence - but also claimed that, methodologically, material objects could be “read” like a text: “Artefacts transmit signals, which elucidate mental patterns or structures. The structuralist premise and semiotic promise of the interpretation of artefacts is the knowledge that artefacts serve as cultural releasers.”⁷⁶

By the late twentieth-century, the importance of objects in shaping social and cultural identity was established as a central component in the formation of modernity and the rise of early modern Europe.⁷⁷ The filtering of these ideas through to the study of Chinese material culture was led by scholars like Craig Clunas and Wu Renshu, who challenged the presumption that these features were solely a feature of Western societies, arguing for a major shift in the relationship between people and things around the time of the Ming-Qing transition. In studies spanning art and gardens, travel and dress culture, they asserted that early modern Chinese society also defined itself by the objects it consumed, and that the discourses of taste and fashion were integral to this articulation of identity.⁷⁸

Within this wider debate, the work of cultural historians Antonia Finnane and Dorothy Ko has been field-shaping in relation to dress and bodily practices. Both scholars sought to conceptualize fashion

75 Miller, “Consumption and Commodities”, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, vol.24 (1995), pp.141-161, this effectively liberated consumption as a practice, allowing it to take on a more favourable, even sometimes creative, cast than it had been awarded during much of the twentieth-century under Marxist interpretations of capitalist society.

76 Jules David Prown, “Mind in Matter: An introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method”, *Winterthur Portfolio*, vol.17, no.1 (Spring, 1982), pp.1-19, p.6.

77 John Brewer, and Roy Porter eds., *Consumption and the World of Goods* (London: Routledge, 1993).

78 Clunas, “Modernity Global and Local: Consumption and the Rise of the West”, *The American Historical Review*, vol.104, no.5 (Dec 1999), pp.1497-1511; Wu Renshu, *Pinwei shehui: wan Ming de xiaofei shehui yu shidafu* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2008).

outside the Western European and Northern American contexts in which it had been initially and primarily defined and explored. And both scholars began by challenging the claim that Chinese society was so stable and conservative as to lack the desire for change and novelty that enabled the rise of fashion in the early modern Western world. Using testimonies by successive generations of Western visitors to China, they traced the “myth of the absence of fashion in China” back to the eighteenth century.⁷⁹ As one of the earliest illustrators of Chinese dress put it: “The fashion of the Chinese never vary; they are almost of antediluvian invention, and are perhaps emblematic of the stability of their affections.”⁸⁰ Despite their prominent agenda of “unchanging China” and the undoubted problematic nature of these observations – their restricted perspective and lack of access to domestic life or non-canonical texts – similar assertions continued to be made in ensuing centuries.⁸¹ Witness Lipovetsky “The Japanese kimono remained unchanged for centuries while in China women’s dress underwent no real transformation between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries”⁸²; Neil McKendrick “In Japan the kimono and the jinbaori remained virtually unchanged for centuries....In China.... in 1793 a traveller confirmed the lack of change when he wrote “In China, the form of clothing is rarely changed by fashion or whim... Even the women have scarcely new fashions”,⁸³ or even global historian Kenneth Pomeranz, who posits a decline of fashion during the mid-Qing, arguing, somewhat incredulously, that women of this period were more likely to engage in social competition and personal expression through reading and writing poetry than through the pursuit of fashionable clothes.⁸⁴

79 Ko, “Bondage in Time”, 2003; Finnane, *Changing Clothes in China*, 2008, pp.19-29.

80 George Mason, *The Costume of China*, 1800, plate LX, cited by Ko, *Bondage in Time*, p.19.

81 Finnane, *Changing Clothes in China*, p.43. The lack of access to domestic quarters would have particularly inhibited accurate accounts of female dress.

82 Gilles Lipovetsky, *The Empire of Fashion: Dressing modern democracy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994) (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994), p.19.

83 McKendrick, “The Commercialisation of Fashion”, in *Birth of a Consumer Society: the Commercialisation of Eighteenth Century England*, ed. McKendrick (London: Hutchinson, 1983) pp.34-99.

84 *The Great Divergence: China, Europe and the making of the modern world economy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000), p.155. I would question his conflation of the pleasures accorded by material consumption and intellectual expression, besides which the high levels of education required for poetry appreciation would have been confined to a small percentage of the female population, in contrast to dress consumption which allowed participation at many levels.

The work of Finnane, Ko, and other scholars has harvested a wealth of texts to contradict the prevailing assumption that historical China lacked the phenomena of fashion until introduced by the West in the early twentieth century. Rather than deny fashion, this evidence suggests that Chinese clothing and adornment from the sixteenth century onwards changed at a speed that dazzled its native observers. Such sources are not uncontroversial: it is problematic for example that, though often describing the dress and adornment of women, these writers are all male, leaving us some distance from the meaning women might have given clothing and necessitating consideration of the male (often didactic) agenda, which we will examine in the next chapter. But it is crucial evidence; the widespread usage of terms like *shi shang* (fashions of the time);⁸⁵ *shishi zhuang/zhuang* (fashionable make-up/attire);⁸⁶ *shi zhuang* (mode of the moment);⁸⁷ *shi xin* (lit. new time);⁸⁸ *shi xing* (fashionable);⁸⁹ *shi yang* (lit. look of the moment);⁹⁰ *xin shi shi* (lit. new time style),⁹¹ and *xin yang* (lit. new style)⁹² suggest that fashion was an issue of paramount concern to Chinese society.

85 Qian Yong (1759-1854) “Today’s tailors, always use old clothes to determine the measurements, and use the new styles (*xin yang*) to create the fashions (*shi shang*)” (*Lanyuan cong hua* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1979), vol.1, p.324.

86 Yu Huai “The clothes and adornment associated with southern entertainment were taken as the model everywhere...the length of gowns and the size of sleeves changed with the times. Witnesses referred to this as a la mode (*shishi zhuang*)” (cited in Finnane, *Changing Clothes in China*, p.48); a comment on the urban dimensions of *shishi zhuang* is seen as early as the Tang in a poem by Bai Juyi (772-846) “Fashion, fashion, comes from inside the cities (walls) and spreads all around.” (HYDCD, vol.5, p.694).

87 *Shizhuang* was used in early twentieth-century texts (for examples see HYDCD, vol.5, p.704) in the sense of fashionable dress before being supplanted by the modern-day *shimao*, see Yue Zheng, *Jindai Shanghai ren shehui xintai (1860-1910)* (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1991), pp.111-112.

88 HYDCD gives examples from Tang and Yuan writers, vol.5, p.704.

89 HYDCD gives examples from Song and early Republican writers, vol.5, p.694.

90 “Long skirts and wide collars, broad belts and narrow pleats – they change without warning. It’s what they call fashion (Chen Yao (*jinsi* 1535) *Yangzhou fuzhi*, 1733, 10.2 a-b, cited in Brook, *Confusions of Pleasure* (London: University of California Press, 1998), p.220).

91 By the late Qing novelty prevailed over time. In the mid-nineteenth century *Dreams of Wind and Moon*, characters are dressed in fashionable clothing (*xin shi shi*) (see Finnane, “Yangzhou’s “Modernity””, p.65).

92 For descriptions of Kangxi period hairstyles as “xinyang”, see Feng Erkang and Chang Jianhua, *Qingren shehui shenghuo* (Shenyang: Shenyang Chubanshe, 2002), p.180.

The prevalence of these terms is hardly surprising for early modern China was an environment apparently conducive to the formation of fashion.⁹³ The social and economic conditions of this period are well summarised by Rawski, but of particular relevance is the widespread competition caused by the doubling of population, and the commercialized growth in rural and urban handicraft production.⁹⁴ This was seen most of all in the wealthy, urbanised Jiangnan centres of Nanjing, Hangzhou, and Suzhou, the sites of private workshops and imperial factories, distinct from their pre-Ming manifestations in being tied neither to private household production nor imperial demand, but rather produced through putting-out systems of employment and distributed through an inter-provincial distribution network of urban markets and overseas trade.⁹⁵ These commercialized systems created an expansion of both producers and consumers, enabling a more diffuse production of silks

93 Given the fraught debate concerning the application of “early modern” to Chinese history (see Soren Clausen, “Early Modern China”, I use this term with some deliberation. Though this term may be grounded in a normative trajectory generated from European history, clearly Europe did not experience the only possible modernity, and each culture may be investigated “not only in terms of their approximation to the West but also in their own terms.” (Shmuel. N. Eisenstadt, and Wolfgang Schluchter, “Introduction: Paths to Early Modernities – a comparative view”, *Daedalus*, vol.127, no.3 (Summer 1998), pp.1-18, p.7). If this is satisfactorily achieved, for example, analysing the emergence of textile market networks in terms of a longer trajectory beginning in the Song, the term is a useful one, particularly appropriate in a thesis concerned with fashion, a cultural phenomena deeply intricated in developments of modernity like urbanization, commercialisation, and social mobility. Aubrey Cannon highlights the role of such circumstances in creating the impetus for fashion, see “The Cultural and Historical Contexts of Fashion”, in *Consuming Fashion: Adorning the transnational body*, eds. A.Brydon and S. Niessen (Oxford and New York: Berg Press, 1998), p.26.

94 Rawski, “Economic and Social Foundations of Late Imperial Culture” in *Popular Culture in Late Imperial China*, eds. David Johnson, Andrew J. Nathan, and Rawski (Berkeley; London: University of California Press, 1985), pp.3-14, in particular the monetization of New World and Japanese silver, the commercialization of agriculture, the expansion of education, and the popularization of publishing markets. Thirteenth and fourteenth-century China had a population of 60-80 million; it doubled to at least 150 million by the sixteenth-century, reached 150-200 million in 1700 and then doubled again by 1840 (Fuerwerker, “Chinese Economic History in Comparative Perspective”, in *Heritage of China*, ed. Paul Ropp (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1990), pp.224-41, pp.228-9).

95 The quantities of silk produced by the imperial workshops in the seventeenth century were greater than any previous point, but – for the first time - they occupied a smaller percentage of overall silk manufacture, an indication of the massive expansion of non-imperial markets, see Vainker, *Chinese Silk*, p.144, p.173; the putting out system that flourished in the eighteenth century originated in the fifteenth century, see Peng Zeyi, “Yapian zhanzheng qian Qing dai Suzhou sizhi ye shengchan guanxi de xingshi yu xingzhi”; E-tu Zen Sun, “Sericulture and Silk Textile Production in Ch’ing China”, in *Economic Organisation in Chinese Society*, W.E. Willmott ed. (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1972), pp.77-120, pp.99-101; Lillian M. Li, *China’s Silk Trade: traditional industry in the modern world 1842-1937* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1981), pp.51-2; for overseas trade, Fan Jinmin and Jin Wen, *Qingren shehui shenghuo*, pp.261-295.

and cottons of all qualities, and more diffuse distribution - allowing both elite and commoner to engage in consumption of these fabrics.⁹⁶

Whilst much of the scholarship on Chinese material culture has focused on late Ming elites, it is the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when the jacket style originates, where we find what might be characterised as the “democratization” of dress: a period when many dress objects - particularly celebratory and ceremonial styles, once confined to imperial or noble circles - became far more accessible to wider audiences. The increasing interactions between elite and vernacular portions of society created growing sub-stratification of in-between groups: the families of the many lower degree holders, specialists and secretaries, with some education, but little hope of a higher official position; or the families of successful merchants, urban craftsmen, and shop-keepers, who could potentially purchase gentry status in late Ming and Qing.⁹⁷ These middling classes, with some pretence to education and social status, looked to material culture to signify this attainment: their consumption practices redefined markets and tastes, creating a new publishing genre in manuals that taught how to consume: “the technological treatise, the guidebook to interior decoration, the statistical compilation, the merchant route book, the householder’s manual and the didactic work on norms of behaviour the commoditization of knowledge”.⁹⁸

Evidence for this consumption shift is found in the patterning changes created through design cross-fertilisation across different media: the growth in vernacular motifs, particularly auspicious and

96 Shen Congwen, *Zhongguo gudai fushi yanjiu* (Hong Kong; Shangwu Yinhuaguan Xianggang Fenguan, 1981, revised Shanghai, 1997); p.635; Fan Jinmin and Jin Wen, *Jiangnan sichou shi yanjiu* (Beijing: Nongye Chubanshe, 1993), pp.361-76; on vernacular silk weavers, see Yan Yong, “Qing dai Minjian sizhi ye”, *Ming Qing luncong* (no.5), pp.481-492.

97 This social class is most memorably drawn in Shen Fu, *Fo sheng liu ji* (Beijing: Beijing Chubanshe, 2003); on social mobility see *Qingren shehui shenghuo*, pp.45-48; on rank-selling as a means of facilitating social mobility and power, see Ho, *The Ladder of Success*, pp.46-52.

98 Clunas, *Superfluous Things*, p.167.

religious motifs, and the themes of dramatic narrative, which this thesis will explore.⁹⁹ It is also found in the role of silk in social functions at all class levels, as English botanist-traveller Robert Fortune (1813-1880) described, “all except the lowest labourers and coolies strutted about in dresses composed of silk, satin and crepe.”¹⁰⁰ Indeed sources indicate that silk was consumed in varying degrees by a wider spectrum of society: “the middle gentry and the middle and lower-middle levels of the urban commercial classes.”¹⁰¹ A simplistic division between *buyi* commoner and silk elite belies the complexity of what lay between. As early as the Tang dynasty (618-906), this consumption hierarchy was noted by poet Bai Juyi (772-846) in “Liao damask” (*Liaoling*): “*Liaoling*, sheer patterned silk – what is it like? Not like poorer silks, *luo*, *shao*, *wan* or *chi*, but the forty-five foot waterfall, that leaps in the moonlight of Mount Tiantai.”¹⁰² Commercial weavers sought to meet middle-class demand with cheaper versions of expensive weaves.¹⁰³ One of the striking features of the late Qing is the manner in which both elite and non-elite women were able to buy into - albeit in varying amounts - the consumption of fashionable dress. Certainly Qing commentators indicate that the styles of the day were not the concern of only the highest levels of society. “If servant girls out on errands were not clad in bright red clothing, they did not consider it splendid and nowadays even those country bumpkin women introduce a flash of red to the linings of their blue cotton shirts and skirts.”¹⁰⁴ Rather than the monolithic “Chinese dress”, the evidence suggests that nineteenth-century fashions existed both within and between social groups, requiring work on “constructions of fashionability

99 Hui Gu, *Zhongguo sichou wenyang shi* (Ha’erbin: Heilongjiang Meishu Chubanshe, 1990), pp.195-6, Zhao Feng, *Sichou yishu shi* (Hangzhou: Zhejiang Meishuyuan chubanshe, 1992), pp.179-189; Fan Jinmin and Jin Wen, *Qingren shehui shenghuo*, pp.376-381.

100 Robert Fortune, *A Journey to the Tea Countries of China* (London: J Murray, 1852), p.37; A process that appears to have been encouraged by officials engaged in spreading the Confucian message of virtue and ceremony, see Vainker, *Chinese Silk*, p.184.

101 E-Tu- Zen Sun, “Sericulture and Silk Textile Production”, p.81.

102 Burt Watson, trans and ed. *Columbia Book of Chinese Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), vol.1, pp.245-6.

103 *Silk: Replies from the Commissioner*, p.34, no.110, 21st Oct 1880, Hankow.

104 Ye Mengzhu, *ibid*, p.180.

across social divides”.¹⁰⁵ Doubtless this shift from an “honorific vestimentary system” centred upon courtly consumption and sumptuary regulations, to a “fashion system” enabling more personal choice and individual taste, still omitted vast sections of Qing society, but equally it allowed many more than is typically recognised, the possibilities of “self-enhancement through cloth and clothing”.¹⁰⁶

Nevertheless the idea of explaining historical Chinese dress through the prism of fashion remains controversial. Though a number of writers have argued and continue to argue for the existence of fashion in non-Western cultures,¹⁰⁷ some would claim that even to pose the question of fashion in historical China is invalid, that it places a Western-generated framework upon Chinese society. Both Finnane and Ko observed the possessive association between Western modernity and fashion; that written into the characterisation of unchanging, fashion-lacking China is an implication of Western dynamism tied to a Hegelian historiography: “It is evident, however, that the comparison at stake is not between China of yesteryear and today, but between the Europe of today and a China suspended in time.”¹⁰⁸ Still the basic definition of fashion utilised by contemporary scholars does not seem to necessitate Western cultural specificity: “It is a system of dress found in societies where social mobility is possible; it has its own particular relations of production and consumption, again found in a particular society; it is characterised by logic of regular and systematic change.”¹⁰⁹ This definition contains no explicit modern or capitalist values, and yet its author, Joanne Entwistle, would likely deny the application of her definition to China; for her and others, fashion is geographically and historically specific to early modern Europe, and accordingly other types of fashion occurring in other

105 Christopher Breward, *The Culture of Fashion: a New History of Fashionable Dress* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), p.5

106 Jane Schneider, “Cloth and Clothing”, in *The Handbook of Material Culture*, ed. Christopher Tilley (London; Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2006), pp.203-219.

107 See Craik, *Face of Fashion* (London: Routledge, 1994); Barnes and Eicher eds., *Dress and Gender* (Oxford; New York: Berg, 1992), and for a recent formulation attacking the Western-centric bias of Fashion History, the recent essay by Abby Lillethun, Linda Welters, and Joanne B. Eicher, “CSA Forum: (Re)defining Fashion”, *Dress*, no.38 (2012), pp.75-99

108 Ko, “Bondage in Time”, p.7; Finnane, *ibid*, p.6.

109 Entwistle, *The Fashioned Body* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), pp.47-8.

types of societies and cultures, must be excluded.¹¹⁰ These are instead labelled with the alternative “anti-fashion” or “folk fashion” in which the change is so slow as to be barely perceptible even to the wearers themselves, as Bogatyrev defined: “Folk costume is in many ways the antithesis of clothing which is subject to fashion changes. One of the chief tendencies of the latter is the ease with which it changes – the new fashion must not resemble the one it replaces. The tendency of folk costume is not to change – grandchildren must wear the costume of their grandfathers.”¹¹¹ That the Chinese case does not fit this characterisation is suggested by many of the late Ming and Qing *biji* writers, for example Gu Qiyuan (1565-1628) who shows rather more concern for the rate of change in his description of Nanjing fashions: “thirty years before, they would only change once in ten years, but nowadays not more than two or three years pass before there is change in the size and height of coiffures, the width of the sleeve, the length of the head adornments, the application of colour, the decoration of coiffures, the workmanship of the shoe base, none are without change.”¹¹²

Entwhistle suggests that it is an act of ethnocentricity to attempt to locate the fashion system within all cultures, but equally, to deny China or other cultures recourse to fashion frameworks is to deny an important and useful theoretical structure.¹¹³ There may be a danger in over-compensating for the undoubted Eurocentric bias in dress history (Phyllis Tortora’s definition of fashion as “a taste shared by many for a short period of time” or Craik’s notion that “if the “fashion impulse” is a universal concept, that means all humans have it” surely dilutes to a degree that it becomes hard to distinguish a fashion system from any other clothing system.)¹¹⁴ But adjusting some of the parameters of fashion,

110 Conflating historical fashion systems with the modern fashion industry can be misleading, for example Chang and Chang refer to a new type of summer shoes becoming so popular that “several hundred shoe factories were established.” (*Crisis and Transformation in Seventeenth-century China* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992) p.148). Though presumably intending to convey ideas of mass-production, by not qualifying ‘factory’ with ‘non-mechanised’, they imply ambiguous notions of how the Ming textile industry operated.

111 Bogatyrev, *The Functions of Folk Costume in Moravian Slovakia*, (The Hague: Mouton, 1971), p.1, n.1.

112 *Kezuo Zhuiyu* (1616; Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1987), *juan* 9, p.252; See also Wu Renshu for discussion of the numerous phrases used to describe fashionable change in the “Customs” (*Fengsu*) section of Jiangnan local gazetteers: “shegu quxin”; “suishi yizhi”; “yueyi suixin”; “shuhu bianyi” (“Ming Qing xiaofei wenhua de xin qujing yu xin wenti”)

113 See Entwhistle, *The Fashioned Body*, p.46-8.

114 Tortore quoted in Lillethun et al, “CSA Forum: (Re)defining Fashion”, p.78.

for example, to allow for the fact that eighteenth-century Suzhou appears to have experienced a slower rate of change than the ever-accelerating changeover of Paris, does not appear to carry such threats. In this way, we can acknowledge that texts like “Fashions of the Time” (*Shishi zhuang*), from *The Painted Boats at the Gates of Wu continued* (*Wumen hua fang xu lu*), which describes the latest Suzhou hairstyles, is a form of fashion discourse:

These change every ten years or so. When I was a teenager, I saw the boat girls wearing the new (hair) style of *huanbin gaoji*. The temple hair (*bin*) was spread out like two wings, the bun was piled up like a high dish, it was raised at the front and shaped at the back shaped, with the hairpin placed in the centre. Though commonly called *Yuanbao tou*, it actually imitated the *Furong ji* of past times. Later on, this style changed to the “Two flat sections” (*Ping er gu*). This was piled straight up in three sections, coiled into a heart-shaped bun on the top, and a gold or silver hairpin used to secure the lower section. But this imitated the *Si qi ji* of past times. Nowadays it has again changed to the *Ping san tao*, which has three sections of hair coiled flat sections outside the centre bun, and this is after the *Ling she ji* hairstyle of past times. In this style, the temple hair is simple and relaxed, as if a light cloud enwrapped the moon.¹¹⁵

And in this way we can explore the many commonalities between Chinese and Western fashion: the shared desire for the exotic - “New and Curious” (*xinqi*) or the trend for vintage styles - “Return to antiquity” (*fugu*).¹¹⁶ Denying the existence of fashion in early modern China not only makes it difficult to describe the changing styles evident in comparison between late Ming and Qing dress,¹¹⁷ but more seriously, turning to other explanations of “acculturation... or... random variation” downplays the “role of human intention and choice” and denies the active role of cultural consumer that women took in making socio-economic decisions about how they dressed. Recognition of this role has been a major factor in “the historical reclamation of the female consumer”, opening “the door on one of women’s most important historical roles, as managers or participants in household consumption strategies.”¹¹⁸ Though women rarely achieved an active role in production and marketing of fashion, “through their massive participation in the development of a fashion culture ... they were

115 *Gezhong shengshuo*, *Wumen huafang xulu* (1813; Shanghai: Zhongguo tushu gongsi, 1914), *jishi*, p.39

116 Wu Renshu, “Mingdai pingmin fushi de liuxing fengshang yu shidafu de fanying”; Finnane, *Changing Clothes*, pp.44-47.

117 Finnane, *Changing Clothes in China*, p.9.

118 “Doing the Laundry”, p.352.

nevertheless crucial agents in the growth of capitalism in the eighteenth century”.¹¹⁹ Moreover, if fashion is only considered as relevant to Western dress history, fashion history will necessarily be dominated by social and cultural factors specific to the West, leaving us unable to explain fashion in wider socio-cultural terms. By establishing fashion as a universal construct, rather than defined solely in terms of early modern Europe, we permit histories of non-Western cultures to contribute towards our understanding of this complex phenomena, allowing us to comprehend what aspects might be specific to the socio-economic phenomena of capitalist states, class structure and industrialized modernity of early modern Europe, and which aspects might be rather more universal. As Cannon notes, the defining of fashion in European historical terms has led to the dominance of factors specific to these histories, for example psychological and social motivations relating to a clearly-defined class structure, he asserts a need for explanation in wider human terms relating to “the assertion of self-identity and social comparison”.¹²⁰ By investigating the jacket style as an instance of fashion, an object of dress whose content and style was deeply intricated in the social and cultural conditions of the place where it was created, I will attempt to extricate factors specific to Qing China and those that relate to wider human terms.

4. THESIS METHODOLOGY AND OUTLINE

Despite the dismantling of the narrative of fast-moving Western fashion in opposition to static Chinese dress, it is not clear that the question raised in Finnane’s ground-breaking study *Changing Clothes in China* – “What does it mean to speak of fashion in a Chinese historical context?” has been wholly answered.¹²¹ As a body of work, studies of Chinese historical fashion remain isolated from mainstream (read Western) dress historians, who rarely incorporate comparisons from China or Asia,

119 William H. Sewell Jr., “The Empire of Fashion and the Rise of Capitalism in Eighteenth Century France”, *Past and Present*, no.206 (2010), pp.91-105, p.118.

120 Aubrey Cannon, “The Cultural and Historical Contexts of Fashion”, in *Consuming Fashion: Adorning the transnational body*, eds. A.Brydon and S. Niessen (Oxford and New York: Berg Press, 1998).

121 Finnane, *Changing Clothes in China*, p.43.

and continue to deny the existence of Chinese historical fashion.¹²² One key factor behind this isolation is the lack of object-based studies. Ko's *Cinderella's Sisters* artfully employs close object study to enable a more nuanced understanding of the complex phenomena of fashionable consumption and Dauncey exemplifies how to integrate objects, images, and texts in her study of didactic prescription in late Ming women's dress, but generally scholars have prioritized writings upon fashion, preferring to engage in the issues surrounding textual records rather than confront the visual images and extant objects from which changing consumption patterns may be detected.¹²³ This is partly due to the skewed artifactual record – the bias inherent in museum collections and the difficulties of locating objects relevant to a given historical question, but it is also, perhaps, due to a certain suspicion on the part of historians as to the reliability of objects in historical investigation, as the historian David G. Johnson puts it: “Values can be embodied in nonverbal symbols, and exemplified in behaviour, but to be communicated with any precision, or to be explained, they must find expression in words.”¹²⁴ Later in the thesis I will seek to counter this claim, here it is well to observe that grounding dress historical debate in the records of *biji* (brush notes), *difang zhi* (local gazetteers), and the *yufu zhi* (Record of Carriage and Dress) of the Imperial Histories,¹²⁵ has neglected the very objects from which changing consumption patterns may be detected and underutilizes the key strategy employed by modern-day dress historians of integrating object, text and image. It has also created a gulf that dress historian Lou Taylor termed the “Great Divide” between the object-centred methods of the curator/collector and the socio-economic and cultural theory approach of the university academic.¹²⁶

122 For exclusion, see Peter McNeil, *Fashion: Critical and Primary Sources*, entirely absent of non-European case-studies; for denial, see Chuimei Ho, “Textiles – the universal craft”, in William Watson and Chuimei Ho, *The Arts of China after 1620* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), “The great majority of Chinese women, whether of Han or other ethnic groups, were not to experience the dubious benefits of fashion-consciousness until the twentieth century.” p.211.

123 Dorothy Ko, *Cinderella's Sisters: a Revisionist History of Footbinding* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2005); Sarah Dauncey, “Illusions of Grandeur: Perceptions of status and wealth in late-Ming female clothing and ornamentation”, *East Asian History*, vol.25/26 (2003), pp.43-68.

124 Johnson, “Communication, Class, and Consciousness”, in *Popular Culture in Late Imperial China*, eds. David Johnson, Andrew J. Nathan, and Evelyn Rawski (Berkeley; London: University of California Press, 1985), pp.34-72, p.34.

125 See Li Zhitan, (ed.) *Zhongguo fushi wenhua cankao wenxian mulu* (Beijing: Zhongguo Fangzhi Chubanshe, 2001).

126 See “Doing the Laundry: A Reassessment of Object-based Dress History”. There is of course a considerable range even within the curator / collector field, between the more careful scholarship practiced by dress historians like Verity

Of course, textual sources are crucial in various respects - informing on the impact of changing styles or contemporary responses to new influences - but without a sustained examination of a single object style it is difficult to quantify the way in which audiences of a wide social and geographical spread adopted fashionable objects. To be sure, visual sources have methodological issues that must be fully considered before using as evidence; stylistic analysis will always be vulnerable to criticism for being mired in what historians Leopold and Fine scathingly dismissed as charting “in minute detail... the addition or deletion of every flounce, pleat, button and bow”.¹²⁷ Yet there are simple advantages to the sustained examination of a single dress style, permitting analyses of technique and pattern, design and colour to suggest significances that may be overlooked by textually founded investigations, and allowing us to grasp how fashions are adapted and interpreted by different audiences. By grounding the dynamic nature of fashion, we gain a sense of how fashion operated in the Chinese context, and edge closer to the kinds of meaning these objects might have held for their consumers. Indeed, without object-based studies, fashion in historical China seems bound to remain an indefinite entity, its influence on the development of dress vaguely reconstructed, and its relationship to other potentially influential factors - ethnic identity or popular culture - imprecisely drawn.

The basic methodology employed in this thesis is adopted from material culture studies, in particular the stylistic analysis developed by historian Jules Prown, and further refined by R Elliot, as a means of

Wilson or John Vollmer, which combines object focus with textual analysis, and the works of Valerie Garrett, which though sumptuously illustrated, rarely cites either Chinese primary sources or secondary sources. Still, by writing for the “popular” audience of the museum makes it difficult to provide more in-depth analysis or incorporate new shifts in Chinese history scholarship, as illustrated by *Evolution and Revolution*, published to accompany an exhibition at the Powerhouse Museum, Sydney, and raising any number of fascinating issues concerning dress and the body in Chinese history, but limited to a fairly cursory examination by the format. See Wilson, *Chinese Dress*, (London: Bamboo Publishing in association with the Victoria and Albert Museum, 1986), *Chinese Textiles*, (London: V&A; New York: Distributed in North America by Harry N. Abrams, 2005); Garrett, *Chinese Dress*, (Tuttle Publishing, 2007), Vollmer, *Ruling from the Dragon Throne*, (Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press, 2002), Clare Roberts, ed. *Evolution and Revolution: Chinese Dress 1700s – 1900s* (Sydney: Powerhouse Publishing, 1997)

127 Ben Fine and Ellen Leopold, *The World of Consumption* (London: New York; Routledge, 1993), p.93.

extricating the formal data embodied in artifacts.¹²⁸ Prown formulated three stages of description, deduction, and speculation to structure a systematic approach that proceeded from detailed object descriptions to forming hypotheses about styles and subject matter. I utilize this approach to order the close study of eighteen examples of the jackets, studied in a number of museum collections, predominantly in North America. Further context and comparisons were garnered from examples gathered from catalogues and publications, which provides evidence of the stylistic range of the jackets. I documented the objects according to the following criteria (see Table 1.1): provenance (1.1a); style (1.1b); measurements (1.1c); fabrication (1.1d); and iconography (1.1e). In those cases where the figural narrative subject matter was not known or easily ascertainable, I generated probable identifications by detailing the scenes according to the gender, age, and status of the figures; their dress, headwear, accessories; the objects they held; their postures and movements; architectural components, furniture, props, and the scenic backdrop or framing. I took a series of close-up, high-resolution images to enable comparisons to illustrations from dramatic anthologies, prints, and other narrative-adorned objects. This data is provided in appendix form, and it is referenced and discussed throughout the thesis in regard to different investigative angles of discourse and design, production and consumption. Through these angles I build up layers of probable context, providing a counter to the typical lack of provenance relating to the jackets. In particular I focus on the wider region of Suzhou, renowned for its fashionable dress, commercialized handicrafts, and vibrant popular culture. Influences of commercialization and popular culture were somewhat challenged by the moral environment in which women made decisions about what dress to make, commission, purchase, and wear. Chapter 2 reconstructs this environment as bounded by concepts of fashion, luxury, and *fuyao* (outrageous dress) positioned in opposition to Confucian virtues of self-reliance, frugality, and thrift. Despite this conflict, as Chapter 3 outlines, the jacket's design development illustrates a fundamental shift in the consumption and production of Chinese women's dress towards commercialized markets. Chapter 4 focuses on this trajectory from the perspective of the urban embroidery workshops of late Qing Jiangnan, the production system likely responsible for the jackets. Highlighting the little studied

128 Prown, "Mind in Matter"; R Elliot et al, "Towards a Material Culture Methodology", in Susan M Pearce ed., *Interpreting Objects and Collections*, pp.109-124.

genre of commercial embroidery as a stylistic and thematic dialogue between boudoir embroidery and folk embroidery, I demonstrate how embroidery provided women of varied backgrounds a legitimized means of making a living, of gaining autonomy and recognition, and perhaps of creative expression. By probing the structural relationships between male-fronted urban guilds and female countryside embroiderers, I emphasize the mechanisms of interaction between rural and urban, elite and vernacular production of embroidered textiles. Chapter 5 addresses the content and composition of the jackets' narratives, arguing that print and performance played primary roles in determining scenic choice and facilitating the introduction of narrative imagery to women's dress. Chapter 6 investigates the jackets' conception of narrative; by comparing the jackets to contemporary prints and illustrations, I illustrate the highly sophisticated and referential ways which dramatic narrative was rendered in Qing material culture. Chapter 7 considers how women used narrative to find meaning in their own lives and uses representations of embroidery and narrative in vernacular literature to investigate the significance of these embroidered figures for female audiences.

5. CONCLUSION: SYMBOLS, FIGURES, AND IDENTITY

This project started when I was delving the treasure-trove drawers of the Peabody Essex Museum and came across the *Zhenzhu ta* jacket (J11). I was, and remain fascinated by the idea of a woman choosing (or someone choosing for her) to wear a fictional narrative on her body. In the twenty-first century, we may put on a slogan T-shirt - one approach to resolving what anthropologist McCracken calls clothing's "impoverished means of communication",¹²⁹ and children wear clothing adorned with their favourite cartoon figure, but historically and universally, figural decoration is unusual upon dress - just imagine the Western *Zhenzhu ta* equivalent of a young Victorian woman wearing a gown

129 Grant McCracken, *Culture and Consumption: New Approaches to the Symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), p.69.

embroidered with a biblical scene like the Story of Esther.¹³⁰ Later I discovered that many examples of this figural roundel jacket style had been disdained as “Figures in Garden” imagery, and it was partly out of the conviction that the jackets depicted something more than generic figures that I began the investigation. But though many drama and print anthologies were pored over in the course of the deceptively simple task of identifying the scenes, the thesis was motivated by a desire to go beyond the decoding of symbols that characterizes much of Western scholarship on Chinese dress, an approach which implies embroidered motifs present a “single uncontested meaning”, a linear mapping from symbol to meaning. That is to say, I am interested less in the fact that the jacket featured *Zhenzhu ta*, and more in how it features *Zhenzhu ta*, and how this representation reflects Qing women’s experience and understanding of the *Zhenzhu ta* narrative as garnered from other visual and performative media. Accordingly I have striven to construct a socially and culturally grounded study that contextualizes the jackets’ embroidered scenes against contemporary narrative renditions in print and performance, image and song, to provide some sense of the “web of meaning” which might be provided by a single narrative scene.

How we interpret this web of meaning is a more complex question: drawing cultural data from non-linguistic sources remains the Achilles’ heel of material culture scholarship. Through the semiological concept of the sign (an anchoring unit within a communication system placed in juxtaposition with other items to produce a particular meaning) the Saussurian structural model of language has been extended across a wide range of cultural signifying systems. It has proved a productive model for material culture because it allows the meaning of objects to be both arbitrary and culturally relative, shifting through time and context, part of what makes objects so rich a record of cultural change. But this linguistic model also suggests that every object has its message, and providing the code can be discovered, then this message can be read, a conclusion that is actually at odds with the basic communication systems of material culture. Rather as McCracken convincingly demonstrated, the

130 Biblical tales were common to embroidered samplers and furnishings but rarely dress, see Mary M. Brooks, *English Embroideries* (London: Jonathan Horne Publications, 2004); Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (London: I.B. Taurus and Co. Ltd, 2010).

communication system of material culture, and dress in particular differs fundamentally from that of language. Outfits are not “read” as a linear sequence with viewers syntactically analysing how different elements modify other elements and the entire outfit itself, but instead as an ensemble, a simultaneously processed combination of co-present elements. Moreover, the potential meanings that may be attributed to outfits are restricted to a highly limited set of possibilities, a finite vocabulary that sharply contrasts to language’s infinite possibilities. Clothing provides, McCracken concluded, “a collection of messages rather than a means for their creation,” and these messages must be specified in advance of any act of communication. The decoding process of “reading” clothing appears to depend on identifying various mutually presupposing and highly redundant elements that construct outfit and message. This suggests the hypothesis that cultures entrust objects with the responsibility of carrying certain messages that cannot be or is not entrusted to language: clothing’s “closed” or “conservative” code makes it eminently suitable for representing cultural categories, principles, and processes, whilst simultaneously discouraging their outward manipulation.¹³¹

McCracken’s account is of some relevance here, both because so much of the Western-penned histories of Chinese dress centre on this idea of linguistic code-solving, but also because it points to the potential semiotic clash that lies in the application of narrative (linear, linguistic) to dress (non-linear, non-linguistic), an issue which will be explored at greater length in Chapter 5. The concept of clothing as a collection of existing messages, rather than a mechanism by which new messages are formed, is an intriguing one, though it perhaps creates more questions than it answers. How far do societies differ in their collection of messages and the ways in which these collections are bounded? Given the important role of clothing in both constituting and challenging socio-cultural change, how does this collection of messages change over time and space, and what, in turn, does this suggest about clothing’s ability to communicate new messages?

131 A noticeable omission in McCracken’s experimental design is the lack of consideration for what each interpreter brought to the interpretation, in particular how different socio-cultural backgrounds influenced how the outfits were “read” (*Culture and Consumption*, pp.62-71).

As suggested earlier, research into the semiotic system of Chinese dress has long prioritized auspicious decoration, presented as a static and ahistorical collection of messages concerned with idealized values of fortune and happiness. We have already seen that, contrary to this account, auspicious motifs did not necessarily mean the same thing to all groups in Chinese society, and that meaning and usage did change throughout Chinese history. Yet this is not to deny the highly conservative nature of this collection of symbolic messages, one permitting only a limited range of socially sanctioned values of longevity and virtue, wealth and fortune, marital happiness and the birth of sons. Han dynasty (206BCE-220) brocades utilized linguistic means to express their desires: brocades woven with auspicious phrases like “a thousand autumns, myriad years, may you have sons and grandsons” (*qian qiu wan sui yi zisun*),¹³² but this message was still being expressed one thousand years later, by the more referential means of the rebus combination of gourd (*gua*) and butterfly (*hudie*) to communicate “May you have prosperous descendants” (*gua die mianmian*) (for example the main fabric in J3). The narrative *Man chuang hu* (J8) is often read as employing a similar means of symbolic expression to communicate the same wish: the tale of General Guo Ziyi celebrating his sixtieth birthday surrounded by his wife, seven sons, eight sons-in-law and grandchildren used to communicate a simple message of longevity and fertility. But this thesis will make the case that narrative embroidery constituted an evolution of both medium and message. By using narrative plots and characters, women sought to nuance values familiar to decorative dress, circumventing the limitations of normative symbolic vocabulary to express the contemporary complexities of the lived life.

132 Dieter Kuhn ed., *Chinese Silks*, p.155.

THE DISCOURSE OF CHINESE WOMEN'S DRESS

When I was young, women's adornment was still plain, but by the end of the Chongzhen reign (1627-1644) they had gradually become more luxurious, until today (early seventeenth century) this fountainhead is overflowing. Now let me provide some examples illustrating these changes, to provide a warning mirror for the cognoscenti who hark at these words.¹

1. INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter presented a justification for explaining late Qing women's dress (specifically the jackets) in terms of fashion theory. Here we turn to consider how we should characterize the fashion system in which the jackets were produced, disseminated and consumed. The "fashion system" framework is particularly associated with Roland Barthes, who conceptualized fashion as the confluence of three communicative systems: the plastic structure of image clothing (clothing as drawn or photographed); the verbal structure of written clothing (clothing as textually described); and the technological structure of the clothing as object (clothes produced by a limited "vocabulary" of colours, fabrics, shapes, and techniques).² This complex cultural system has considerable validity beyond the twentieth-century European arena he investigated, and the trinity of object-text-image is now well established as a methodological ideal in dress history. I follow Barthes in arguing that fashion exists not only in objects, but is constructed through the words and images that describe and communicate the objects; throughout the thesis, I will highlight the terms around which dress consumption revolved. Yet in regard to "fashion system", my usage is more in line with what Riello and Lemire have defined as "the early appearance and function of fashion as a self-perpetuating process, which informed the historical dynamic, linking itself with other components of the society and economy. The "systematic" nature of fashion thus rested in its interactive relationship with historical changes."³ Accordingly I aim to establish the systems by which Qing fashions circulated and

1 Ye Mengzhu, *Yue shi bian*, "neizhuang", p.178.

2 Barthes, *The Fashion System*, trans. Matthew Ward and Richard Howard (London: Cape, 1985).

3 Lemire and Riello, "East and West", p.888.

a “dynamic relationship between production and consumption” constituted: commercial trade networks to spread fashion, socio-cultural influences to create fashion, visual representations that enabled consumers to participate in fashion.

I also seek to establish how this fashion system differed from those defined in Western contexts. So we begin by identifying some of the unique features of the way in which Qing women engaged with commercially produced dress. Whether commercial production necessarily predicates fashion remains controversial, but many fashion studies suggest an onus to locate “particular relations of production and consumption”.⁴ Such commercial relationships run counter to what I term the “trousseau” narrative of Chinese women’s dress, the assumption that all Chinese women embroidered their own wardrobes. As mid-twentieth-century curator Jean Mailey put it: “We remember that Chinese ladies of rank traditionally embroidered parts of their costumes in their courtyard gardens among their birds and flowers.”⁵ Traditionally a degree of self-sufficiency in clothing production was much prized, and weaving, sewing, and making clothes were central to women’s education, regardless of wealth. Classic education texts like the Book of Rites (*Li ji*) established women’s work (*fugong*)⁶ as the most important of womanly skills: “At ten a girl should not go out, she should be taught by her mother all day how to do textile work, study the women’s work in order to make clothes”.⁷ And doubtless, many women would have made their own dress both out of want and necessity. However by the late nineteenth century, a wide range of evidence including guild steles, urban scrolls, and *biji* records suggests that the production of embroidered dress was a highly commercialized and professional activity, something examined more closely in chapter 4. Yet though the ability to commission others - whether servants inside the house or workshops outside the house - to produce the objects that clothed your

4 See Entwistle for a discussion of the relationship between capitalist production and fashion, *The Fashioned Body* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), pp.47-8.

5 Jean Mailey, “Ancestors and Tomb Robes”, *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin, New Series*, vol.22, no.3, (Nov 1963), pp.101-115.

6 Also *fugong*, *nügong*, *nühong*.

7 *Neizhe* “Pattern of the Family” cited in Gao Shiyu, *Zhongguo gudai funü shenghuo* (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan guoji youxian gongsi, 1996), pp.68-9.

body was a status symbol, the discourse surrounding the producers, shops, and markets that produced and distributed professionally produced objects was highly conflicted. Commercially embroidered objects like our jackets embodied references to the fashionable woman, whose image was entangled in the amorality of the courtesan houses.

The second half of the chapter attempts to explain this tension. I will argue that the environment in which women made decisions about dress - whether these related to making, commissioning, purchasing, or wearing of dress - was bounded by negatively-tinted concepts of fashion, luxury, and *fuyao* (outrageous dress). Throughout the lengthy history of Chinese moral discourse concerning what women should wear, controversial styles were associated with social, political and ecological upheaval. Fashionable styles were positioned in opposition to Confucian virtues of self-reliance, frugality, and thrift, creating an antagonistic relationship between female consumers and the growth of commercialised dress production. This presented a particular problem for embroidered dress: the virtue inherent within the embroidered object - the desire to give women a “harmless” pursuit that would keep idle hands occupied and out of mischief - was not easily reconciled with the ornamental excess and potential expression offered by the needle. Neither, of course, was the jackets’ dramatic imagery non-controversial. Novels like *Hong lou meng*, plays like *Xi xiang ji*, characters like Huang Wuniang: all attracted considerable censure, resulting in public bans and private regulations.⁸ Later we will consider what this discordant interface between women and drama implies for how the jackets were valued and positioned. Here, I focus on how professional dress workshops and fashionable women’s dress were morally positioned, in order to highlight the barriers that stood between late Qing women and the production and consumption of fashionable dress. The necessity of negotiating these limitations determined the general aesthetic of late Qing fashions, and specifically, the stylistic form and iconographic references of the jackets.

8 Huang Wuniang was the heroine of the Ming *chuangqi*, “The Lychee branch” (*Li jing ji*), wildly popular and frequently banned in mid-Qing Fujian, see chapter 5.

2. THE QING FASHION SYSTEM

The scholarship of Finnane, Ko, and their colleagues has challenged traditional thinking that Chinese society was so stable and conservative as to lack the desire for change and novelty that enabled the rise of fashion in the early modern Western world, providing convincing textual evidence that has complicated our ideas about consumption in the historical Chinese context, and highlighting women's role as cultural producers and consumers. Literary historian Sarah Dauncey has examined the role of didactic prescription in Chinese dress culture, contrasting the picture of fashion created by the fictional depiction of *Jin ping mei*'s merchant character with normative images and texts that created ideals of female dress.⁹ Taiwanese cultural historian Wu Renshu has made the case for the validity of primary concepts of Western fashion – conspicuous consumption, consumer culture – in understanding the function and nature of late Ming fashions.¹⁰ His colleague Lin Liyue has demonstrated the leading role of elite discourse in determining the fashions of the Ming-Qing transition, noting the use of dress as a tool to negotiate changing social structures.¹¹ Notably much of this work has focused on the Ming-Qing transition, though the late Qing offered its own set of social turmoil and cultural upheaval – conditions in which fashion thrives – literary scholar Paola Zamperini is one of few to have addressed late Qing understandings of dress, using novels to elucidate how modernity was materialized in fashion.¹²

The necessary focus of many of these scholars upon refuting the myth of the static clothing system, has meant that much less consideration has been paid to the issue of whether Chinese fashion was structurally and culturally akin to Western fashion. The use of models generated from Western

9 Dauncey, "Illusions of Grandeur: Perceptions of status and wealth in late-Ming female clothing and ornamentation", *East Asian History*, vol.25/26 (2003), pp.43-68.

10 Wu Renshu, "Mingdai pingmin fushi de liuxing fengshang yu shidaifu de fanying", *Xinshixue*, vol.10, no.3 (Sept 1999), pp.55-109.

11 Lin Liyue, "Yishang yu Fengjiao: wanming de fushi fengshang yu 'fuyao' yilun", *Xinshixue*, vol.10, no.3 (Sept 1999), pp.111-57.

12 Zamperini, "Clothes that matter: Fashioning Modernity in Late Qing novels" *Fashion Theory*, vol.5, no.2 (2001), pp.195-214; also Finnane, 'Yangzhou's "Modernity"' *positions*, vol.11, no.2 (Fall 2003), pp.395-425.

historical examples has displayed little sensitivity to what is concealed or distorted in this cultural displacement - to the potential terminology slippages that occur when theories and methodologies defined for Western contexts are transplanted onto Chinese history. Whilst the minimal requirement for the existence of Chinese fashion has been constituted - the changing styles evidenced by contemporary discourse - fashion is about more than changing styles. Arguably, maintaining the debate at the level of textual discourse - *biji* commentary and sumptuary regulations - has meant that we remain some distance from being able to address in a well-grounded theoretical and methodological manner, how, exactly, Chinese fashion differed from Western fashion. At the level of commentary, the similarities between Chinese and Western commentators creates a troubling equivalence in their concern with the expansion and excess of fashionable dress: compare “If servant girls out on errands were not clad in bright red clothing, they did not consider it splendid and nowadays even those country bumpkin women introduce a flash of red to the linings of their blue cotton shirts and skirts”¹³ with “It is a hard matter to know the mistress from the maid by their dress; nay very often the maid shall be much the finer of the two...her poor scanty linsey-woolsey petticoat is changed into a good silk one, for four or five yards wide at the least.”¹⁴ Yet the parallel should not blind us to the disparities below the shared discursive space of Ye Mengzhu, seventeenth-century Songjiang commentator, and Daniel Defoe, seventeenth-century London journalist, nor the structural and cultural differences between the fashion systems that provoked them to comment. Until we can understand how these differences led the nineteenth-century Suzhou woman to experience a fashion experience unlike that experienced by her counterpart in London, we will continue to misread the gulf between the two.

Consider, for example, the functional importance of the fashion-disseminating doll, whose journeying back and forth provided a method for European courts to communicate and receive knowledge of styles. Not until 1785 did she become obsolete, replaced by the first French fashion magazine with

13 Ye Mengzhu, *Yue shi bian*, p.180.

14 Daniel Defoe, *The Works of Daniel Defoe* (Edinburgh: William P Nimmo, 1870), p.523, “Everybody’s Business is Nobody’s Business”.

engravings.¹⁵ What kind of image or object might have served this role in Ming and Qing China? Fashion publications as labelled didn't appear in China until the 1920s,¹⁶ and *nianhua* prints with titles such as 'fashionable lady' (*shi zhuang meiren*) date only to the late nineteenth century (Fig. 2.1). The prolific print artist Wu Youru (1840-1893) harnessed the powers of the new lithographic press and the capabilities it provided in color, detail, and speed to visualize all that was fashionable and modern in Shanghai. His work, published in the *Dianshi zhai huabao*, provides one of the earliest examples, to my knowledge, of an artist setting out to reveal both domestic and foreign styles of dress, his eye attentive to the details of coiffure and costume that comprise fashionable dress (Fig. 2.2). These images were widely circulated and frequently reproduced, so why are earlier prototypes absent?¹⁷ Why do we lack the kind of evidence found in Japanese visual and written sources from the Edo period (1602-1868): *Kosode moyō hinagata-bon* (sample books of kosode designs), *kosode hinagata-cho* (kosode order books), and dye-colour sample books, sources that evidence rapidly changing styles, mercantile concern with new looks, even early marketing research on the part of distributors.¹⁸ Did such sources once exist? What kind of media might have been utilised to disseminate each year's fashionable styles of dress, hair, and accessory? Take a single fashion like the *shuitian yi* robe, a patchwork ensemble popular amongst lower-ranking women during the Ming-Qing transition that we'll return to later in the chapter.¹⁹ Did *nianhua* like this eighteenth-century Suzhou print play a major role in spreading this style (Fig. 2.3)? Or might illustrated drama, often attentive to sartorial details, be

15 Queen Isabella of Bavaria sent the earliest known fashion doll in 1391, but by the late seventeenth century these extravagant royal gifts were sent back and forth daily. See Delpierre, *Dress in France in the Eighteenth Century* (Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2006), esp.chap.14; McKendrick outlines the doll's demise, replaced first in two-dimensional cardboard model form in 1790, and then later the growth of fashion magazines. (McKendrick, Neil "The Commercialisation of Fashion" in *Birth of a Consumer Society: the Commercialisation of Eighteenth Century England*, ed. Neil McKendrick (London: Hutchinson, 1983) pp.34-99, pp.44-9).

16 For a brief outline of their development, see Finnane, *Changing Clothes in China*, pp.127-134.

17 See *Wu Youru huabao* (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Shudian, 1983) (3 vols), which includes *Haishang baiyan tu* and *Gu jin baimei tu*.

18 See Nagasaki Iwao "Designs for a Thousand Ages: Printed Pattern Books and Kosode" and Maruyama Nobuhko, "Fashion and the Floating World: The Kosode in Art", in *When Art became Fashion: Kosode in Edo-period Japan*, eds. Carolyn Gluckman Dale and Sharon Sadako Takeda (New York: Weatherhill; Los Angeles, Calif: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1992).

19 Zhou Xun and Gao Chunming, *Zhongguo fushi yiguan dacidian*, p.343.

a more likely source as here in an illustration from *Pipa ji* (Fig. 2.4)? Are such sources necessary to verify that Qing Chinese society was one that sought to represent and communicate the changing styles of the day, and in so doing, participate in fashion? Indeed, how can we conceptualize Chinese fashion in light of an absence of fashion imagery?

Partly this is a question of looking for different kinds of sources. It is likely that Chinese travel guides, ethnographical records, vernacular songs, and “bamboo ballads” (*zhuzhici*) served some of the functions of the fashion almanac, telling people outside areas like Suzhou, which had a reputation for fashionable dress, what that fashionable dress looked like, and how it might be reproduced. In this thesis I highlight the value of these sources for reconstructing Chinese dress history for non-elite consumption: vernacular rhymes like “Women’s Fashions (*nü shi zhuang*), which described the latest style of women’s short *ao* jacket “fully edged with devil style borders,”²⁰ or *chaqu* songs like “Fengliu dajie”: “Miss Charming has a special talent for dressing up, holding the narrow pleats of her one-hundred-pleats silk gauze skirt and matching plum blossom jacket.”²¹ It is also worth questioning whether fashions were necessarily communicated via image. The disparity between the minutely detailed textual descriptions of the nineteenth-century Yangzhou novel *Feng yue meng* and the sketchy drawings that accompany the text in the Guangxu period Juchengtang edition of 1886 (Fig. 2.5) perhaps queries the necessity of searching for fashion imagery.²² And, to be sure, much can be explained by the bias of object survival, the literati dominance of art systems that ensured the devaluing and destruction of material like wood-block printed embroidery patterns, shop-account books or inventories, which have been so instrumental in grounding the research of early modern European dress history. But these explanations only go so far. The fact remains that we now have a

20 From *Guangxu bumen jilue*, *Fushi men* cited in Li Jiarui, *Beiping fengsu leizheng* (printed 1937, reprint Shanghai: Shanghai shudian, 1996), p.240.

21 Cited in Wang Shucun, *Zhongguo nianhua shi* (Beijing: Beijing gongyi meishu chubanshe, 2002), p.127.

22 The same scene describes Lu Shu: “On his head he wore a turquoise blue woolen cap embroidered with gold couching. On the front was fastened a red-gold peony design decorated in kingfisher feather and inset with a crimson gemstone ornament. It also had a crimson silk knob on top and 8” raw silk tassels arranged at the back. He wore an egg-white gown of Hangzhou ‘foreign’ crepe silk with a corn poppy design, and over it a military-style formal jacket of foreign-blue wool lined with plain white damask and fastened with cassia-bud buttons.” (Hanan trans., *Courtesans and Opium*, chap.1, p.9).

wealth of commentary telling us of the concern for fashionable styles, but very little evidence of *how* these fashionable styles were designed, produced, and circulated.

The absence of the how - systematic structures by which fashion was produced and consumed - is no trivial matter. It was affordably priced book and journals containing standardized measurements and geometric patterns that underpinned the expansion of the ready-to-wear trade in nineteenth-century England, and with it, fashion for the masses.²³ It was the visual and textual descriptions published in English newspaper and periodicals that allowed women in remote country locations to participate in the styles created in the fashion urban centres. More than just disseminate fashions, such media standardized markets, tying “consumers to clothing of one impulse.”²⁴ Accordingly, many of the seminal studies of early modern European dress and textiles have been concerned with the communication of visual and textual information: Mukerji’s study of the role of printing in forming patterns of consumption, Purdy’s thesis that the impact of visual representations of fashion made print culture more decisive than the industrial revolution in developing German society’s concern with fashion, or Roche’s argument for the role of fashion illustrations in propagating fashion in a convenient, relatively low-cost and accessible format.²⁵ As Lemire and Riello put it: “Fashion ... was also shaped by a culture in which print was central, and it was the printing of information – visual, as well as literate – along with printing as a manufacturing process that produced a fashionability that could be fully communicated.”²⁶ This information was evidently of concern to Chinese female consumers, whose instances of fashion transmission are often described with the verb “to imitate or learn from” (*xue*), as in a Jingshan, Hubei bamboo ballad, which tells how the Jingshan women all say

23 Winifred Aldrich, “Tailors’ Cutting Manuals and the Growing Provision of Popular Clothing 1770-1870”, *Textile History*, vol.31, no.2 (2000), pp.163-201.

24 Lemire, “Developing Consumerism”, p.252.

25 Mukerji, *From Graven Objects: Patterns of Modern Materialism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983); Purdy, *The Tyranny of Elegance* (Baltimore, Md; London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998); Roche, *Dress in Ancient Regime France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Paris: Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l’homme, 1994).

26 Beverley Lemire and Giorgio Riello, “East and West: Textiles and Fashion in Early Modern Europe”, *Journal of Social History*, vol.41, no.4, (2008), pp.887-916, p.888.

“copy the Suzhou (styles): short jackets, wide sleeves and long gauze sashes” (*xue Suzhou*);²⁷ or the song lyrics which accompanied a mid-Qing Taohuawu *nianhua* print entitled “Yujia Nulang” (Young women from a fishing family): “though she cannot touch the beauties of the inner chambers, she also imitates the fashionable dress and popular styles.”²⁸ Given the late Ming expansion in print culture - simultaneous to the rise of fashion and the growth of material consumption - did print culture serve as a means of providing information about fashionable dress to these consumers, not to mention those who made their living from the production of such articles – embroiderers, seamstresses, and tailors?²⁹ And if so, why is there so little evidence of this type of print culture? Partly because dress history has traditionally prioritised art-historical issues of style, materiality, and iconography, we know little about the Qing growth in producers and retailers influenced Chinese women’s dress culture. The lack of interest in understanding objects in production terms may be seen as contributing to the difficulties with which questions of fashion have been approached in the study of Chinese material culture, and the degree of imprecision with which we understand how Chinese women participated in fashion. These commercial systems will be addressed in chapter 4, here we begin by defining the characteristics that shaped the Qing fashion system.

3. FASHION AND THE CONFINED GENTLEWOMAN

The Qianlong-commissioned scroll “The Prosperity of Suzhou” (*Gusu fanhua tu*) by academy painter Xu Yang (*juren* 1753) (Fig. 2.6.a,b,c) provides a richly detailed portrayal of a city at the height of its commercial glory: more than 12,000 people, 2140 buildings, 40 bridges, 400 boats, 261 shops and 50 trades.³⁰ The data it provides has been well mined by historians, and it clearly demonstrates the

27 Li Zongding, *Jingshan zhuzhi ci*, juan 9, *Lushu, Fengbian zhong*, cited in Li Bozhong, *Jiangnan de zaoqi gongyehua* (Beijing: Shehui kexue xenxian chubanshe, 2000), pp.145-6.

28 Lyrics cited in Wang Shucun, *Zhongguo nianhua shi*, p.123.

29 Cynthia Brokaw, “On the History of the Book in China”, in *Printing and Book Culture in Late Imperial China*, eds. Cynthia Brokaw, and Kai-wing Chow (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), p.23.

30 The painting, also known as *Shengshi zisheng tu*, measures 1241 by 39 cm. See Liaoning Bowuguan, Xu Yang, *Qing Xu Yang Gusu Fanhua Tu* (Taipei: Taiwan shangwu yinshu guan, 1989), p.1.

importance of textiles, clothing, and accessories to Suzhou commerce. The city was recognised as the heart of Qing textile and handicraft production, as encapsulated in Zhang Han's (1510-1593) classic formulation of the escalating nature of material consumption: "Clothing made in Suzhou is splendid, for if not, it is not considered cultured; ... The whole world values Suzhou dress, and (so) Suzhou increases the craftsmanship of these clothes".³¹ The mid-Qianlong period was the height of Suzhou's textile glories – a time of guild foundation and shop openings, providing consumers with textile specialities from all over China. Since Suzhou was also known as the centre of mid-Qing fashions – "The women all follow the Suzhou styles"³² – we might expect to find some evidence of shops responsible for perpetuating these styles. But in the scroll, whilst officials are well supplied by the numerous shops selling hat floss and rank badges, there are no examples of shops selling women's dress objects. The scroll portrays fourteen silk shops, five dress-making shops, and nine accessory shops, almost all of which focus on court and official dress goods: the "The Studio of Three Entrances" court shoes" or "Hat retail and trade, selling court hats, silk court hats for winter and summer, serving our customers without fail" (Table 2.1a).³³

Of course *Gusu fanhua tu* is no transparent record of Suzhou commerce. We know little about how Xu composed the painting, which was begun in 1759, just two years after Qianlong had made his second Southern Tour, and completed three years later in 1762.³⁴ It also only follows the western city wall either side from Pan Gate to Chang Gate, omitting the eastern half better known for textile handicrafts.³⁵ But if we compare it to a contemporaneous text like the "List of Street Shops (seen) in Jiangnan Province Suzhou Prefecture", which lists twenty-five Suzhou shops, a similar picture is

31 Zhang Han, *Song chuang meng yu* (1593) (Shanghai: Shanghai shudian, 1984), *juan* 4, *baigong ji*, p.15.

32 Ouyang Zhaoxiang (*juren* 1837), *Shui chuang chun yi* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1984), p.79, no.97, "Suzhou tou".

33 Approximately 20% of the shops sell objects in the category of dress, accessories, and embroidery, see Fan Jinmin, "Qingdai Suzhou chengshi wenhua fanrong de xiezha", in *Guoji minsheng: Ming Qing shehui jingji yanjiu* (Fuzhou: Fujian Renmin Chubanshe, 2008), pp.474-520.

34 Extensive usage of this source would require close analysis of the imperially-commissioned urban painting genre and tribute tour images: *Gusu fanhua tu* is a recreation of the earlier *Shanghe qingming tu*, and it overlaps with the Southern Inspection Tour scrolls (*Nanxun tu*) also produced by Xu Yang.

35 See Xu Yinong, *The Chinese City in Space and Time: the Development of Urban Form in Suzhou* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2000).

drawn (Table 2.1b). Court and official dress goods are highly visible: “Court dragon robes and rank badge gowns woven to order” and “Capital style court hats” (from the) heavenly and marvellous hall”, women’s clothing shops are entirely absent.³⁶ And though later in the Qing, women’s material culture became more visible: Gu Zhentao’s listing of Suzhou shop-names included shops like “Tian Qiqi’s Buttons” or “Zhu Kewen’s Scented Cosmetics” (Table 2.1c), still there are no named women’s clothing makers.

It is hardly surprising that official dress occupies such a substantial proportion of commercial production. Within the wider environment of monetization and expanding consumption that stimulated Ming and Qing textile production, state and private textile and garment workshops were supported by court and official needs.³⁷ This market was relatively stable and predictable, not to mention large: Chang Chungli estimated the late imperial Chinese gentry – broadly defined to include most wealthy merchants as well – to be 2% of the Chinese population, approximately 7 million, receiving about 24% of the national income.³⁸ The inclusion of merchants reflects the sector’s continual expanse: the purchase of lower-level positions was common during the Qing and escalated during the nineteenth century. And officials necessarily spent considerable sums upon their dress. The late Qing official Li Ciming (1830-1894) kept an expenditure diary for the years 1862-89 (Tongzhi 2-15). The clothing costs he detailed - for himself and women in his household - included accessories, tailors, and clothing. Outfitting himself in suitable attire was evidently a sizeable expenditure; in 1863, he spent half of his income (266 *liang*) on the costs of his wardrobe (more than 127.2 *liang*). Official items like dragon robes were expensive, in 1870 he spent 14 foreign *yuan* on a *mangpao*. In later years,

36 This list is one half of the text *Qianlong di Jiangnan sheng Suzhou fu youxing jiedao tu*, and comes from a Japanese genre known as *Fengshuoshu*, which comprised information gained from questioning foreign ship personnel. Records from the Qing court were known as *Tangchuan fengshuo shu* and date from 1644 to 1858. Li Hua provides a Chinese translation in “Tangchuan fengshuo shu yu liuchuan zai Riben de Qianlong nanxun shiliao”, *Qingshi yanjiu*, vol.3 (1997), pp.97-106, based on the text in Gong Qi Cheng Shen, ed., *Shi ting cao - Qianlong di Jiangnan sheng Suzhou fu youxing jiedao tu*, appendix 3, part 7.

37 Fan Jinmin, Jin Wen, *Jiangnan Sichou Shi Yanjiu* (Beijing: Nongye Chuabnshe, 1993).

38 Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence*, p.136.

he visited second-hand stores to purchase items (1876).³⁹ Moreover, the dependence of clothing producers and retailers upon official rank-holders meant that they became increasingly intertwined during the Qing. Officials began to invest in production, establishing shops in Suzhou, a pivotal hub for those purchasing official and court goods.⁴⁰ Nor were these theoretically regulated objects necessarily immune to fashion.⁴¹ As the Qing dynasty progressed and regulations were manipulated, status-gaining sartorial complements like hat finials or rank badges became available to those with sufficient money, connections or philanthropy. They could be purchased in a set, for example Figure 2.7, from the ROM collection, which shows a pair of ready-embroidered tigers and crimson suns to be applied onto the surcoat when one received a promotion (or demotion) to the fourth rank of military official. In the process, they became ever more subject to “fashion systems”: their stylistic change sped up and it was increasingly determined by the ever-shifting rules of taste that judged some consumer behaviours vulgar and others refined. In terms of Appadurai’s framework, they shifted from a “coupon” or “license” system (restricted to those socially “licenced” to possess them) to a “fashion system”, exemplifying the kind of movement that an object may make over the course of their “social life”.⁴²

But if the presence of official dress shops makes sense, equally the absence of women’s dress shops in a region famous for its production of fashionable women’s dress also requires explanation. I will discuss shortly how the lack of representation partly reflects the controversial nature of commercially produced objects of dress like the jackets – heavily embroidered and embellished – worn by the immoral fashionably dressed woman. But this issue also pushes us to enquire into the process by

39 Zhang Dechang, *Qingji yi ge jingguan de shenghuo* (Hong Kong: Xianggang Zhongwen daxue, 1970), pp.105-218; p.110, 1863; p.134, 1870; p.159, 1876. I am currently preparing an annotated translation of this valuable source.

40 Marilyn G. Hamburger and L-R Salter, “Function, fashion and status: Qing dynasty belt ornaments”, *Orientations* (May 2006), pp.60-67; Lai Huimin cites various examples of officials that invested in production and opened shops in Suzhou, including one Wang Qi who opened a *Jixiang hao yidian* (Auspicious Clothing Shop) with stock of 4354 items of dress. See “*Guaren baobuo: Qianlong di yu gusu fanhua*”, *Zhongyang yanjiuyuan jindai shi yanjiusuo jikan*, no.50 (2005), pp.185-223, pp.212-3.

41 As a regulated genre, official or work dress is usually positioned outside fashion systems, see Breward, *The Culture of Fashion* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), p.5.

42 Arjun Appadurai, “Introduction: commodities and the politics of value”, in *The Social Life of Things*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp.3-63, p.25.

which women purchased commercially produced objects of dress, a topic poorly evidenced in the urban scroll genre. In export watercolours however, shops formed more popular subject matter. One album now in the PEM details clothing and silk shops in attentive detail. The shop is called “New Profit” (*xin li hao*) and here women’s clothes do feature: jackets with decorative sleevebands and pleated, embroidered skirts (Fig. 2.8).⁴³ These objects hang on the outer walls, advertising the shop’s capabilities, but the only people in the shop are men, and throughout the entire album, women only feature as servant women running errands. This is an export object projecting an image of China to satisfy foreign markets, but it does not appear unrealistic. In Qing society, elite women did not go shopping, something Western women visitors to China often noted: “We never meet ladies going shopping in China; goods are bought to the house for them to choose from, or they send a servant to make purchases for them.”⁴⁴ Elite women relied upon go-between figures in allowing them access to commercially produced dress. This might be a sympathetic male relative, for example, in *Hong lou meng*, Tanchun asks Baoyu to buy her a nice painting (she will embroider him a pair of slippers in return). Bao seems somewhat mystified by the appeal of urban shopping, telling her: “In the trips I make to bazaars and temple fairs, whether it’s inside the city or round about, I can’t say I ever see anything really nice or out of the ordinary. It’s all bronzes and jades and porcelain and that sort of stuff. Apart from that it’s mostly dress-making materials and clothes and things to eat.” Tanchun is little interested in such wares (“Now what would I want things like that for?”) and Baoyu hardly wishes to regulate the dress of his female playmates, yet other women surely encountered moralizing patriarchs as fathers, brothers, and cousins, who confined their clothing consumption.⁴⁵

Gentrywomen also relied on the bridging role of less confined women like maids or peddlars who brought wares to the houses of wealthy women. The ability of such “illegitimate or disreputable

43 Forbes, H. A. Crosby, *Shopping in China, the artisan community at Canton, 1825-1830: a loan exhibition from the collection of the Museum of the American China Trade* (Washington, D.C.: The Foundation, 1979), no.14. The customers’ names apparently placed on large strips repeated down each jacket sleeveband are all female (Xü Yao, Guo Fenxin etc).

44 Mrs Arnold Foster, *In the Valley of the Yangtze* (London: London Missionary Society, 1899), p.39.

45 Cao, Hawkes trans., *The Story of the Stone*, chap.27, pp.35-6.

women (*san gu liu po*), to traverse the *nei* and the *wai* caused them to be regarded with great suspicion.⁴⁶

Mrs Neng's father, a prominent official, forbade her mother from purchasing wares from itinerant sellers who visited the house.⁴⁷ But the restricted access to public shopping created a need for this type of in-home consumption - hairdressers, tailors and silversmiths visiting the home upon order. It also likely contributed to the emphasis seen in late Qing fashion upon certain areas of the dressed body - borders and coiffures - whose fashionable significance was far more easily realized than a tailored object of dress, which would have required several visits by a skilled tailor, who were often male and had to maintain a respectable distance from the female body. This explains why, in the nineteenth century, when shops devoted to female consumption become more visible in Suzhou, they sold objects like accessories or cosmetics: "Zhu Kewen's Scented cosmetics" (*Zhu Kewen xiangshi*), "Wu Longshan's scented powder" (*Wu Longshan xiangfen*), "Huang Guoben's Handkerchiefs" (*Huang Guoben shoujin*).⁴⁸

There were other ways in which the confinement of elite women to their homes impacted on the Qing fashion system. Theoretically the normative confinement of Han women meant that they inhabited a space untethered by political dress regulations. Unless married to an official and participating in a public official occasion, Han women were not required to wear regulated dress on state occasions, and outside of these zones, the Manchu court showed very little will to control Han women's dress. The freedom from Manchu dress regulations, together with the confinement to domestic realms perhaps gave Han women a liberty not enjoyed by other groups, for example their more publicly, officially dressed husbands or Manchu women. Certainly, the idea that Han Chinese women had some freedom in their dress choices has some currency in Chinese dress history: researchers often evoke an image of autonomy of expression for those women, who theoretically

46 The *san gu liu po* are the Three Dames (Buddhist, Taoist nuns and fortune-tellers) and Six Wenches (go-betweens, matchmakers, instructors, witches, healers and midwives), see Yi Ruolan, *San gu liu po – Mingdai funu yu shehui de tan suo* (Taipei: Daoxiang chubanshe, 2002), esp.pp.142-145 on their role in dress culture.

47 Zeng, *Testimony*, p.37.

48 Gu Zhentao, *Wumen biaoyin, fuji*, pp.351-2.

operated outside official norms of design and consumption.⁴⁹ But the idea requires further dissection, not least because recent scholarship has demonstrated that women did leave the domestic sphere: whether for religious and seasonal festivals; or to travel together with fathers, husbands, and sons to official appointments; or to visit scenic and leisure spots. For many women, temple and garden locations like those seen on J18 for example, offered relatively legitimate sites of worship, nature, and exploration, and this increasing female visibility, has been argued to have created more opportunities for emulation and sartorial competition.⁵⁰ This mobility would have been more accessible further down the social ladder. Reverend Hampden C. du Bose who visited Suzhou during the mid-nineteenth-century, commented on the “comparatively more freedom awarded the gentler sex in this city.... Those of the middle class go about the streets a great deal and visit the stores, and also at times, the pleasure gardens.”⁵¹ And urban rhymes evidence the kinds of women with the freedom to participate in Suzhou’s festive outings: maids - “Seven li on the road from Tang Heng west to east, the maid-servants tread crimson in a soft cloud”⁵², and fashionable courtesans (*shiji*) - “The women freshly made-up elegant and light, their glossy thrice-coiled coiffures (*sanpanton*). They wear the latest *shuangfeibin* style, jasmine flowers surround their heads with scent.”⁵³ Still, even with the above caveats, it cannot be denied that elite women were much restricted in movement, particularly in their youth when public appearance would cast aspersion on their virtue and hence marital value. By limiting how women accessed shops and markets outside the domestic realm, the ideal of women’s confinement thus played a key role in structuring stylistic influence and shaping the development of

49 Wilson “From the very detailed descriptions of clothes in the eighteenth century novel ‘The Story of the Stone’ it seems that dress may have been one of the very few areas of real choice and expression open to women.” (*Chinese Dress*, p.47); Clunas, *Pictures and Visuality in Early Modern China* (London: Reaktion Books, 1997), p.160; Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers: women and culture in seventeenth-century China* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1994), pp.172-6; A. C. Scott, *Chinese Costume in Transition* (Singapore: D. Moore, 1958), p.28.

50 Mann, “The Virtue of Travel for Women in the Late Empire”, in *Gender in Motion: divisions of labor and cultural exchange in late imperial and modern China*, eds. Bryna Goodman and Wendy Larson (Lanham, Md: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2004), pp.55-74. Women visiting temples was often criticized by conservative writers, but temple sites also offered many women a reasonably legitimate location to watch theatrical performance, see Zhao Shanlin, *Zhongguo xiqu guanzhong xue*, chap 7.

51 *Beautiful Soo: the Capital of Kiangsu* (Shanghai: Kelly & Walsh, 1899), p.13.

52 Li Mian, “Huqiu zhuzhici”, in *Gusu zhuzhici* (Shanghai: Baijia chubanshe, 2002), p.336-7.

53 Gu Wenshi, “Huqiu zhuzhici”, in *Gusu zhuzhici*, pp.344-8, p.346.

women's fashions.

In Europe, the formation of 'society' and its associated calendar of occasions has been argued to have contributed an impetus for fashion by providing not just an arena for display and observation but also a means of distinguishing occasion and place, leading to the development of different clothing identities: that which was worn inside the home and that which was worn outside, the former being concerned mainly with comfort, the latter increasingly founded upon the need to present an identity easily readable by onlookers.⁵⁴ This contact fuelled the development of dress in as both social identity and identifier. Social arenas stimulated the Western fashion system not only in facilitating display, but also in providing a realm where social 'readings' were practiced.⁵⁵ By contrast the domestication of the Qing woman's social world implies a lack of contact with, and observation of, the stranger. The putative confinement of Chinese women to their homes suggests a mode of dress largely worn in private, in the company of family and intimate friends. Did this factor necessarily inhibit the development of the fashion system? The sources caution us not to overstate these differences. Theoretically female confinement prevented the construction of a publically social arena involving both men and women, and certainly Qing gentrywomen would have spent much of their time in the company of other women, but there were occasions upon which male and female mingled - mealtimes (albeit at separate tables), domestic rituals, celebrations of festivals - occasions when they wore their most special and ornate clothing.⁵⁶ Women's poetry is filled with mentions of visits to and from friends and family. Indeed it is possible to argue that for the confined Qing woman, her arena of 'society' was the home; thus Ko argues for the steady retreat of social interaction back into the

54 The division between public and private dress is paralleled by similar evolutions into private and public rooms within domestic architecture, and had significant impact on the body-dress relationship, see Entwistle, *The Fashioned Body*, p.97, 102-5; Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), pp.66-7.

55 For example, the activity of women strolling down the street with fashionably dressed companions, gave rise to the wardrobe category of "shopping dress", a means of displaying their taste and affiliation with certain dressmakers or milliners. In China, this did not arise until the early twentieth-century with the appearance of the first department stores in Shanghai.

56 Francesca Bray, "The Inner Quarters: Oppression or Freedom?" in *House, Home, Family: living and being Chinese*, eds. Ronald Knapp and Kaiyin Lo (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press; New York: China Institute in America, 2005), pp.259-281.

domestic realm during the seventeenth century.⁵⁷ Novels like *Hong lou meng* comprise a cycle through a rich and varied, seasonally dictated, social calendar, complete with differentiated dress codes. Though it largely takes place in domestic arenas, it is nonetheless filled with visitors and hence the opportunity to both witness and display new styles. One such occasion can be seen in a Yangliuqing Guangxu reign *nianhua* print of a *Hong lou meng* scene: the women gather at the the Pavillion of Lotus Root Fragrance to enjoy the sweet osmanthus, drink wine, eat crabs and write poetry (Fig. 2.9).⁵⁸ The parade of mid-late Qing *ao* jackets with wide bordered jackets over *bai zhe qun* pleated skirts forms a colourful assembly of patterns, but a conception of public and private occasion underlies the image, helping us to make sense of the distinction made by taste-maker Li Yu (1611-1680?) between dress which is suitable for the home and that which is suitable for visitors: “I consider an eight *fu* skirt to be suitable for wearing at home, but in order to be beautiful in front of visitors, then it must be ten *fu*.”⁵⁹ His dress etiquette demonstrates a strong sense of occasion-distinguished dress – that which was suitable for the home and that which was suitable for visitors - suggesting that unwritten but influential social mores were an important factor in the developing material consumption that we see in this period.

In conclusion, whether we view domestic confinement as inhibiting or merely shaping consumption patterns, its impact upon Qing dress consumption is undeniable. It is possible to place a positive spin on this - to argue that separate spheres meant that female consumption was controlled by women rather than being dictated by male tastes or finances - but there are sufficient fictional and factual records of women’s dowry objects being commanded by men, jewellery and clothing sold off when they needed it, to make us question this positive reading, or at least try to nuance it.⁶⁰ Cloistering may

57 Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chamber*, pp.38-9.

58 Cao Xueqin, *Hong Lou Meng*, chap 38; Hawkes, trans, *The Story of the Stone*, chap.38.

59 Li Yu, *Xianqing Ouji*, p.158.

60 For a positive account, see Mann “Engendering the Histories of Asian Civilisation”, University of California, Davis, talk, May 2000. For fictional description: when Yuan You’s racketeering lands him in trouble and he is stripped of his purchased rank, he and his wife “decided to pawn some of her clothes and jewelry and with the proceeds he would set himself up again in the loan-sharking business” (Hanan, trans., *Courtesans and Opium*, chap.2, p.12); for a real-life account,

not have prevented consumption, but neither can we ignore the effect women's normative confinement had upon the fashion system. Yet despite the impact of confinement upon fashion, perhaps still more inhibiting was the moral discourse surrounding women's dress. To return to our scroll of Suzhou - thriving urban scene absent of women's dress shops – it is this discourse that illuminates the restrictions women experienced in engaging with fashion.

4. THE MORAL DISCOURSE OF WOMEN'S DRESS: FRUGALITY AND FASHION

How did a morally upright woman dress in nineteenth-century China? The *ziding nianpu* (self-edited chronological biography) of turn of the century Chinese gentry woman, Mrs Nie Zeng Jifen, affords us some understanding of what dress meant to a woman who followed unquestioningly the normative precepts of her time: “training of girls in homemaking... the confinement of pubescent girls and mature young ladies to special quarters, the limitation of female social contacts outside the family, and the impropriety of coeducation”,⁶¹ even as the political and social systems that had created such precepts crumbled:

When I was young, clothing styles were simple and unadorned. This was especially the case in my family. As I have mentioned, one garment was sometimes handed around among my sisters, aunts, and sisters-in-law. My father detested showy things and gave written instructions forbidding us to wear jackets with wide borders and skirts decorated with multi-coloured flowers.⁶²

She tells of her father's strict frugality with a mixture of pride and resentment, and it is hard to separate the hyperbole from the reality in this passage. Chinese writers typically alluded to the sartorial simplicity of times past; observing the “simple and plain” (*pu su*) styles of one's youth was a standard way of setting up a commentary on the luxurious styles of today, and the conventionalized sequence

see Ida Pruitt, from the story told to her by Ning Lao T'ai-T'ai (b.1867), *A Daughter of Han – The Autobiography of a Chinese Working Woman* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1967), p.47.

61 Zeng Jifen, *Testimony of a Confucian Woman: the Autobiography of Mrs Nie Zeng Jifen, 1852-1942*, trans. Thomas L. Kennedy (Athen, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1993), p.xxvii.

62 Zeng, *Testimony*, p.96.

from simplicity to luxury (*you jian ru she*) underpins much commentary on material culture.⁶³ Yet Mrs Zeng is probably not exaggerating her father's control over her wardrobe, parental intervention in the form of *jia xun* (family regulations) is evidenced elsewhere, for example, the mid-Qing Henan author of the novel *A Lantern at the Crossroads* (*Qi lu deng*), Li Lüyuan (1707-1790), who sternly directed his family towards the utilitarian:

Cloth shoes and cotton stockings should as far as possible be appropriate to one's status (lit. fit the foot). Nowadays people cover these objects with embroidered clouds and flowers, this is pure waste! What do women know? All they know is how to show off their cleverness, why must their husbands compete in their level of waste? There is also no need for satin stockings, and to further weave designs on top, this only irritates the wearer's foot!⁶⁴

Elsewhere in the book Mrs Zeng details how her father's control impacted on her clothing decisions: he strictly controlled the numbers of garments in each of his daughter's trousseau chests, and carefully edited his family's clothing in ritually significant times of mourning and festivity.⁶⁵ Small wonder that Mrs Nie Zeng herself equated extravagance in dress with moral failing. When she attended a wedding of a prominent official's son, she provided an enthralled description of the outfit of her husband's accountant's concubine: "She wore a court necklace and embroidered jacket, and her whole person dazzled with gems and diamonds. I heard then that the gold, jade, pearls, and malachite she wore were worth more than 20,000 taels." They were later to discover that this accountant had stolen funds from her husband's new office prior to his arrival, and though Mrs Nie is discreet in her allegations of wrong-doing, the couple's moral illegitimacy is highlighted through her description of the "upstairs wife", a figure of ornamental excess wearing inappropriate objects like a court necklace.⁶⁶

In viewing a dazzling appearance as masking an untrustworthy character, Mrs Zeng and her father were espousing beliefs about the functions of dress that can be traced back to Bangu (32-92 BCE):

63 For example Qian Yong (1759-1844), *Lüyuan cong hua*, *juan* 7, pp.192-3: "When I was five or six years old, the customs of my country were still simple and plain ... now more than 50 years later, no matter whether wealthy or poor, urban or countryfolk, the men all wear lightweight furs and the women are clothed in embroidery and brocade."

64 "Li Lüyuan's Earnest Words of Household Instruction" (*Li Lüyuan jia xun zhen yan*) was written when Li was 71 years old (Qianlong 42) and appended to the manuscript of his novel *Qi lu deng*, the text is reproduced in Luan Xing ed., *Qi lu deng yanjiu ziliao* (Zhengzhou: Zhongzhou shuhuashe, 1982), pp.141-152, no.20.

65 Zeng, *Testimony*, pp.37, 40

66 Zeng, *Testimony*, pp.68-9.

“Why did the ancient sages create jackets and skirts? ...In order to illustrate virtue and encourage good example, and to distinguish between the noble and the common,”⁶⁷ and Jia Yi (200-169 BCE): “The way of clothing is to choose the best fitting – the most pleasant for the people and the most gorgeous and sacred for the emperor. Different styles and patterns are applied to classify the higher and the lower, and to differentiate the noble and the mean.”⁶⁸ Beyond shelter and warmth, in China as elsewhere, clothing’s primary function was to distinguish: basic distinctions of gender, age, wealth, status (noble *zun* from humble *bei*; elite *gui* from commoner *qian*), and taste (elegant *ya* from vulgar *su*), and those culturally specific to China: Chinese (*hua*) from non-Chinese (*yu*), wife (*qi*) from concubine (*qie*). But as the commercial revolutions of the late Ming and early Qing unfolded, as Spanish and Japanese silver flooded into Chinese markets, and material culture became the stuff of market economies and social mobility, distinctions became confused and common people “overstepped” themselves (*jianyue*) in their material consumption. Elite groups appear to have resisted such transgressions, though apparently to little avail:

(Previously) servants were not permitted to wear dress in the colour of sky-blue and nor were merchants. But later on there appeared woollen fabrics in the so-called ‘Tibetan blue’ shade, and amongst those two groups, the servants all overstepped their position and wore this shade. So recently sky-blue (clothing) is everywhere, and accordingly there is no way of making social distinctions, and yet no one comes forward to criticize this.⁶⁹

The very problem with fashion was that by widening consumption and challenging sumptuary regulations, sartorially based social distinctions became increasingly unreliable. In Chinese history this kind of concern with the impact of unfettered consumption is particularly characteristic of periods of imperial change and social upheaval: texts cluster around locales like late Ming Nanjing or late Qing Shanghai and, as Dauncey has shown in regard to the former, they centre on the female figure, linking “changes in female clothing habits to the issue of proper female deportment and the place of women in society.”⁷⁰ Fan Lian’s worries that late Ming women of noble families could no longer be

67 Ban Gu, *Baibu tongyi* (Taipei: Taiwan Shangwu yinshuguan, 1983), p.850-59, *Yishang*.

68 Jia Yi “Discourse on Dress” *Fu yi*, translated in Yuan Zujie, “Dressing for Power: Rite, Costume, and State Authority in Ming Dynasty China”, *Frontiers of History in China*, vol.2, no.2 (2007), pp.181-212.

69 Ouyang Zhaoxing, *Shui chuang chun yi*, no.83, “*Fu se yi zhen*”.

70 See Dauncey, “Sartorial modesty and genteel ideals in the late Ming”, in *Gentility in China: Perceptions & Ideals*, eds. Daria Berg and Chloe Starr (London: Routledge, 2007), pp.134-154, p.135

distinguished in their dress from the women of entertainment quarters was echoed two centuries later by a Daoist scholar quoted in 1894 *Shenbao*, who sighed:

Twenty years earlier, gentlewomen and courtesans could be distinguished, but nowadays the courtesans are at will to lead the way in clothing and adornment; the gentlewomen follow in their footsteps of constantly changing patterns. I only fear that this is inappropriate, (though) it ensures a beautiful body and face, it affords the viewer no way of distinguishing the gentlewomen from the courtesan, and where can that end?⁷¹

As the above quote suggests, two idealized extremes orient this literature: the frugal elegance of the virtuous gentlewoman and the embellished vulgarity of the immoral courtesan.

The restrained clothing consumption of the idealized gentlewoman was described in didactic texts, published and circulated by officials that attempted to promote a more frugal mode of living and challenge a material consumption seen as out of control. They speak to the desire to pull women (and the men who consumed on their behalf) back from the brink of a chasm of unconstrained consumption. As Dauncey describes in her discussion of late Ming sartorial expressions of morality and fashion, these works highlighted extreme virtue, presenting images of chaste women as models of frugality who denounced luxury and waste: “I wear coarse, unrefined silks and do not eat rich foods. Those around me only wear basic cloth and there are none who adorn themselves with fragrant ornamentation.”⁷² The same emphasis governed the visual presentation of women; it is one of the features limiting the degree to which literati portraits can inform upon dress history. A representative portrait is the “Portrait of Yuan’s mother Madame Han” (Fig. 2.10): robed to the high neck and fastened with bolt-like buttons, she presents a sternly virtuous face to the viewer. This moral stance pervaded beyond the genre of matriarchal exemplars, even influencing visual treatments of courtesans - widely acclaimed as the centre of late Ming fashionable culture. A portrait of courtesan Gu Mei shows her in simple, neutral dress and understated jewellery similar to that of the paragon Madame Han: her hair is in the *song bin bian ji* (softly curved bun) style, popular during the early seventeenth

71 Fan Lian, *Yunjian ju mu chao, ji fengsu*, cited in Dauncey, “Illusions of Grandeur”, p.58; *Shenbao* quote cited in Yue Zheng, *Jindai Shanghai ren shehui xin tai*, p.115.

72 Empress Ma (1332-82), wife of the Ming Emperor Zhu Yuanzhang, cited in Dauncey, “Illusions of Grandeur”, p.64.

century and interpreted by Ye Mengzhu as giving an image of dignity and solemnity (Fig. 2.11).⁷³ These two images illustrate the pressure to express a female subject's moral virtue through simplicity and plainness of dress. They provide a visual reflection of the ongoing debate on these notions in Ming and Qing society; but as the visual equivalent to sumptuary laws, they promoted what "those concerned with the morals of society" wished to perpetuate, not necessarily what was practised in reality.⁷⁴

In other genres, particularly professional or erotic art, the ability to depict a contemporary fashionable material environment was more highly prized.⁷⁵ The eighteenth-century album *Yanqin yiqing* (Fig. 2.12) celebrates the textures and patterns of the latest textiles and the most fashionable dress styles.⁷⁶ Its portrayal of courtesans underlines one of the most distinctive features of Chinese dress - the leading role courtesans (*jiniū*) and brothels (*qinglou wenming*) played in determining fashions, particularly in comparison to elite women. This is distinctive primarily in a context of European fashion; it is more commonplace in other Asian cultures. Japanese dress historians have highlighted the importance of merchants, courtesans and entertainers rather than elite groups in the Edo period, demonstrating that fashions moved upwards to the Samurai class only after they were established among merchant women and only then the military and the nobility.⁷⁷ In Chinese society, various factors enabled courtesans to assume this role: their ties to entertainment and performance, their relative bodily and moral freedom. Their profession necessitated a certain level of expenditure on things, which ordinary Chinese families could not possibly attain. They were "early adopters", able to

73 Ye Mengzhu, *Yue shi bian*, p.178.

74 Ye Mengzhu, *Yue shi bian*, p.178; Li Yu, *Xianqing Ouji*, p.157.

75 This genre has recently been reappraised by James Cahill in *Pictures for Use and Pleasure: Vernacular Painting in High Qing China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).

76 Originally a 48-leaf album, twelve of the images are now in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (acc. No.2002.602.1-12). Van Gulik, in reference to a Shanghai publication by *Yiyuan zhen shang she* attributes 24 images from this album to Qiu Ying (1494-1552), but it is now understood to be mid-Qing (*Erotic Colour Prints of the Ming Period*, p.156).

77 Bethe, "Reflections on Beni", p.149.

access luxury foods and furnishings, which would later become everyday goods.⁷⁸ The influence of courtesans was particularly characteristic of urban centres like Suzhou, Yangzhou, Nanjing, and later Shanghai and Beijing, it ebbed and flowed according to dynastic shifts and censorship drives, and took life from local performance and print culture. Most influential was the Southern courtesan, an integral figure to Chinese fashion system: “The women all follow the Suzhou styles, and Suzhou follows the lead of the courtesan’s styles, and then (ladies from) those official families then imitate these styles, though I cannot understand why this should be.”⁷⁹ Synedochic of the reputation of urban hubs like Yangzhou or Suzhou; as Finnane argues, the Southern courtesan’s “highly gendered image” should be understood “partly as a representation of the exotic.”⁸⁰ Much desired by Manchu emperors, their vision of southern allure was bought into the palace through imagery like the “Twelve Beauties” hanging scrolls. The set, commissioned by the Yongzheng emperor and dating to between 1709 and 1723, depicts twelve beauties dressed in the fashions of early Qing Jiangnan (lower Yangzi delta): high necked under-robcs, fastened at the neck with two or three buttons as in the style of the Gu Mei portrait, their outer robes with long, loose sleeves bordered with narrow strips of patterned brocades and damasks (Fig. 2.13).⁸¹ At one level, both the *Yanqin yiqing* and the Twelve Beauties images functioned as fashion imagery; though hardly for the masses, they surely reached women of elite consumer circles, providing a medium through which southern styles spread to the court and Han fashions reached Manchu imperial concubines, a process we’ll consider in more detail on the following chapter. Here suffice it to observe that this elite fashion imagery was anonymous and its style of *gong bi zhong cai* (fine line, rich colour) and professional mimesis little recognised by literati painting values.

78 For a discussion of the lead of the brothels in fashionable consumption more generally, see Wu Renshu, *Shechi de nuren: Ming Qing shiqi Jiangnan funu de xiaofei wenhua* (Taipei: Sanmin shuju, 2005), pp.63-86.

79 Ouyang Zhaoxiang, *Shui chuang chun yi*, p.79, no.97, “Suzhou tou”.

80 Wei Minghua, *The Thin Horses of Yangzhou* translated and introduced by Antonia Finnane, *East Asian History*, no.9, (1995), pp.47-66, p.48.

81 Once believed to have depicted consorts of the Yongzheng emperor, the images, each 2 metres high by 1 metre wide, were originally structured as a “surrounding screen” (*weiping*), creating a kind of virtual erotic room. See Cahill, *Pictures for Use*, p.49; Wu Hung, “Beyond Stereotypes”, in *Writing Women in Late Imperial China*, eds. Ellen Widmer and Kang-i Sun Chang (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), pp.338-341, pp.352-355; Yan Qianpei, “Ershi meiren tu” yanjiu, *Yiyi fenzi*, no.16, (2011), pp.29-74.

During the course of the Qing, courtesan culture became increasingly commodified: as educated gentry women became more preferable models of literate femininity, the elegant reputation enjoyed by late Ming Nanjing courtesans like Gu Mei diminished.⁸² Nevertheless courtesans continued to influence fashion, particularly during the latter half of the nineteenth-century, when prostitution, along with printing, publishing and performance, shifted to Shanghai. Courtesans were the trend-setters of the day: “The dress of the Shanghai courtesans changed rapidly, their gorgeous dress and beautiful attire closely followed the fashions, and these were always changing.... invariably women from respectable families also imitated these trends, and before long, they also spread to the interior.”⁸³ The close relationship between courtesans and tailors stimulated rapidly changing styles:

All tastes in clothing are determined by the brothels. Shanghai courtesans all come from Suzhou and therefore mostly dress in the Suzhou style. The shops in Coloured Clothing Lane (*Cai yi jie*) make the courtesans’ styles: beautifully designed, elegantly cut, and chosen by themselves. At that time, lower status courtesans were often called tailors (*fengren*) (because they “cut” by themselves). The shops provide them with the latest styles, with all kinds of complicated styles (*cu zhi*), the fabric and buttons all prepared and skillfully made.⁸⁴

Notority was key to remaining desirable in the market, and so courtesans chose styles that singled them out: whether through novel materials like the brightly shaded woollen fabrics and printed cottons that clothe the courtesans of *Feng yue meng*; daring colour variations;⁸⁵ cross-dressing in men’s hats and coats.⁸⁶ Another recurring theme is asserting culture and literacy: whether referencing poetry in calligraphic borders (Fig. 2.14.a,b); painting with embroidered borders reproducing contemporary trends (Fig. 2.15.a,b); or theatrical culture through the wearing of operatic costume, or robes

82 Cahill, *Pictures for Pleasure*, pp.157-8.

83 Xu Ke, *Qingbai leichao*, p.6166; Catherine Yeh presents three main phases in nineteenth century Shanghai fashion: the first phase before courtesans moved into the Foreign Settlements when Suzhou set the fashion; the second phase in the settlements during 1860s when Shanghai courtesans integrated a mixture of Beijing, Canton, and Western elements; and the third phase during the 1880s and 1890s when the trends defined by Shanghai courtesans for the Jiangnan region spread through the country, see *Shanghai Love*, p.34.

84 Wang Tao (1828-1898), *Hai zou ye you ku* (preface 1860), *Xiangyan congshu*, vol.78, ji 12, p.9 (1818: reprint Shanghai: Zhongguo tushu gongsi, 1914), p.5649, “The dress system” (*Yifu zhi zhi*).

85 Yeh gives the examples of gardenia yellow, traditionally associated with men’s outer dress, or crimson crepe skirts being worn on New Year’s festival instead of the marriage and court ceremonies with which they were associated, *Shanghai Love*, p.52, n. 63.

86 In both Western and Chinese styles, see Sun Yanzhen, *Qingdai nüxing fushi wenhua yanjiu* (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2008), pp.129-132.

embroidered with operatic and dramatic iconography.⁸⁷ It is within this social setting that our narrative-adorned jackets take life, and it is within these environs that we see both the influence of dramatic culture upon sartorial expression and the possibilities of dress in an environment more permissive than that experienced by gentrywomen elsewhere in Qing China.

5. *FUYAO*: A SOCIO-CULTURAL EXPLANATION FOR MATERIAL CULTURE?

Obviously, not everyone viewed the creative clothing expression of Shanghai courtesans as a positive. Critics singled out female consumers, framing their luxurious habits as a threat to social order. Using terms like fashion, luxury, and *fuyao*, they associated fashionable consumption with historical precedent to emphasize its consequences. The ancient concept of *fuyao* - essentially a causal association between the wearing of outlandish dress with political and ecological disaster - tells us much about the environment in which Qing women engaged with new or fashionable styles of dress. The earliest example of its usage is found in the second century BCE “Great Commentary to the Book of Shang” *Shang shu da zhuan*: “Those whose appearance is not respectful are insufficiently solemn, their arrogance is their culpability, frequent floods are their punishment, for in its extreme this is evil, and then *fuyao* occurs.”⁸⁸ However the most cited source on *fuyao*, one that was still being referenced in the Qing dynasty was the History of the Han (*Han shu*) (111 BCE): “When customs are dissolute and disrespectful, then ceremonial rituals change and political upheaval easily occurs, thus the wearing of strange and frivolous dress creates *fuyao*.”⁸⁹ The theoretical basis of *fuyao* was derived from the theories of Yin Yang and the Five Elements (*yinyang wu xing xue*) and Chinese scholars Li Jianguo and Meng Lin have argued that it emerged as an extension of disaster theory (*zaiyi zhi shuo*), to provide ancient Chinese political commentators with a means of justifying their involvement with politics.⁹⁰

87 Stage costumes from Peking Opera adaptations of *Hong lou meng* were particularly popular, see Yeh, *Shanghai Love*, p.143.

88 The *Hongfan Wuxing Chuan* section, cited in Li Jianguo, Meng Lin, “Jianlun Tangqian “fuyao” xianxiang”, *Wuhan Daxue xuebao (renwen kexueban)* (2006), pp.427-433, p.427.

89 *Han Shu*, “The Record of the Five Elements” (*Wuxing Zhi*), *juan* 27, cited in Li and Meng, p.427.

90 They analyse texts from the *Wuxing zhi*, *Yufu zhi*, and *Lifu zhi* sections of standard histories between the period of the late Han and the Sui dynasties; for Ming understandings of *fuyao*, see Lin Liyue, “Yishang yu Fengjiao”; for late Qing usage,

But this ancient concept was still being deployed well into the Qing dynasty. The historian and poet Zhang Yingchang (1790-1874) wrote in 1869: “(*Fuyao*) is commonly referred to as “*bi*” (evil). After wearing (*fuyao*) one becomes evil, and one’s mind becomes depraved. It begins from the hats and shoes, the jackets and collars.”⁹¹ As scholars have shown, *fuyao* was often used to describe popular clothing positioned in opposition to traditional dress, in particular styles deriving from outside Han Chinese culture, the so-called “barbarian clothing” (*hu fu*) from Central Asia and the northern borders. It also tended to focus on popular clothing styles worn by women, particularly the mass adoption of previously unpopular styles, something that could also be interpreted as fashion. Clothing judged to be *fuyao* would incur the wrath of the heavens, resulting in ruin for the individual wearer, their community or even country. This textually authoritative idea opposed the creation of new styles of dress and bound women’s dress to the country’s political fortunes.

Fuyao can be understood as connecting two larger belief systems: firstly, the idea that women’s behaviour role in familial and domestic arenas was implicated in the security and wellbeing of the country. As the well-known poem from the Book of Odes (ca. 781-771 BCE) puts it: “(Disorder) does not come from heaven; it is produced by women.”⁹² Secondly, *fuyao* was the product of a society that viewed dress as possessing deep political implications, and invested garments and garment components with didactic force. The sleeveband, for example, was something of a touchstone for those who concerned themselves with changing fashions; many a Ming and Qing *biji* obsess over sleeves: “Sleeves were initially still small, with only a *chi* foot at the widest, later they became wider to three feet, the same as men’s clothing. From the Shunzhi period onwards, women’s sleeves again became small, today they are not more than about a foot.”⁹³; “But the size of the sleeves, the width of the pure green, these all change with the times, and are certainly not a fixed style.”⁹⁴ But sleeve widths,

see Sun Shusong and Huang Yi, “Wan Qing “fuyao” xianxiang de tantao yu fansi”, *Liaocheng daxue xueban (shehui kexue ban)*, no.1 (2010), pp.38-43.

91 Zhang Yingchang, *Qing shi duo* (1869; Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1960), *juan* 23, p.834.

92 James Legge, trans, *The She King* (New York, 1967), section 3, chap.3, no.264, “Zhan Yang”, p.347.

93 Ye Mengzhu, *Yue shi bian*, p.181, “neizhuang”.

94 Yang Shuben, ed., (Qianlong) *Puyuan suozhi*, *juan* 6, *xishang*, in *Zhongguo difangzhi jicheng, Xiangzhen zhi chuanjuan*, no.20,

like robe lengths, were understood as part of a regulated clothing system that originated with that most early and culturally important of Chinese garments, the *shenyi*, a garment where the upper and lower garment was sewn together, and whose pattern measurements are described in the Record of Rites.⁹⁵ Robe lengths and cuff widths were one way in which the first Ming Emperor Zhu Yuanzhang (1328-1398) sought to recover the authoritative rituals of Han officials (*Han guan wei yi*): “Officials’ robes should fit their bodies. The length of those worn by civil officials is one inch from the ground. The sleeves should be long enough to reach the elbows when they are folded back from the end of the hands; they should be one foot wide, with cuffs of nine inches wide”.⁹⁶ Through this socio-political context, a woman’s sleeveband width carried associations beyond fashion, something that illuminates on the sleeveband commentary and also the choice of patterns and motifs applied to the sleeveband. Moreover, the political significance of clothing also derived from the long-held principle that the clothing of each member of society should be appropriate to their identity, as defined by gender, age, and status, and the idea that “clothing that is inappropriate to one’s status will bring disaster to one’s person”.⁹⁷ *Fuyao* commentary became particularly prevalent at times of dynastic change and political uncertainty, and the recurrence of this ancient term within Ming and Qing debates about luxurious ornamentation and fashionable dress reflect this unease about the conflict between social boundaries and the expression of status.

Conceptually *fuyao* was concerned with distinction, hence it tended to be invoked in response to clothing that moved genres, for example, blurring the line between foreign dress and Han Chinese dress, or male and female dress, or mixing elements of mourning dress into secular dress:

In the early Daoguang period, everyone wore their hair in the “Ingot style” (*yuanyao tou*), later this changed to the “Swallow-tail style” (*xuan an wei*); in the middle of this reign, everyone changed to the “Three flat set style” (*ping san tao* - this was quite refined, and the swallow-tail style disappeared.... In the years of *Jianwu* (1834) and *Yiwei* (1835), the styles

95 This garment is at the centre of the recent ethno-nationalist *Hanfu* movement, which seeks to reinstate the *shenyi* as a Han Chinese garment worn on formal occasions. For *Shenyi* measurements, see Dieter Kuhn, ed, *Chinese Silks*, p.23.

96 See Yuan Zujie, “Dressing for Power”, p.186, citing *Daming budian*, juan 61.

97 Liu Ruoyu citing the *Zuo Zhuan*, ed. Li Mengsheng (Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1998), pp.279-80: cited in Sophie Volpp, “The Gift of a Python Robe: the Circulation of Objects in ‘Jin Ping Mei’”, *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, vol.65, no.1 (June 2005), pp.133-158, p.157.

suddenly changed to plain simple robes and jackets, (people) used white thread to wrap the hair-bun, but if asked, there was no death of a close relative (with which one could explain this), therefore this is a sign of great disorder: is this not what the ancients called *fuyao*?⁹⁸

One of the best examples of this is the afore-mentioned Ming-Qing transition fashion of *shuitian yi*, a patchwork robe or jacket created from small squares of disparate fabrics to form numerous seams resembling the partitions and shapes of paddy fields, which appropriated a textile technique closely associated with Buddhist dress. The limited fictional and visual descriptions in novels, illustrated dramas and erotic albums suggest that *shuitian yi* was primarily worn by such lower status women like courtesans, concubines, and maids.⁹⁹ Figure 2.12 shows a leaf from the mid-Qing erotic album *Yanqin Yiqing* - a maid wearing a *shuitian bijia* waits outside a room for her mistress, whose lover's shoes peep out from the curtained-off space. Li Yu included a lengthy critique of *shuitian yi* in his writings on taste, *Xianqing ou ji* (Random Jottings of Leisurely Moments) (1671):

Robes made by sewing together small cloth pieces is known as the Buddhist patchwork robes (*Baina seng yi*). What kind of guilt do women have that they suddenly wear the dress of nuns? The change in customs and fashion is often related to a dynasty's fate. This style did not start until the end of the Chongzhen reign (1627–1644). When I saw it I was surprised and once commented: “To change the shape of clothing without reason, it almost as though there are spirits causing this. (The style has spread) all over this world, how can the regime not collapse?” Soon afterwards the Chuang rebellion rose all over, tearing apart the Central Plains, and everyone said that my words were unfortunate in their correctness.¹⁰⁰

Though Li Yu was the only one to explicitly frame *shuitian yi* as an act of *fuyao* connected to the downfall of the Ming, other writers also saw the fashion in similarly moralistic terms.¹⁰¹ *Shuitian yi* was likely judged as *fuyao* for numerous reasons: the inappropriateness of extending a clothing technique associated with religious dress into female secular dress, the undesirability of a style that blurred gender or social identity. Whether they were resisting the dress style itself or rather the religious belief that it may have represented is a matter of conjecture. But regardless of motive, by classifying *shuitian*

98 Ouyang Zhaoxiang, *Shui chuang chun yi*, no.97, *Suzhou tou*.

99 For example, the mid-Qing satirical novel *Rulin Waishi* (The Scholars) by Wu Jingzi: “The courtesan on the boat changed her outfit. She took off an outer jacket of dark purple and changed into a paddy-field jacket (*shuitian pijeng*).” Completed in 1750, it was set in the Ming. Cited in Wen Zhouxun and Gao Chunming, *Zhongguo lidai fushi*, p.254.

100 Chuang refers to Li Zicheng (1606-1644), the late Ming peasant who led his rebels to first topple the Ming dynasty; Li Yu, *Xianqing ou ji*, p.157.

101 Li Yu's contemporary, Ye Mengzhu, characterised it as unfitting for “decent” people (*Yue shi bian*, p.1), and approximately one century later, Zhai Hao (1736-1788), compiler of the eighteenth-century encyclopaedia *Tong su bian*, also labelled it immoral and followed Li Yu in attributing the ultimate cause of this fashion to the tailors' thievery (p.561).

yi as *fuyao*, these writers were able to simply and directly invoke dissent, creating an association between contemporary disastrous events and the dress “choices” of women. Given Ye Mengzhu’s characterisation of *shuitian yi* - “really nothing like mortal clothing. Those families who maintain decency need not imitate this,”¹⁰² it is not surprising that this fashionable form associated with lower class women, was little visually represented. Guardians of Chinese society “those who uphold worldly morals” would have hardly wished to see the fashion recorded and thus circulated. Clearly this kind of judgement would make it very difficult for the daughters and wives of literati and official elites to wear this style.

The concept of *fuyao* is culturally specific to Chinese history, and yet there are intriguing parallels to other fashion theories. Perhaps the closest comparison is “zeitgeist theory”, the assertion that fashions echo or predict social, political and cultural change. Historian A. C. Scott utilized this reasoning to argue that Chinese women’s dress symbolised their social and cultural constraints: “The long gowns and robes, which exposed no part of the body and the bound feet were indicative of those who led a secluded life both mentally and physically and took no part in the world beyond their own threshold” comparing their dress to the “hampering skirts, tight bodices and corsets” of Victorian England.¹⁰³ An alternative angle on *fuyao* is to consider it as early material culture theory, an attempt to locate a socio-cultural explanation for changes in material culture. As Prown argued, the study of material culture is grounded by the idea that society deposits a “cultural fingerprint” on the artifacts it produces. This generates two testable hypothesis: that objects produced in the same time and in the same place should share stylistic elements, and that changes in style should be concurrent to shifts in cultural values.¹⁰⁴ This argument will be explored in Chapter 5, which considers how the conception of narrative presented in the embroidered jackets derived from contemporary understandings of narrative as evidenced in drama and prints.

102 Ye Mengzhu, *Yue shi bian*, p.181.

103 *Chinese Costume in Transition*, p.77.

104 Prown, “Style as Evidence” in *Art as Evidence: Writings on Art and Material Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), pp.52-68, 56.

6. CONCLUSION: THE MORALITY OF EMBROIDERED DRESS AND DRAMATIC PERFORMANCE

To return to our figural roundel jackets, though the lack of commentary on this style means there is no direct evidence that the jackets were considered *fuyao*, it is apparent that many of the jacket's features - the narrative content, the overlaid borders, the embroidered materiality - would not be viewed sympathetically by many of the commentators cited in this chapter. For someone like Mrs Zeng's father, the embroidered, layered, decorative vision of dress expressed by the jackets was inherently immoral. Indeed, as a patterning process, embroidery presented a conundrum, as both Mann and Bray have outlined.¹⁰⁵ From one perspective, it prevented idleness, considered a real threat to women as wealthy, leisurely lifestyles spread. It was also a symbol of leisure; only a wealthy woman could afford to produce high-quality embroidery for herself, others would be forced to liquidate the products of their skill. But they did so against the grain of the alternative perspective, which argued that embroidery merely embellished (unlike weaving which actually created an object, and therefore was encouraged as a means of allowing women to support their families and pay taxes), and was therefore a subsidiary category of craft and undesirable in its commerce. The view expressed by the early Han *Yan tie lun* is never far from the surface: "If the women folk decorate the small things and work on the minute and form elaborate articles to the best of their skill and art, then there will not be enough silk and cloth for wear."¹⁰⁶ The ambiguity of *nügong* - caught between "womanly work" and "women's work" - encapsulates this conundrum. Bray separates these two senses: the former a gendered and moral activity producing objects of moral and symbolic value but not monetary value; the latter producing commodities within the market economy and private household economy.¹⁰⁷ Museum scholarship on embroidered Chinese objects has widely preferred the former framing, something influencing even writers like Mann and Bray, who are ambivalent about the existence of a

105 Bray, *Technology and Gender*, pp.267-269; Susan Mann, "Household Handicrafts and State Policy in Qing Times", in *To Achieve Security and Wealth: The Qing imperial state and the economy, 1644-1911*, eds. Jane Kate Leonard and John R. Watt (Ithaca, NY: East Asian Program, Cornell University, 1992), pp.75-96.

106 Huan Kuan (ca. 1st century), Esson M. Gale, trans., *Discourses on Salt and Iron* (Taipei: Ch'eng-Wen Pub Co, 1967), chap.3, p.24.

107 Bray, *Technology and Gender*, p.256.

commercial market for embroidery.¹⁰⁸ But I would dispute the sharp separation of these markets: domestic from foreign, commercial from artistic. Chapter 4 explores the evidence for commercial markets for embroidery from the late Ming onwards, and the participation of both elite and common women in this market. By laying out the nineteenth-century network of commercial embroiderers, workshops, and markets, we will examine the impact of these conflicting perspectives on embroidery upon commercially embroidered clothing articles like the jackets.

Shuitian yi provides a case-study illustrating the larger theme of this chapter: the ways in which the moral discourse of women's dress shaped the Qing fashion system, and the importance of characterizing this fashion system in order to understand the nature of Qing women's fashion. Taken collectively, the features discussed here: the dominance of official male dress objects in commercial outlets; the normative confinement of women to the home; the conception of the dressed woman according to idealized poles of the Confucian paragon's virtuous frugality and the Southern courtesan's embellished adornment; the notion of *fyao* and the association this formed between new styles and social and ecological upheaval; all these features created an environment hostile to fashion. Of course, many of these features represent extreme views of consumption. It is hard to know whether the views promoted by Mrs Nie Zeng's father were echoed by her contemporaries, but obviously not every elite woman's father wrote *jia xun*, not every gentlewoman had her clothing choices so strictly circumscribed. The view of fashion expressed in bamboo ballads and vernacular songs allows us to temper the surface of these male-penned *jia xun* and *biji*. But undeniably, this aversion to fashion formed boundaries that limited women's consumer decisions; they had to navigate these boundaries if they wished to participate in the Qing fashion system. It is ironic that the female figures constructed in the imaginative space of the Western museum's Chinese dress collection – “a Manchu lady” or “Chinese noblewomen” – were precisely the kind of woman who most lacked the freedom to wear this style of dress. The role of courtesans and entertainers in leading fashion and their relative freedom in dress decisions means it is far more likely that they wore the figural roundel

108 Mann, “Women's Work in the Ningbo area (1900-1936)”, in *Chinese History in Economic Perspective*, eds. Thomas G. Rawski and Lillian M. Li (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), pp.263-268, p.260; *Technology and Gender*, p.267.

jackets. The kind of reframing that occurred as these objects were turned into the dress of gentlewomen is analogous to the way in which Western women compiled photos of courtesans into their scrapbook albums on Chinese women, mistakenly supposing them to be gentlewomen.¹⁰⁹

The control over women's wardrobes was part of a general attitude towards the ways in which daughters, sisters, and wives were permitted to engage with the outside world. Just as Lu Yiting's *Household Instructions* specified how the women of his family should dress, so too did he restrict how they engaged with dramatic performance: "If they go to visit relations or watch a play, they must be chaperoned, they are not permitted to go alone."¹¹⁰ In his study of female audiences, scholar Zhao Shanlin presented an array of sources evidencing the restrictions women faced if they wished to engage with drama. In these texts drama is one of a series of unsuitable activities for women, necessitating them leaving the inner chambers, and so as undesirable as visiting monasteries or viewing festival celebrations, and perhaps even more so. The standardized phrasing of the Qing regulations place the dangers of men and women mixing at will as central to the risks: "nan nü xianghun" or "nan nü hunza".¹¹¹ Criticism of female audiences was often couched in formulaic and fixed terms, with dress and adornment playing key components of this personification of risk. Sexualized features like powder and stockings provided synecdochic emblems for writers like the mid-Qing drama critic and anthologist, Qian Decang (fl. 1763-1774):

Actors and actresses may entertain guests, but when women watch from behind the screen, powder and scent fills the air, wafting up from behind the screen, gauze stockings and upturned shoes, insidiously peep out from the screen, even to the point that they comment on the guests, giggling and tittering away. The actor's eyes fall directly upon them, and the audience's heart returns this gaze.¹¹²

109 Régine Thiriez, "Photography and Portraiture in Nineteenth-Century China", in *East Asian History*, no 17/18 (June / Dec 1999), pp.77-102, pp.95-7.

110 *Jiating jianghua* (c.1895; Suzhou: Jingitang shufang), *juan zhong*, p.15.

111 For examples of late imperial official decrees using this phrasing, see Zhao, *Zhongguo xiqu guanzhong xue*, chap.7, pp.98-9, n.1, 7

112 *Xin ding jieren yi guang ji*, *juan 8*, *Shuo yan tan* (Taipei: Tianyi chubanshe, 1985); cited Zhao, *Zhongguo xiqu guanzhong xue*, p.100, n.13

The *fuyao* discourse is bound up in this conception of the adorned female viewer. For example, in one case from mid-Qing Hunan, when fire broke out during a performance of the Mulian cycle, Confucian moralists concluded the fire was a heavenly punishment for allowing female viewers: “Next year when Mulian rescues his mother, we must be careful not to let young women overstep the inner chambers!”¹¹³

It is hard to know how these anxious bans and complaints impacted on women’s lives. Though Zhao cites several Ming and Qing *jia xun* that forbid women outright from watching drama, the picture gleaned from novels and family instructions suggests that family heads sought to supervise and control, barring visits to the murky locations of temple fairs but allowing private performances upon family occasions. Thus Li Lüyuan wrote in his Family Instructions (*Li Lüyuan jia xun zhun yan*) that family members were forbidden from going to the temple fairs because of the layabouts and ne’er do goods.¹¹⁴ Most of Zhao’s sources are texts clearly slanted towards conservative values like *jia xun* and provincial regulations (*difang faling*); the self-selection intrinsic to these sources - only those men who were sufficiently concerned about female audiences to espouse their (usually extreme) positions would write the family instructions or provincial regulations that survive and allow us any understanding on this area - makes it hard to determine the prevalence of their position.¹¹⁵ One rather doubts that a position as strict as some of these conservative voices could find a popular foothold: “If it is the occasion of celebrating the longevity of a father or mother, or the big ceremony of a wedding, then one can call on available actors, if this is an occasional occurrence” but one definitely cannot “allow woman and children to watch such performances.”¹¹⁶ Women of this period obviously experienced a range of restrictions, with daughters from official families likely facing the greatest strictures in engaging with drama: it is unlikely that lower-class women or the potential courtesan wearers of these

113 *Hu ben, Yan buo xing*, in *Qing shi duo* (The Bell of Qing poetry), juan 25, cited Zhao, *Zhongguo xiqu guanzhong xue*, p.101, n.14

114 This was appended to manuscript editions of the novel, and is reproduced in Luan Xing ed., *Qi lu deng yanjin ziliao* (Zhongzhou shuhua she: Henan sheng xinhua shudian faxing, 1982), pp.141-152, no.28, p.144.

115 Zhao, *Zhongguo xiqu guanzhong xue*, chap.7.

116 Zhao cites several Ming and Qing *jia xun* holding this position (*Zhongguo xiqu guanzhong xue*, p.100).

jackets were affected by restrictions to the same degree.¹¹⁷ Other scholars have offered a subtler perspective on the relationship between women and patriarchal culture, noting the ways in which women carved a cultural space of their own amidst the regulations and the bans.¹¹⁸

Despite these boundaries of chaperones and edited programmes, novels and biography indicate that elite women, as other women, were passionate viewers of drama, that drama provided a shared cultural form to be enjoyed, often together with other women, a medium of entertainment, instruction, and escape from the monotony of cloistered existence.¹¹⁹ Women's confinement presumably placed a premium upon visual and performative media: images able to create and disseminate fashion across social and geographical divides, and dramatic performance that allowed women an imaginative space within domestic confines. In this regard, the growing popularity of narrative iconography in textile culture - an area of their lives where women had relatively more control and agency - is in itself highly suggestive. And though the debate on the suitability of embroidery as female practice revolved around notions of proper work, and the basic and supplementary in dress, perhaps embroidery also threatened in its potential symbolic and linguistic communication, an angle considered in greater depth in chapter 7. It is tempting to view embroidered dress as a materiality in which women potentially might create meaning in their world, upon their terms, but as we have seen here, the discourse surrounding women's dress formed a hurdle that directs us to view this process as a negotiation. Nineteenth-century women's dress objects are the results of this negotiation. For despite Mrs Zeng's father's negative view of decorative borders and colourful embroidery, it is these features that characterize not only the figural roundel jacket style, but also nineteenth-century trends more generally. This is not solely a matter of aesthetics. The

117 Issei's work distinguished three different performance locations; market centre groupings of villages, smaller villages, and lineage rituals, and he demonstrated that they differed most of all at the level of content, determining which scenes were selected and even how the language with which they were performed, "The Social and Historical Context", pp.141-6.

118 Bray, "The Inner Quarters", p.279; Ko argues for a continuum between inner and outer spheres, mutually constitutive rather than mutually exclusive (*Teachers of the Inner Chambers*, pp.12-14).

119 Mrs Nie Zeng for example fondly recalled the dramatic troupes that came to her home for birthdays and Lantern Festival (*Testimony of a Confucian Women*, pp.77, 78).

constraints of the Chinese fashion system - the need for in-home consumption, the focus on small, accessible components - caused fashion to develop within certain parameters. The figural roundel jacket exemplifies these restrictions: the decorative focus on the border, the roundel, the collar - all permissible sites of iconographical innovation, small components more accessibly purchased from an embroidery shop or peddler and assembled at home according to the individual's taste. The next chapter considers how the figural roundel jacket style illustrates the intersection of aesthetics and commerce in the evolution of late Qing women's dress.

COLLARS AND SLEEVES: THE FIGURAL ROUNDEL JACKET AND LATE QING FASHIONS

So the gowns are long again, but sleeves are getting shorter and shorter. A couple of years ago the knees were out, now it's the elbows. Always getting longer or shorter, never any peace. Can you wonder at all the wars? One day when gowns and sleeves are neither long nor short, there'll be law and order in the world.¹

1. INTRODUCTION: THE AESTHETICS OF QING DRESS

This chapter provides a dress historical investigation of the figural roundel *shan* or *ao* or *shan* jacket. Both decorated and calf-length jackets, the former was single layer, the latter usually lined: made from satins, brocades, and damasks, they were cut wide with split sides, and straight or bowed sleeves. Lengthwise this jacket style provided a compromise between the expanse of the *pao* and the brevity of the *ru*.² It often featured a cloud collar (*yun jian*), sometimes a round collar (*yuan ling*) and fastened either overlapping to the right (*dajin youren*) or in a front centre split (*dui jin*), with fabric knot-and-loop buttons (*pankou*) or gilt buttons (*niukou*). Stylistically the jacket was distinguished by the heavy emphasis on decorative trimming at the collar (*lingkou*), overlapping front (*yijin*), side hem (*ce bai*), bottom hem (*xia bai*), and sleeveband or cuff (*xiukou*) as detailed in the diagram in Figure 3.1. For thousands of years, Chinese dress styles had focused attention on these garment openings and edges, these components emphasized the layered aesthetic of Chinese women's clothing, the manipulation of length, silhouette, and opening: sleeveless waistcoat upon a long robe, knee-length jacket over a long skirt, bordered trousers beneath.³ This idea of layered areas of colours, patterns and textures, each set within zones of decoration reached an extreme in late Qing women's dress: Zhang Ailing scorned

1 Ailing Zhang, *The Rouge of the North* (Berkely, CA: University of California Press, 1998), p.134.

2 Also known as the *duanru* or *ru'ao*, the *ao* short jacket had initially been worn as an inner garment that can be traced back at least to the Tang period but become increasingly popular during the Ming period. See Gao Chunming, *Zhongguo fushi mingwu kao* (Shanghai: Shanghai wenhua chubanshe, 2001) p.550; Zhou Xun and Gao Chunming, *Zhongguo fushi yiguan dacidian* (A Dictionary of Chinese Dress) (Shanghai: Shanghai Cishu Chubanshe, 1996), p.222.

3 Bao Mingxin, *Jindai Zhongguo nüzhuang shi lu* (Shanghai: Donghua Daxue Chubanshe, 2004), p.192, n.21.

“Chinese fashion designers of old” for not understanding that “a woman is not a Prospect Garden”⁴ but perhaps Trilling’s observation (of the lace overlay in a portrait of Francis III) is a fairer interpretation: “patterns are not meant to be enjoyed for their own sake, so much as combined, overlapped, obscured by distance or uncertain light, and ultimately allowed to disappear into the texture of opulence.”⁵

The attention to these decorative trimming has led some to argue that fashion in Chinese dress consisted of only these details - openings, fastenings, collars, hemlines, sleeves, splits - rather than the basic silhouette or cut presented as fairly static.⁶ In fact Qing dress history reveals some quite substantial changes in the silhouette. The late Ming women’s wardrobe revolved around the *ruqun* (short jacket and over-tied empire-line skirt), the *beizi* (knee-length, button-less, centre-opening jacket, also known as *pi Feng*), and the *bijia* (sleeveless jacket), styles still being represented in mid-Qing images like the *Yanqin yiqing* album (Fig. 3.2).⁷ Compared to the unstructured feel of the late Ming *shan* jacket, the stiffly worked silhouette and adorned patterns of the *ao* jacket, seen in this photo of a Shanghai courtesan, have a quite different feel (Fig. 3.3). And as an outfit, the *aoqun* combination had entirely different proportions to its predecessors: as long and loose jackets and skirts became more structured, jacket and sleeve widened in cut, the emphasis moved away from the ground fabric to the decorative harmonies and dissonance created through borders, hems, and sleeves.

These developments should not only be attributed to the established predilection towards confining designs within culturally sanctioned zones, for they also reflected the exploitation of such tastes by the commercialized handicraft industries, which directed fashion trends towards locating ever more space

4 The Prospect Garden is the large and elaborate garden in *Hong lou meng*, Chang, “A Chronicle of Changing Clothes”, p.432.

5 James Trilling, *The Language of Ornament* (London, New York: Thames & Hudson, 2001), p.26.

6 For example, Bao Mingxin argues it is these details that became an arena of personal taste expressed through colour, motif, height of slits, fastening and so on (*Jindai Zhongguo nüzhuang shi lu*, p.192).

7 Falsely attributed to Qiu Ying, see Cahill, *Pictures for Use*, p.125.

onto which to apply the fruits of commodified embroidery. As Ye Mengzhu disdainfully remarks: “Initially the embroidery was only applied to the lapel strip, the belt and the sleeveband, but later (styles) featured entirely embroidered flower roundels.”⁸ He saw this trend as vulgar excess, but the focus of Qing fashions upon the modular component - easily produced and purchased objects like the collar, sleeveband or border that could easily be added and removed as the wearer wished – also derived from the structure of the fashion system, as analysed in the previous chapter, in particular, the way in which women might access objects of professionally produced embroidery. Here I follow this modularity in investigating each of the jacket’s most important components individually. The chapter consists of three studies of the main features of the jacket style: cloud collar, border, and roundel. Together, they make a collective case that the Qing period witnessed an unprecedented commercialization of dress, allowing greater numbers of women to participate in the fashion system and fostering a greater degree of collaboration between artisans of different media, thus enabling the influence of contemporary culture expressed within the jackets. By exploring each element’s historical and stylistic development individually, I seek a more grounded understanding of the changes that occurred during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and to set the stage for a discussion of how fashions travelled in Qing China.

2. THE CLOUD COLLAR

Chinese dress historian Schuyler Cammann thought little of late Qing cloud collars: “The cloud collar.... had become merely ornamental by the eighteenth century, with its original significance apparently forgotten, it became to all intents merely a background for trivial ornamentation, and at times even tended to lose its traditional shape.”⁹ But in this thesis, “trivial ornamentation” and loss of “traditional shape” are features of fashion, and the cloud collar well exemplifies the development of fashion through Chinese history. As the Table 1.1b demonstrates, the majority of figural roundel *ao*

8 Ye Mengzhu, *Yue shi bian*, juan 8, “Nei zhuang”, p.181.

9 Cammann, “The Symbolism of the Cloud Collar”, p.6.

jackets feature a cloud collar applied onto the garment and co-ordinating with the bottom and overlapping front borders. This was a latter stage in what was a long history in the Chinese dress system: from the Jin dynasty (1115-1234) to the Republic of China (1912-1949), the cloud collar was worn by various ethnic, social, and gender groups that adopted the cloud collar's symbolic and cosmological significance for diverse practices. Its winding historical path thus offers a rich perspective on how far the meanings awarded to dress may travel, an issue I have explored in more detail elsewhere.¹⁰ What follows is a brief account that highlights how the cloud collar embodies the effect of commercialization and commoditization upon Qing dress and society, themes that will be developed in the following chapter. Though it is but one element to the jackets, by placing it in this long-term perspective, the cloud collar's historical development illustrates how dramatically Chinese dress had changed by the nineteenth century, specifically how ceremonial modes of dress once confined to imperial and noble circles had become “democratized”, and the role commercialized production played in this democratization.

The cloud collar is categorized within the class of *pishi* objects worn on the shoulder, which existed in some variety from the Han dynasty (206 BCE to 220 CE).¹¹ It originated in the *pjian* collar, which was initially made from cotton or hemp, but around the Tang and Song, more rigid fabrics of silk satin and brocades were adopted. These had a stiffening effect, so that rather than follow the wearer's body shape, the cloud collar could be used to shape the body, and also form a canvas onto which motifs and patterns could be applied, both probable key factors in its success, particularly with female entertainers. Tang and Five Dynasties (907-960) period stone carved dancers show that the *ruyi*-lobing - a defining characteristic - was early present.¹² Still, most Chinese dress historians present the cloud

10 Silberstein, “Biography of the Cloud Collar”, *Indumenta: Revista Museo del Traje* (Journal of the Costume Museum of Madrid) (2011)

11 See Fan Jianhua, “Zhongguo Yunjian Kaoxi”, *Xiju yishu: Shanghai xiju xueyuan xuebao*, no.6 (2007), p.85; Lu Min and Chen Ruixue present a basic genealogy in “Yunjian fazhan jiankao”, *Fushi wenhua yi sheji*, no.3 (2007), p.46.

12 For example a Five Dynasties dancer from the Chengdu tomb of the *Shu* King Wang Jian (r. 907-918) in Gao Chunming, *Zhongguo fushi mingwukao*, p.584

collar proper as originating around the eleventh century, and argue the distinctive lobed shaping of the cloud collar actually stemmed from the northern minorities.¹³

Despite these *hu fu* origins, it was to become a quintessentially Han Chinese object and its sinicization seems to have begun during the Jin dynasty (1115-1234) when it first enters the official imperial record. The History of the Jin (*Jin shi*) records “We again prohibit against private use of pure yellow curtains and furnishings - even if these have been imperially-awarded carriages and dress - the sun and moon cloud collar, the dragon patterned yellow dress, the saddles of five holes, these objects must all be changed.”¹⁴ The regulation was intended against the imperial court: it comprises an attempt to retain the sun and moon as a inviolably imperial symbol, and to singularize the cloud collar within this sphere of imperial value - in anthropologist Kopytoff’s framing, a projection of the “visible reach of sacred power... onto additional, sacralised objects”.¹⁵ This sense of sacredness was to be amplified during the Yuan dynasty (1206-1368) where, in contrast to the earlier images of female entertainers, we find the cloud collar also being worn by men. The History of the Yuan (*Yuan shi*) records the uniform of the royal bodyguards: “Armour made with the blue brocade cloud collar, trimmings of white brocade and felt, entirely lined with white *juan* silk. The cloud collar is shaped like four hanging clouds with dark blue edging made of yellow gauze and the five colours, it is adorned with gold.”¹⁶ From Yuan bodyguards, the cloud collar continued its rise, entering the Ming imperial dragon robes

13 A likely antecedent is the *guha*, an accessory that appeared during the Liao (907-1119) under the influence of the Khitan rulers. See Wen Zhouxun and Gao Chunming, eds., *Zhongguo lidai fushi* (Shanghai: Shanghai xuelin chubanshe, 1983) pp.211; Jin Lin, “Yunjian zai Meng Yuan fushi zhong de yunyong”, *Neimenggu daxue yishu xueyuan xuebao*, vol.3, no.3 (Sept 2006), p.13.

14 *Yufu zhi* (1344; reprinted Beijing, Zhonghua shuju, 1975), *juan* 43, *zhi* 24, p.980.

15 Whereas the dragon and phoenix eventually came to be worn by commoners, the sun and moon was reserved for imperial garments, signifying the imperial family’s link between Heaven and Earth, and appearing as part of the twelve imperial symbols at least as early as the Northern Wei. See Zhao Feng, “Symbols of Power and Prestige: Sun, Moon, Dragon, and Phoenix Motifs on Silk Textiles”, in *Power Dressing: Textiles for Rulers and Priests from the Chris Hall Collection*, eds. Wong Hwei Lian and Szan Tan (Singapore: Asian Civilisations Museum, 2006), pp.38-47; Kopytoff, “The Cultural Biography of Things”, p.73.

16 *Yuan Shi*, *Yufu yi*, *juan* 78, *zhi* 28 “*yinwei fu se*” (presented 1370).

to frame the dragons that curled around the wearer's shoulders, as seen in the woven cloud collar and sleeve patterned dragon robe (*yun jian lan xin longpao*) excavated from the tomb of the tenth son of the Ming Taizu emperor Zhu Tan (d.1389), featuring four rising dragons set within clouds tightly coiled within the cloud collar.¹⁷ Ming rulers also used the cloud collar as part of their textile diplomacy: like the better-known dragon robe, by referencing the imperial majesty of the Ming court, the cloud collar provided a useful tool of foreign diplomacy, particularly with the Manchus and Mongolians on the North-East frontier.¹⁸ A list of “extraordinary presents” dating to Feb 7th 1439, sent to Mongolia as ever increasing and escalating tribute missions forced China to up their gift-giving, included a “cloud collar woven with the gold brocaded tiger design and flowers, and adorned with gold and jewels” along with numerous other objects of silk fabrics, garments and accessories, all used to maintain peaceful borders.¹⁹ As it spread along these paths of exchange, it was “culturally redefined” - diplomatic distribution and commerce effectively popularized the cloud collar.²⁰ The resulting lack of exclusivity may well have contributed to its fall from favour in court: by the late Ming, the cloud collar had faded from male imperial dress, leaving its mark only in the simplified framing of the shoulder dragon pattern.

During the Qing dynasty, the cloud collar become feminized, a central component in Han women's ceremonial dress. Ye Mengzhu provided one of the earliest, most detailed descriptions of the Qing woman's cloud collar:

17 Cloud pattern satin damask brocaded with a four-clawed dragon in a four-lobed medallion, excavated in Beijing Southern Suburbs in 1961, now in the Palace Museum, Beijing. See Zhao Xiuzhen, *Beijing wenwu jingcui daxi. Zhixin juan*, fig.35, pp.82-3.

18 The Ming court rewarded or reciprocated (*shang*) tributes in the form of gifts and records of these are found in the long lists from the *Da Ming Shilu* and the *Da Ming Huidian*. See Cammann, “Presentation of Dragon Robes by the Ming and Ch'ing Court for Diplomatic Purposes”, *Sinologica: review of Chinese culture and science*, vol.3 (1953), pp.193-202; Henry Serruys, *The Tribute System and Diplomatic Missions (1400-1600)* (Bruxelles: Institut belge des hautes études chinoises, 1967), esp.pp.211-333.

19 *Huang Ming Daodian shu*, juan 9, *Beilu zhi shang*, translation after Serruys, *The Tribute System and Diplomatic Missions*, p.243-5.

20 Kopytoff, “The Cultural Biography of Things”, pp.73-5, 67.

As for women's collars, previously there were three kinds; the largest a cloud shape cut from white *ling* (twill silk) and draped over both shoulders, the chest and back embroidered with flowers and birds, and decorated with gold, pearls, precious stones, and bells which tinkle as the wearer moves. This kind is called 'palace style' (*gong zhuang*), the next size is called "cloud collar" (*yun jian*), and the smallest is called "gebin". These are embroidered with patterns, and decorated in the same way. Recently "palace style" cloud collars are only used in ceremonial dress. For ordinary occasions, the "gebin" collar is used but in a different style; some are made from coloured fabrics cut into the shape of a nasturtium flower, the threads knotted to form a tasselled net, it fastens at the collar and hangs over the shoulders. Decorated as the wearer wishes, it is considered especially light and easy.²¹

This passage, written around the Ming-Qing transition, suggests that what we generically label a cloud collar was more individuated for its wearers. An impression of the "gebin" style is provided by the early Qing painter Yu Zhiding (1647-1709) in "Female Entertainers", which shows the cloud collar faithful to its roots as the dress of female musicians and dancers (Fig. 3.4). Late Ming gentleman Qiao Yuanzhi sits surrounded by all his worldly goods; to his left three female entertainers play their musical instruments, clothed in voluminously sleeved gowns, intricately worked *yun jian*, and giddily high coiffures.²² But as the Qing progressed, the cloud collar began to be worn by more elite figures: earlier delicately cut "willow leaf" styled in eighteenth-century *Gusu* prints of *guige* ladies (Fig. 3.5); later the heavier, bordered outlines of nineteenth-century *Yanglingqing meiren* prints (Fig. 3.6).²³ Like Qiao Yuanzhi's books and musical entourage, material objects and cultural assertions were central to these idealized pin-up beauties. In marked comparison to the plain frugality of the literati-painted woman, *nianhua* prints along with genres of erotic and professional art, displayed a keen interest in the details of contemporary material environments, the objects through which one might become a *guige* lady. Perhaps *nianhua* prints functioned as a form of fashion imagery; certainly through these prints, contemporary dress culture became tied to the ideals of the boudoir, and the cloud collar jacket became integral to the gentlewoman's material ensemble.

21 Ye Mengzhu, *Yue shi bian*, p.181.

22 The painting is also known as *Qiao Yuanzhi Sanbao* (The three pleasures of Qiao Yuanzhi), these being the books, wine, and music.

23 *Gusu* refers to a group of Suzhou Taohuawu prints, which may be reliably dated to the early eighteenth-century due to their export to Japan during this period. See Jin Yulin et al, *Suzhou Taohuawu muban nianhua* (Nanjing: Jiangsu Guji Chubanshe; Hong Kong: Xianggang Jiabin Chubanshe, 1991).

This kind of imagery enables us to understand how by the mid-Qing, the cloud collar became associated with Han women's wedding attire.²⁴ *Nianhua* provided a medium to spread the appeal of the cloud collar, enabling it to reference beauty, fertility, wealth, cultural attainment and happiness, all values that Qing women would have wished to evoke on formal occasions, and causing the object itself to communicate ceremonial and auspicious significance. The wedding day was one of the few days in a woman's lifetime that they could wear such gorgeous dress, and the preparation process would have taken months, indeed years in the case of a childhood engagement. Critically, weddings involved not only the labour of the woman herself, as Western accounts of Chinese dress production have typically emphasized - the Chinese girl sitting at home slowly embroidering her entire wardrobe - but increasingly over the early modern period, also the labour of strangers, employed both in and outside the home. Ceremonial occasions also presented sites of discordance, where debates constellated as to how Confucian ritual should be most properly marked. Objects like the cloud collar point to the conflict between virtuous frugality and the ritual participation presented by the rise of commercialized material culture. Critics bemoaned women's luxurious ways and the excessive styles worn for celebrations: "I see the people celebrating cappings, weddings, and funerals, each vying with the other for extravagance, not hesitating to borrow money..."²⁵ even as specialist guilds formed to meet the desire to purchase embroidered objects that would appropriately mark the occasion, and craftsmen gathered at households preparing trousseaus and weddings.²⁶ The Qing period saw an

24 Xu Ke, *Qingbei leichao*, p.6125.

25 Liang Yusheng (1744-1819), *Yuanbao lue* (Qiantang liang shijia, 1900), *Pie ji, shiwen*, p.244, citing an imperial submission by Liu Tiancheng in 1781 (Qianlong 46).

26 The *Yunjin gongsuo* guild for producers of burial and mourning clothing (*shouyi*) was established in Suzhou in 1822: "Burial clothing became more affluent and gorgeous, whether for auspicious or inauspicious events, feast or ceremony, providing appropriate clothing for the convenience of the people." (*Ming Qing Suzhou shougongye shi beike ji*, pp.212, 221); See Tang Kangxiong, "Peijia zhuanglian" in *Ningbo Xisu Congtan*, ed. Zhang Xingzhou (Taipei: Dongfeng wenhua shuju, 1974), p.212, for an account of the process of putting together a trousseau in Ningbo, which well illustrates the range of craftsmen employed. The bride's female relatives would come to teach her embroidery, enabling her to produce small items like pillow-covers and shoe-tops, a requisite display of womanly ability, but these home-made objects were combined with embroidery purchased in Changsha, where the regional Hunanese embroidery style, *xiangxiu*, had recently risen in reputation.

increasing expectation of (and thus pressure to achieve) a rich material consumption to adorn ceremonial occasions - births, marriages, festivals - yet most women would have struggled to afford the embellished formal wear so expensive in tailoring, fabrics, and decoration. Objects like the cloud collar or border succeeded precisely because of their ability to allow more ordinary women to participate in celebratory consumption.

The ceremonial role of the Qing cloud collar can be seen as a continuance of its previous existence in entertainment dress, for its materiality clearly suggested performative functions. It structured the shoulders, modifying the body shape to create width and presence. It contained a clear, auspiciously framed canvas to “carry” motifs of good fortune; no other accessory came to have such symbolic value as an object of *nügong* and marital ceremonial status (it does not seem to have been worn by concubines). Like other components of Qing women’s ritual dress - detachable neck pendants, overskirt lapel aprons, and belt hangings - the cloud collar created movement and presence that demarcated the ceremonial space in which the bride was transferred to her new home and family.²⁷ It was easily elaborated to identify ceremonial players and ceremonial space: the late Qing cloud collar was often trimmed with silver pieces, bells and tassels (it was sometimes called the “sound collar” (*xiang jian*), additions which ceremonialized the procession and drew attention to the bride. As Maria Hayward has argued in another context, the role of textiles in singling out individuals at transitional moments of their life was perhaps particularly significant for women who had fewer opportunities to do so than men.²⁸ In China, a wedding was that rare occasion in which women were required to assume a key ritual role, and material culture evolved to highlight her performative body.²⁹

27 See Jacobsen, *Imperial Silks*, no.336, no.341, no.343 for examples.

28 Maria Hayward, “Reflections on gender status distinctions: an analysis of the liturgical textiles recorded in mid-sixteenth-century London”, *Gender and History*, vol.14, no.3 (2002), pp.403-425, p.421.

29 Women and children were forbidden to participate directly in lineage rituals, see Zheng Huimei ed., *Lanshan yu nügong: Kejia nü zǐ de yì shì měi xué*, p.92. Funerary and marital ceremonies provided a rare forum in which women could legitimately express themselves in public, see Anne E. McLaren, *Performing Grief: Bridal Laments in Rural China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2008).

Equally, less prosaic points also favoured the cloud collar. Its practical function in protecting the clothing from oil was early noted by taste arbiter Li Yu: “Cloud collars are used to cover the clothes, to avoid dirt and oil, and made into the most beautiful shapes.”³⁰ Many women could only have afforded one or two items of formal clothing for celebratory occasions, and protecting them from dirt was challenging - silk floss embroidery was hardly easy to wash.³¹ Cloud collars could be used not only to adorn but also to protect or cover up stains, an association explicit enough in the early nineteenth century for Lin Sumen to name the cloud collar “Hair-oil Collar” (*you jian*).³² They could also facilitate the rejuvenation of dated outfits and, like the growth of institutions like second-hand clothes shops, pawnshops and hire-shops, should be understood as responding to the challenge of having “new” clothes to wear for New Year celebrations or other formal events.³³

Both ceremonial associations and practical functions may have contributed to the appearance of our cloud collar *ao* jacket style, described by Zhang Ailing as “the ‘Cloud Shoulder Vest Coat’ of black silk with broad edging patterned with stylized ‘coiled clouds’” that sat atop three other jackets.³⁴ The incorporation of the cloud collar within the *ao* or *shan* jacket had been anticipated by Li Yu, who advised co-ordinating the cloud collar’s colouring with the main jacket, so as to prevent the lining from being exposed through the cloud collar’s movements:

This object is worn on the shoulders and does not always adhere to the clothing: if a breeze comes it will flutter and expose the lining. Just like the wind blowing the lightly hanging leaves and curling up the decaying lotus leaves, even the figure of a beauty cannot escape

30 Li Yu, *Xianqing ou ji* (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2000), p.157.

31 Gao Chunming, *Zhongguo fushi mingwu kao*, p.586; Xu Ke connects this function to a late Qing fashionable Suzhou hairstyle called “*Suzhou jue*”, in which the oiled hair was worn in a bun that hang down upon the shoulders, and the cloud collar could protect the dress from staining from the hair-oil (*Qing bai leichao*, p.109). On the *Suzhou jue* style, see Zhou Xun and Gao Chunming, *Zhongguo yiguan fushi dacidan* (Shanghai: Shanghai cishu chubanshe, 1996), p.343.

32 Lin Sumen, *Hanjiang sanbai yin* (1808; reprint Guangji shushe, 2005), *juan* 6, “*xinqi fushi*”, p.86; for analysis of his inventory of dress, see Antonia Finnane, “Yangzhou’s “Mondernity”, pp.405-8.

33 See Hattie Mae Nixon and Ellen Johnston Laing, “Recycled Textiles in the University of Oregon Museum of Art”, *Orientations* (Aug 1983), pp.7-19.

34 Aileen Chang (Zhang Ailing), “A Chronicle of Changing Clothes”, *positions: east asia cultures critique*, vol.11, no.2 (2003), p.429.

looking like the aftermath of a disaster scene. If you make the main fabric and lining fabric the same colour, then even if this neatness does get upturned, it won't be a problem.

For perfectionist Li Yu, even this, he decided, was still unsatisfactory: "if the collar moves and the colour is the same, it is still not as good as the collar not moving at all." His solution to the problem is remarkably prescient: "The (cloud collar) is suitable for wearing everyday at home, but if you go out visiting, then you must subtly connect (the collar) with threads, so as to avoid it coming apart from the clothing."³⁵

This overview of the historical development of the cloud collar draws out broader changes in Chinese dress history: the role of dress in widening ritual celebration; the shift from woven to embroidered textiles; and especially, the growing use of embroidery as technology to communicate meaningful motifs, themes that will be further investigated in the following chapters. Most vividly its evolution illustrates how courtly fashions could be democratized and how palace dress might be "rapidly commodified into fashionable necessities":³⁶ from the Yuan "sun and moon cloud collar" to a 1910 Hunan embroidery pricelist translated in Table 4.2 (no.53):

White satin cloud collar fully embroidered with flowers and plants, 20 *yuan* for best quality, 18 *yuan* for medium quality and 16 *yuan* for low quality. We have various types of ink paintings of birds and animals. We welcome you to purchase these, please first examine these photos and then we can negotiate the price.

3. BORDERS AND SLEEVEBANDS

Today the dress-makers (*yigong*) in Beijing use from three to five borders on one item of clothing. The cost of this work is several times that of the actual garment, and even children's clothing is styled like this. This is truly sinful. Rural people have copied this trend - they call it 'three circles, five borders' (*san yuan wu gun*) how could these 'three circles, five borders' be outlawed? Men enjoy hearing about food whilst women take pleasure in looking at clothes. Once seen it is imprinted on the heart: circle, circle, border, border - perhaps their very lives depend upon it.³⁷

³⁵ Li Yu, *Xianqing ouji*, p.158.

³⁶ Schneider, "Cloth and Clothing", p.209.

³⁷ Li Guangting, *Xiangyan Jieyi* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1982), *yuan* 3, p.42.

Nearly ever since clothing has been made in China, it has been bordered. Excavated textiles and carved figures from the Warring States tombs show the use of the most prestigious silks – colourful, patterned, heavier weaves – to border garment openings, hems, and cuffs (Fig. 3.7). Practically, this strengthened the garment edge and protected cut edges of cloth.³⁸ Symbolically, it communicated elite privilege and imperial prestige; such luxurious textiles were controlled by the royal workshops and given as gifts to officials as signs of honour and prestige that conveyed ideas of nobility and royal favour - hence the term “collars and cuffs” (*ling xin*), still current, to refer to people in leadership positions.³⁹ But if during the early imperial period, the ornamental edging of luxury silks formed a means of delineating rank and social status, some two thousand years later, it had become a morally weighted issue laden with associations of the wasteful woman:

When it comes to luxurious women’s clothing, none can surpass Wu prefecture. Their clothing borders ... are woven in bright shades and golden threads, they compete in the new and contend in the glorious, and are not a bit concerned with workmanship. ... Where will this luxury end? Is it not a willful waste!⁴⁰

The border does not seem to have gathered didactic ramifications until the mid-Qing. Earlier on, robe trimming was more restrained: narrow black bias-cut binding used to strengthen the garment edge, narrow borders of decorative damask or brocade as seen in the elegant gauze *beizi* preserved in Huang Sheng’s tomb, edged with gold-printed and patterned fabrics displaying the latest floral designs from Southern Song Fuzhou.⁴¹ And even during the early Qing period, as the Twelve Beauties paintings (Fig. 2.13) shows, styles were still restrained – simple palettes, refined patterns. It was not until the early nineteenth century that borders begin to appear in an increasing range that reaches its fashion peak some time around the Tongzhi (1861-1875) period. The tumult is evidenced not only in the many extant garments and borders, but also the nomenclature that multiplied to cover this proliferation of styles: from single borders - “appliqued borders” (*xiang*), “binding” (*gun*), “borders”

38 Robert Jacobson, *Imperial Silks: Ch’ing dynasty textiles in the Minneapolis Institute of Art* (Minneapolis; Minneapolis Institute of Arts; Chicago; Distributed by Art Media Resources, 2000), p.480.

39 Young Yang Chung, *Silken Threads: a history of embroidery in China, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2005), p.78.

40 Hu Shiyu, *Doucun*, juan 3, *Shi dou*, p.61.

41 Kuhn ed., *Chinese Silks*, pp.297-302.

(*hua bian*), “ribbons” (*hua taozi*), “Dog-tooth piping” (*gou ya’r*), “white banner border” (*bai qi bian*); “peony border” (*mudan dai*), “gold and white devil borders” (*jin bai guizi langan*); coiled gold embroidery (*panjin jian xiu*); to multiple borders - “Three Borders and Three Trims” (*san xiang san ya*), “Three Borders and Three Trimmings” (*san xiang wu gun*), “Five Appliques and Five Pippings” (*wu xiang wu gun*), and even, urban myth had it, “Eighteen Borders and Trimmings” (*shiba xiang gun*).

Quantity defined the border aesthetic: the more numerous the borders, the wealthier and more socially prominent the wearer appeared. Hence the terminology for multiple border sets, for these suggested that the wearer could afford numerous layers of extravagantly bordered garments, even if, in fact, an extravagant border was all the wearer could really afford. Like the ribbon of early modern Europe, the border provided an affordable and accessible means to update garments, making a dated garment more of the moment, a cheap and cheerful consumer item that even poor women might “buy into”.⁴² This fact seems to have preoccupied male critics, a rhyme quoted by Li Guangting satirizes the desperation of the fashion-loving woman: “The time for receiving clothes is here and again no clothes, the woman patches her garments and searches for strips of cloth; at the bottom of the jar is just half a *sheng* of rice, she sells this to buy three *chi* of dog-tooth patterned ribbon.”⁴³ There is an underlining moral judgment of what is necessary or fundamental in dress, and what is frivolous or superfluous:

But the cost of borders is even more extreme: there are the so-called *bai qi bian*, *jinbai guizi langan*, *mudan dai*, *panjin jian xiu* and other styles, a single jacket or skirt in itself has a fixed price, the cost of the borders at least doubles this, though the jacket constitutes six tenths, the borders take up four tenths.⁴⁴

In fact, the much-maligned border was supporting the livelihoods of countless people in nineteenth-century China. Though the heights of the border fashion concurred with a substantial increase in the

42 For an example of a garment cut from a late eighteenth century floral satin, but updated with late-nineteenth century trims see Vollmer ed., *Clothed to Rule the Universe*, p.75, cat. No.65, “Women’s semiformal domestic *ao*”,

43 Li Guangting, *Xiangyan jieyi*, *juan* 3, “Yigong”, p.42

44 Written by the Mongolian official Yu Qian (1793-1841) when he was sent to Jiangnan in 1840 (Daoguang 20), see *Mianyizhai xu cun gao* (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2010), *juan* 16, *Xunsu tiaoyue*, p.35.b.

commercial production of textile borders, the undoubtedly causal relationship between these two phenomena has been little addressed.⁴⁵ After the Taiping rebellion (1850-1864) destroyed areas of more complex silk production, the accessibility and potential of this market attracted many. In 1850s Zhenjiang, there were only a few score looms producing silk ribbons, by the end of the century, there were about 3000 employing 4000 men, producing 300 different patterns.⁴⁶ The production bar was not set high: silk could be imported from Sichuan or Zhejiang, and the ribbons (tabby weave, patterned through a supplementary warp) required only a fairly simple and fairly cheap loom, as seen in this late nineteenth-century photograph of women and children making “lace” ribbons (Fig. 3.8).⁴⁷ Market spread varied, from Foshan whose border trade (*langan hang*) “only sell in the surrounding suburbs, it cannot be compared to those provincial shops with sales to each province”⁴⁸ to Zhenjiang, where only one tenth was consumed locally, the rest was sent to Beijing, Zhili, Henan, Shanxi, and Hubei.⁴⁹ Moreover, though Chinese and Western fashion systems are normally treated as discrete operations, it bears emphasis that borders in China had a similar function to ribbons in Europe and America. (Yu Qian’s judgement above will be familiar to anyone who has looked at commentary on the fashionable ribbon in early modern Europe.⁵⁰) Merchants on both sides sought to globalize the industry: many of the Customs samples sent from Chinese cities included foreign styles or dyes, for example, “Foreign blue Sichuan ribbon, one inch wide” (*yi cun kuo yanglan chuan bian*), priced at 40

45 Vollmer suggests the increase in production of silk ribbons was helped by the introduction of Jacquard mechanical looms in 1840s (*Clothed to Rule the Universe*, p.51).

46 The 1881 report *Silk: Replies from the Commissioner (Silk* (China, Maritime Customs II – Special Series: No.3) (Shanghai, 1881, reprinted 1917) describes production in numerous locations: Jiujiang, Suzhou, Shanghai, Canton, Jinjiang, and Hubei (Hankow), p.64, Zhenjiang.

47 In Jiujiang, Jiangsu province they imported silk from Sichuan, Hubei and Zhejiang (no.88, p.39, Kiukiang, 30th Oct 1880); “There are a great variety of kinds and colours, and manufacturers have assured me that they can reproduce all kinds of Chinese patterns. Each family engaged in this work has from 3-5 looms; the price of each loom is from \$2.25 – 3.” (p.83); Hommel describes the ribbon loom in *China at Work*, pp.186-8.

48 Peng Zeyi, *Zhongguo gongshang hanghui shiliao ji*, p.149, citing the *Foshan zhanggyi xiangzhi*.

49 Annual production was 80,000 pieces at 9 HKFts per piece; 30,000 pieces of the total 700,000 were shipped to Shanghai, the rest overland (*Silk*, p.147, no.156).

50 Colonial writers regularly blamed women - “symbols of threatening economic changes” - for consumer excess, see T.H. Breen, “The Meaning of Things: interpreting the consumer economy in the eighteenth century”, in *Consumption and the World of Goods*, eds. John Brewer and Roy Porter (Routledge, 1993), pp.249-259, p.256.

copper cash a yard.⁵¹ Western merchants like the French ribbon manufacturer Isodore Hedde (1801-1880) visited China during the nineteenth-century and purchased samples to inspire European factories. His detailed catalogue listed numerous examples of borders labelled with their Chinese names (Fig. 3.9), and he certainly seems to have recognized the fashionability of these objects, observing of a pair of “light blue satin embroidered sleevebands” that they “should be a focus of ribbon manufacturers wishing to produce designs for Chinese consumption. Doubtless, such items would encounter great success amongst the elegant (ladies) of Nanjing, Suzhou, and Hangzhou.”⁵²

Despite the border’s global counterparts, Western collectors were most taken with the sleeveband, an item of Chinese embroidery that predominates in museum collections, often sewn together in pairs and framed in glass. Its survival in such vast numbers reflects its ability to serve as a kind of textile postcard from China: cheap, embellished, synecdochic of the elegant Chinese gentlewoman. But again, the popularity of this feature in Chinese fashions actually derived from a rise in commercial production. The folded sleeveband style (*huanxiu*) began during the mid-Qing, and flourished during the Tongzhi and Guangxu periods, simultaneous to the expansion of the embroidery industry that will be outlined in the following chapter. Li Dou described the eighteenth-century Yangzhou *huanxiu*: “The women’s *shan* robe is 2 *chi* and 8 *cun* long, the sleeve is 2 *cun* wide, the sleevebands (*waihu xiu* lit. outer sleeve protecters) are bordered with embroidery and brocade.”⁵³ Unlike the collar and hem borders, which frequently co-ordinated and were sold as sets of border yardage, worked in embroidered sections and shaped to fit the collar, bottom and side hems of the *ao* jacket (Fig. 3.10); the sleeveband formed a separate decorative field, made from a contrast fabric, usually cream satin, stitched to the internal lining and folded back. Narrative scenes are common to the embroidered

51 *Silk*, p.42, no.88, p.39, Kiukiang, 30th Oct 1880.

52 Jean Claude Philippe Isidore Hedde, *Description Methodique des produits divers recueillis dans un voyage en Chine* (St.Etienne, 1848), p.241, no.742. His collection formed from 1843-6 Guangzhou and Jiangnan textile samples is now in the Musée des Tissus de Lyon, see Maria-Anne Privat-Savigny et al, *Les prémices de la mondialisation: Lyon rencontre la Chine au 19e siècle* (Lyon: EMCC, 2009)

53 Li Dou, *Yangzhou huafang lu* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1960), *juan* 9, p.195.

cream sleeveband, reflecting, I will later argue, the close ties of influence between embroidery and painted or printed imagery. Such influences enabled a wide variety of scenes in these embroidered sleevebands and the tendency of Chinese dress histories to emphasize the auspicious has understated significant themes. In addition to our focus of narrative scenery, it is well to highlight other themes that illustrate how women appropriated elements of contemporary culture and reinterpreted them in their dress. Visual references to “civil service culture” are common, for example, Figure 3.11 shows a pair of sleevebands embroidered with the theme of Spring Apricot Flowers and Swallows “*xing lin chun yan*” which denoted the provincial examination which took place during second month when the apricot flower blossomed, and so was called the “Apricot Flower Month”.⁵⁴ Travel imagery of famous landscape and gardens is another popular subject-matter more typically associated with men, seen in J18, which depicts the Eight Scenes of Suzhou (*Gusu bajing*), an embroidered reading of a theme commonly expressed in bamboo ballads and poetry like “Visiting Courtesans” (*Ye you*) by Suzhou poet Shao Changheng (1637-1704):

The mountain peaks of Wu are like dots of ink, the brooks of Wu like blue dye; the women of Wu are gorgeously made-up and attired... In the second month, the spring begins to halve, girls are invited to accompany spring outings ... talk and laughter perfume the warm breeze, jade wrists and gold bracelets, *ya* hairbuns and amber hairpins ... you sit there with folded sleevebands, wearing clothes of silk gauzes and damasks.⁵⁵

Indeed, it may be argued that the sleeveband’s popularity derived primarily from its potential to stage an embroidered communication. Thus, the fashionably dressed and alluringly postured woman in Fig. 3.12, a nineteenth-century portrait by Zheng Kunyu has abandoned her book on the table, empty of writing, but her sleevebands display inky landscapes, a painting within a painting and a reference to the free wonderings of her imagination.

54 The homophony of “*yan*” (both swallow and feast) was used to refer to the honour of being invited to dine with the emperor if one succeeded in this exam.

55 Shao Changheng, *Qing men sheng gao* (Piling, s.n. Kangxi gui youyi you, 1693-1705), *juan* 2, p.12.

4. FASHIONING ETHNICITY: BETWEEN MANCHU AND HAN

Hitherto we have considered the cloud collar and border of the *ao* jacket as case studies of the Qing commercialization of dress. Here I wish to turn to the perspective of ethnicity, in order to locate the evolution of the roundel within an on-going fashion dialogue between Manchu and Han women.

Stylistically the *ao* jacket is classified as an upper garment (*shang zhuang*),⁵⁶ one part of the sartorial metaphor for the civilized world. Chinese civilization is traced back to the moment where the founding emperors, Huangdi, Yao and Shun “allowed the upper and lower garments to hang down and the world was in order” (*chui yishang gai quzhu qian kun er tian xia zhi*).⁵⁷ From this point on, the establishment of dynastic rule was bound up in the clothing systems regulated by each court, and the distinction between the upper and lower garment became an important symbolic assertion. Like all dynastic rulers, the Manchus sought to use clothing as an implement of power and control, and like all non-Han dynastic rulers, they sought to construct a clothing system that would simultaneously assert their right to the throne as Chinese emperors and preserve their ethnic identity and culture. The ensuing tension between sinicization and sustaining Manchu identity occupies a dominant place in Qing dress history and it is central to women’s dress, long been framed as emblematic of the moral wellness of a given ethnic or social group - a touchstone of political stability and cultural integrity.

The standard narrative presents Manchus initiating the Qing dynasty with the dress system of nomadic hunters and gatherers. Thus they wore robes that prioritised freedom of movement, but with little sophistication, for example, men and women wore the same style *pao* robes. This account masks important nuances. One of the most basic and important distinctions made between Manchu and

56 See Wang Qiang et al, “Qing dai nuzi shang zhuang xianzhe”, *Jiangnan daxue xuebao (renwen shehui kexueban)* vol.7.5 (2008).

57 Richard Wilhelm and Carl F. Baynes trans., *The I Ching or Book of Changes* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977), Book II, “The Great Treatise” *Dazhuan*, “History of Civilization”, p.332.

Han women's dress holds at the level of the silhouette: the narrowly cut and lengthy Manchu women's *pao* robe shown in this Wu Youru print (Fig. 3.13) contrasted to the Han women's upper jacket and lower skirt (Fig. 3.3) or the loose-sleeved, wide-cut Ming *shan* jacket (Fig. 2.13).⁵⁸ This feature was often stressed by Manchu writers like Zhenjun (1857-1920): "In Manchu customs, women's jackets are joined to the skirt, and do not separate the upper and lower, this is the ancient system."⁵⁹ Yet there is some evidence that prior to the establishment of the Qing dynasty, Nurchen women had in fact worn skirts, and such was the femininity of this clothing item that a common punishment for wayward youths was short prison stays dressed in women's clothing.⁶⁰ That such evidence was ignored in order to maintain the case that the Nurchen lacked gender distinctions in dress demonstrates the perceived necessity of establishing dress markers to distinguish the dress of Manchu women from Han women.

Nobody viewed the need to define identity through dress more seriously than the Manchu emperors. The lessons of their Jin and Yuan dynasty predecessors, whom they viewed as having miscalculated the balance between sinicization and cultural preservation, evidently weighed heavily on them.⁶¹ From the Hong Taiji Emperor (1626-1643) to the Jiaqing Emperor (r.1796-1820), edicts alerted the Manchu people not to "abandon the traditions of our ancestors!"⁶² But as the Manchus became more established in their new empire, transitioning from a nomadic, horse-riding tribe who privileged

58 Sun Yanzhen, *Qing dai nüxing fushi wenhua yanjiu*, p.77; Wang Qiang et al, "Qing dai nüzi shang zhuang xianxi", n.3; Chen Dongsheng and Zhou Liyan, "Qingdai Man Han fushi de yanbian yu jiaorong", *Liaoning fuzhuang zhiye jishu xueyuan xuebao*, no.3 (2004), pp.32-4.

59 Zhenjun, *Tian zhi ou wen* (Guangxu 33rd year (1907), reprinted Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1995-1999), *juan* 10, p.723; Fu Ge (fl.1856) also makes this distinction, and cites various historical precedents in order to reconstruct the moral implications of the distinction (*Tingyu congkan* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1984), p.160).

60 For examples from the *Manwen laodeng*, see Wang, "Zaoqi Manzu funü de fuzhuang", p.82.

61 Yuan Zujie, "Dressing for Power: Rite, Costume, and State Authority in Ming Dynasty China", *Frontiers of History in China*, vol.2, no.2 (2007), pp.181-212.

62 The earliest is the Hong Taiji edict from the second year of his reign (1628), see Zhao Erxun ed., *Qing shi gao* (Beijing: Shuhua ju, 1976), *juan* 103, *zhi* 78, *yufu* er, which told the cautionary tale of the Jin dynasty's demise: "Do not neglect the old ways of the ancestors. Wear Jurchen clothing. Learn the Jurchen language. Practice archery and horsemanship every day."

martial arts to a sedentary political elite who adopted numerous Han traditions, the loss of their heritage became a real risk, and elements of Manchu dress like the narrow sleeves and horseshoe cuffs began to appear in a new light, one component in a self-conscious assertion of Manchu identity. The Qianlong eighteenth-century marked a turning point in this process of cultural assimilation, marked by a new awareness that Manchu language and dress were being rejected in favour of Chinese norms and previously closely held tenets of Manchu identity like martial arts were ebbing; we observe a determination to save the Manchus from the effects of sinicization, to help them resist their entrancement with Chinese language and literature, art and food. This new stance is highlighted in the Qianlong Emperor's *Huang chao liqi tushu* - commissioned following historical research devoted to identifying the "reason why (these past non-Han dynasties) abandoned their old customs"⁶³ - it promoted a newly sinicized vision of Qing dress that combined elements of early Chinese imperial heritage such as the twelve imperial emblems, with iconic Manchu dress features like archery thumb rings, horseshoe cuff, hunter's purse. Such features, like the ridged sleeves said to simulate the wrinkles of the pushed-up sleeve of the Manchu hunter, were becoming increasingly referential - removed from the reality of the new Manchu lifestyle.⁶⁴

Much of the concern with protecting Manchus from the influence of Han dress focused upon Manchu women, and throughout the Qing period, edicts cautioned against bannerwomen wearing Han styles, evidently a growing phenomenon both inside and outside the palace. During the twenty-fourth year (1759) of his reign, the Qianlong emperor inspected the *xin nü* (lit. elegant ladies) to be selected for service in the palace, and found some wore Han styles. Apparently shocked that they could dress like this in front of the emperor and concerned that far worse might be happening at home, he issued a decree forbidding this practice. Sixteen years later, in 1775, he was compelled to

63 Zhao Erxun, ed. *Qing shi gao*, juan 103, *zhi* 78, *yufu er*.

64 As Vollmer notes, the *Huangchao* marks a turning point in Qing imperial dress, whereby instead of single fabric constructions, multiple fabrics are used particularly for sleeves and facings (*Ruling from the Dragon Throne*). On the displacement of the *fadu*, a rustic Jurchen hunter's bag, by the *hebao*, an elegant Chinese purse, see Pei Huang, *Reorienting the Manchus: A Study of Sinicization, 1583-1795* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell East Asia Series, 2011), pp.2, 220-1.

further regulate: “Banner women wear three earrings in each ear, this is part of traditional Manchu customs and it absolutely cannot be changed. I have seen some bondservant *xiunü* women wearing ear pendants, even going so far as to wear one earring in one ear, which is definitely not the Manchurian (way). This is immediately prohibited.”⁶⁵ It is hardly surprising that Manchu women had begun to wear Han women’s dress styles, after all many of the *xiunü* had Han mothers and had been raised in homes of Han culture. In general, the eighteenth century was a turning point for the integrity of Manchu culture; like Chinese language, food, literature, Chinese dress had been to some degree internalized by the Manchus. What is specific to the debate on dress though, is the disjuncture between the vision of Manchu dress promoted by the regulations, and the imagery circulated through imperially sponsored media like court painting. Numerous examples, predominantly in the *xingle tu* genre, feature palace beauties clothed in Han dress, proving that these styles were well known at court and suggesting that Han fashions were not just alluring to the women who wore these clothes, but also to the emperors and princes for whom they wore these clothes.⁶⁶ In the previous chapter we considered the visualization of the southern courtesan in the “Twelve Beauties” scrolls, commissioned and used by the Yongzheng emperor. But a contemporaneous set of hanging scrolls, “Yongzheng Enjoying Pleasures” (*Yongzheng xingle tu*) (Fig. 3.14) is perhaps more noteworthy, for it places the Yongzheng Emperor, dressed in scholarly blue robes, together with these Han-clothed beauties. Painted when he was about 30, well before he became emperor at the age of 44 and an age in which he might have chafed at the paternal control of the Kangxi emperor who famously forbade Han women from entering the Forbidden City.⁶⁷ In the painting, four consorts mark the corners of his study, but the balustrade divides them into two pairs. In the background the older two wear

65 Xu Ke (1869-1928), *Qing bai leichao* (Shanghai: Shang Wuyin Shuguan, 1917), *fushi juan*, no.28, p.6146, “Gaozong Renzong chuiyi fushi”; on the Manchu *baoyi*, see Elliot, *The Manchu Way: the Eight Banners and Ethnic Identity in Late Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), pp.82-4.

66 The aforementioned erotic album *Yanqin yiqing* was also part of the imperial collection during the Qianlong and Jiaqing reigns.

67 Shan Guoqiang, “Gentlewoman Paintings”, p.58.

Manchu style robes, but the younger pair in front draw attention with intricate little collars, pleated skirts, tasselled belts, all features associated with early Qing Southern Chinese fashions.⁶⁸

Both *Yongzheng xingle tu* and the “Twelve Beauties” paintings encountered controversy for their use of Han Chinese styles, which according to regulations should have been forbidden to imperial consorts. There are various possible explanations. The images might be realistic; the consorts might have been Han women, after all, both the Kangxi and Yongzheng emperor had Han Chinese consorts.⁶⁹ But even these women apparently were not permitted to wear Han dress.⁷⁰ Another justification lies in aesthetics, as Shan Guoqiang argues: “The conventions of the genre required that feminine beauty be accentuated, and that the painting be aesthetically pleasing. Because Manchu dress was excessively austere, it was not perceived as fulfilling the standards of a genre developed specifically to highlight feminine beauty.... It became the practice to clothe the female subjects in Han Chinese attire.”⁷¹ Yet this situation that he presents as intuitive is worth querying: why did standards of Han beauty prevail? After all, the women are not dressed in the archaic, semi-Song styles - the standard mode of female dress used within *shinü* or *meiren* paintings. Rather they wear fashions current during the early Qing, for example the small *gebin* style of cloud collars described by Ye Mengzhu. An alternative explanation is found in a response by the Qianlong Emperor (to another *xingle* painting, *Qianlong xingle tu* by Jin

68 Cahill argues the women’s figural style suggest the work of Yangzhou painter Zhang Weibang who promoted a more earthly vision of women compared to the willowy “Jiao-Leng style” established by the earlier northern artist Jiao Bingzhen (active 1680-1726) and his follower Leng Mei (ca.1670-1742 or earlier). See *Pictures for Use*, pp.42-44.

69 Qing emperors and princes could select their secondary consorts but not primary wives, from daughters of Han Chinese banner families, as well as Manchu, Mongol and other banner families, see Shuo Wang, “The selection of women for the Qing imperial harem”, *The Chinese Historical Review*, vol.11. no.2 (Fall 2004), pp.212-222.

70 These standards were not consistently applied. The court painting “Four Dinner Scenes beyond the Great Wall” by Lang Shining (*Qingdai gongting huibua*, pp.174-179, fig. 38) depicts a consort of the Qianlong Emperor, probably the Muslim Lady Rong, who combines a Uighur gown, cut from Uighur design fabric with Manchu horseshoe cuffs and three earrings in one ear. That Rong and other Mongolian consorts were allowed to wear their own ethnic dress, pinpoints the essential conundrum facing the Manchu emperors: they believed in dress and language as means by which an ethnic group maintained their cultural identity, and so promoted the practice of Mongolian and Muslim constituents wearing their ethnic dress. But to allow Han women to do the same in the palace would facilitate the spread of the already dominant Han style.

71 Shan Guoqiang, “Gentlewomen Paintings of the Qing Palace Ateliers”, p.59.

Tingbiao (act. c.1750-d.1768), in which the women also wear Han style dress, but in the archaic mode), that this was “no more than a play within paintings – it is not that we admire the Han people’s costume”⁷² From this perspective, the choice of Han clothing was merely dressing-up, and should therefore be categorized along with other *xingle tu* images of the Yongzheng and Qianlong emperor costumed as fictional figures or generic characters - Taoist monk or Turkish prince. Both emperors displayed considerable interest in this form of masquerade imagery, and their desire to toy with the possibilities of identity partly reflects the many roles Manchu emperors had to master in order to successfully rule the Chinese empire.⁷³ Anecdote suggests that the Qianlong Emperor himself was tempted to dress in Han-style clothing, but he believed that to do so, outside certain arenas of fantasy and leisure, was inherently risky.⁷⁴ Court women had different restrictions - their exploration of identity was confined to “the beauty”, going only so far as to change time and place to European princess or historical consort. But the Qianlong Emperor was disingenuous in refusing to see the essential conflict expressed by a beauty visualized for the company of the emperor, wearing Han-style fashions. And whether we view the *Yongzheng xingle tu* scroll as truth or fantasy, what these images really evidence is the dominance of Han Chinese conceptions of fashion and beauty at the mid-Qing court. Notions of Manchu fashion and beauty were directed by a fashion system oriented around the Southern Han style created in the Suzhou and Yangzhou pleasure houses. It remains to be seen whether this was still true by the nineteenth-century when our jackets were designed and produced.

The nineteenth-century is notable for the growing similarity between Manchu and Han women’s fashions. In the ninth year of his reign (1804), when the Jiaqing Emperor inspected the *xin nü*, he found that many of them had bound their feet, a strictly prohibited practice, and he threatened to

72 Quoted in Wan Yi et al, *Qing dai gongting shenghuo* (Hong Kong: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1985), p.274.

73 See the 13 leaf album “Yongzheng xingle tuce”, *Qing dai gongting huibhua*, pp.118-123, fig. 18.1-13; A Qianlong album is on pp.200-201, fig.45; Wu Hung, “Emperor’s Masquerade: ‘Costume Portraits’ of Yongzheng and Qianlong”, *Orientalism*, vol.26, no.7 (July / August 1995), pp.25-41.

74 Xu Ke, *Qing bai leichao*, p.6146.

punish the fathers and brothers of those who continued to disobey this ban.⁷⁵ He was compelled to repeat his warnings two years later (1806): “The women in the Manchurian and Mongolian banners have been wearing clothing with increasingly wide sleevebands, if this is discovered, then their fathers and brothers will be named and punished,” and eleven years later (1817): “As for the daughters of those high officials and courtiers, whose robe sleeves have become increasingly wide, so that they compare to the sleeves of Han women: this trend cannot continue”.⁷⁶ The Jiaqing emperor was obviously concerned with frugality, his view of the luxurious and wasteful Han dress bears comparison both to his great-grandfather, the Kangxi emperor: “Those women selected for service in the palace must wear wide-sleeved full gowns and if they dress in opulent and lavish Han attire, this constitutes a serious breach. This prohibition shall be rigorously made clear to all Banner members, in order to eschew lavishness and respect economy”⁷⁷; and to his Han contemporaries, who were equally troubled by the width of women’s sleevebands. But the repeated decrees also speak to the fact that this period presents the most blatant interaction between Han and Manchu fashions. Dress historians commonly assert that the final movement of the sinicization of the Manchus was the merging of Han and Manchu women’s dress, apparently to the point where it becomes difficult to identify the two. This trend was described in local bamboo ballads like “New Words on the Fashions” *Shishang xintan*: “More than half of the bannerwomen have changed to Han dress,” and “palace robes are cut (in the style of the) short jacket and skirt”, and captured in photographs of court ladies (Fig. 3.15).⁷⁸

Examples like the sleeveband or border illustrate the parallels between the two groups in terms of how each made their own mode of dress fashionable. The “short jacket and skirt” above probably

75 Xu Ke, *Qing bai leichao*, p.6146.

76 Zhou Xibao, *Zhongguo gudai fushi shi* (Shanghai: Zhongguo xiju chubanshe, 1984), p.484.

77 Edict of the ninth year of Jiaqing, Veritable Records of the Jiaqing Reign (*Qing Jiaqing shi lu*), quoted Shan Guoqiang, “Gentlewomen Paintings of the Qing Palace Ateliers”, p.58; on the virtue of frugality extolled by the Manchus, and their use of this to separate them from the Chinese, see Elliot, *The Manchu Way*, pp.284=5.

78 Li Jiarui, *Beiping fengsu leizheng*, vol 1, *juan shang*, p.242.

describes the Manchu *changyi*, a popular style in the Daoguang and Xianfeng courts.⁷⁹ It was unregulated, a straight-cut, round-necked, overlapping robe that extended to the ankle to reveal the height of the banner shoe. Worn on everyday occasions over the *chenyi* under-robe, it was distinguished from the *pao* robe by its highly decorative style and the *ruyi tou*-headed slits on each side to the armpit (*kaixi*). The *changyi* enabled Manchu women to recreate the traditional narrow-sleeved *changpao*, applying the broader sleeves, *huanxiu* sleevebands, and layered embellishment of late Qing trends. One viewpoint is that this garment was a response to the Han *ao* jacket - it is the only Manchu style to use figural roundels (Fig. 3.16). However in the next section, as we turn to the development of the eight roundel *batuan* style in Manchu and Han dress culture, we shall consider evidence that complicates the assumption that the figural roundel style was a Han fashion innovation.

5. ROUNDELS AND THE BATUAN STYLE

The roundel has a long history in the Chinese decorative arts, with precedents in both Han Chinese and northern minority material culture. Its origins are conventionally credited to the Sogdians, who brought weft-faced compound weave pearl roundel (*lianxihu tuanke*) designs along the Silk Road early on in Tang China. Beyond that, the transference process is not wholly clear: James Trilling argued against the conventional attribution to Sassanian Iran, that the “Medallion Style” emerged from Byzantine Rome between the fourth and sixth centuries,⁸⁰ and Meister has used pre-Tang examples to suggest that roundel patterning may be indigenous to China.⁸¹ Regardless, the roundel proved a historically lengthy and influential device in Chinese visual and material culture, able to serve numerous functions in various media. Trilling argued the roundel drew its strength from the interaction between four basic principles: repetition, symmetry, confinement, and pictorialism. In China, confinement and pictorialism were early maximised, with both roundel centre and roundel

79 Yin Anyi, “Qingdai gongting changyi tanwei”, *Gugong bowuyuan yuankan*, no.4, (2008), no.138, pp.149-161.

80 James Trilling, *The Medallion Style: A study in the origins of Byzantine taste* (New York: Garland Pub. 1985).

81 Michael W. Meister, “The Pearl Roundel in Chinese Textile Design”, *Ars Orientalis*, vol.8 (1970), pp.255-267.

frame utilized to locate imagery. Roundel textiles preserved in Silk Road sites like Dunhuang, Astana and Dulan demonstrate how the interaction between frame and content evolved in the Tang Chinese silk workshops: from the blunt rusticity of the simple pearls encircling boar's heads and profile birds, to the delicate, intricate floral roundels best represented by the Duke of Lingyang complex interlocking floral designs, a resolutely Chinese take on the pearl roundel.⁸² With its interspersed floral medallions and quatrefoil motifs, this sinicized interpretation of the pearl roundel steadily eroded the distinction between roundel frame and roundel content in order to prioritize the impact of the interstice-roundel. But the rise of embroidery during the late Ming meant that roundels were more frequently embroidered than woven, drawing attention away from the interstice and towards the interaction between frame and content, something seen in the jackets with their use of auspicious motifs to frame the roundel centre.

It was the Yuan dynasty - concerned to draw the dragon motif out of ordinary circulation and mark it as imperial motif - who first institutionalized the roundel to frame the dragon. During the Ming this evolved into the "dragon roundel robe", which came in three varieties: the twelve-roundel version displaying the twelve imperial symbols, but also four and eight-roundel styles. Even before the Manchus came to power, they were enthralled by dragon-roundel silks, negotiating with the Ming court and raiding Chinese bases in order to obtain them. As Qing rulers, they initially continued all three versions, but as they established their own dress system, the twelve-roundel style became obsolete and the four and eight roundel style prevailed, each associated with a certain group. Princes wore the four-dragon roundel style *bugua* surcoat (*si tuan long bugua*) as their version of the rank badge surcoat.⁸³ Against the official's square rank badges, this round shape marked a division of

⁸² For the development of the roundel in Tang silks, see Wang Yue and Zhao Feng, "Dunhuang sichou zhong de tuanke tu'an", *Sichou*, vol.1 (2009), pp.45-55. The Duke of Lingyang was an early Tang Sichuanese official, who is recorded as having made designs for tribute textiles, see Kuhn ed., *Chinese Silks*, p.220.

⁸³ Xu Ke, *Fushi lei*, p.6177, no.66, "si tuan long bugua".

cosmological significance: the circle embodied the heavens, the square the earth (*tian yuan di fang*).⁸⁴ Different prestiges of dragons detailed various imperial male ranks: at top was the Emperor's slate-blue *gunfu* court surcoat embroidered with four roundels of five-clawed, *zhengmian* forward-facing golden dragons.⁸⁵

By contrast, the eight dragon-roundel robe *batuan longgua* (Fig. 3.17) has long been considered a female style of *jifu* - a primary means of distinguishing the Emperor from his Empress and Consorts.⁸⁶ This gender assumption has recently been questioned through meticulous object work of Palace Museum researchers, which demonstrated that this style was in fact worn by the early Qing emperors (Kangxi, Shunzhi, Yongzheng) with the standard distinction of *zhongjiexiu* sleeves and number of slits to mark gender. But around the middle of the Qianlong reign, the imperial male style of eight-roundel *gua* and *pao* became obsolete, and it became nearly exclusively a female style.⁸⁷ Their research did not suggest an explanation for this, but there are some possible hypotheses. Firstly, it is during the eighteenth-century that the male dragon-roundel surcoat became a diplomatic gift; like its predecessor the Ming four-clawed *mang* dragon robe, used to control internal courtiers and external diplomats alike.⁸⁸ Since the style was originally intended as the male imperial equivalent of the rank badge surcoat and hence a symbol of male imperial power confined to the imperial family, it is likely that the dissolution of this symbol through more widespread distribution to famous generals like Nian Gengyao (1679-1726) as reward for military success, would have affected how the emperor himself saw the eight dragon

84 Chong Yi, *Dao Xian yilai chaoye zaji* (Beijing guji chubanshe, 1982), p.33.

85 For the different variations of dragon profiles and numbers allocated to different ranks of prince, see Zhao Erxun (ed.), *Qing shi gao* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1976), *juan* 103, *zhi* 78, p.3042-3045.

86 *Jifu* (lit. auspicious dress) comprised a matching ensemble of *gua* and *pao*. It was considered a semi-formal style worn upon festivals and celebrations, and less formal than court attire (*chaofu*); Xu Ke, *Fushi lei*, no.66, p.6177, "tuan longgua".

87 Yan Yong, "Dui qingdai batuan caiyun jinlong wen jifu de zairenshi", *Gugong bowuyuan yuankan*, vol.130, no.2 (2007), pp.80-93, esp.table 1, p.92.

88 For manipulations of "dragon robe diplomacy", see Cammann, "Presentation of Dragon Robes", and Sophie Volpp, "The Gift of a Python Robe: the Circulation of Objects in 'Jin Ping Mei'", *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, vol.65.1 (June 2005), pp.133-158.

roundel design.⁸⁹ And around the same time, it seems dragon roundel silks gained wider currency: scholar Gong Wei (b.1704) complained of the dissolute luxury of Wu region where people knew no boundaries: “Dragon roundels decorated with profile dragons, clothes of *ni* gold and cut gold, the common people all overstep themselves (in wearing these).”⁹⁰

Another factor was the growing popularity of non-dragon roundels. Eighteenth-century imperial designers experimented with the roundel as frame not just for the imperially prestigious dragon and phoenix, but also more secular motifs. Early on this was natural imagery like flowers and butterflies. The “slate blue robe with eight embroidered floral roundels” (*jifu gua xinbua ba tuan*) style (Fig. 3.18)⁹¹ was a regulated style of *jifu*, worn by Manchu court women: the wives of the Manchu ranked Dukes who Guard the Nation (*Zhen guo gong*) and the Dukes who Assist the Nation (*fu guo gong*); as well as Han – the wives of the Han Commoner Dukes (*min gong*).⁹² But there were also unregulated variations: for example, a *pao* robe adorned with figural scenes (*dijing renwu wen tuan*) (Fig. 1.1.a,b,c), found in the tomb of Prince Yunli and once worn by one of his two consorts.⁹³ Embroidered in a restrained palette of browns and blues with green highlights, familiar from contemporaneous Gu family embroidery, it is mostly worked in satin stitch, with some outline stitch and couching for clothing and object details. This early example of figural roundel jacket suggests that despite the prevalence of Han style figural roundel jackets from the nineteenth-century, the style was earlier, if not first, worn by Manchu women.

89 Xu Ke, *Fushì lei*, no.66, p.6177, “Si tuan long bugua”.

90 Gong Wei, *Chaolin bì tǎn* (Qianlong 30, 1765; reprinted Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1981), *juan* 5, p.113.

91 I thank Mr Yan Yong of the Palace Museum for alerting me to this early example of the non-dragon roundel.

92 *Qing shi gao*, p.3052, 3054.

93 Dating support for the burial robes comes from 4 painted fans included with the robes, which were decorated by noted artists, poets and calligraphers, dating to before or around 1738. However, many of the robes and hangings came from the two consorts, who were possibly buried at a later date than the prince, so the robe probably dates to between the Yongzheng and early Qianlong period. The Prince’s first wife was Lady Niuuhuru, daughter of Duke Guoyi, also Aling’a (?-1716) (Sun Wenliang, *Manzu dacidian*, p.364), and his second wife was Lady Meng, daughter of Guan Dase (?-1780) (*ibid*, p.473). As wives of a first-degree prince (*Qinwang fujin*), they were regulated at the same level as the wife of a prince (*Qing shi gao*, p.3050).

In fact, numerous Manchu sources assert the *ba tuan* style to be Manchu. Chong Yi (1885-1945) describes this style in his anecdotes on the Daoguang and Xianfeng courts:

The women's *gua* robe comes in the eight-roundel style, it is also sky blue (like the more formal standing water waves *gua* robe), but the bottom lacks the standing waves (*lishui*). It is embroidered with eight inset roundels above and below, left and right (nb. one on the front and back chest, one on each of the shoulders, and two on the front and back lower *jin* section). It is worn over the *chenyi* instead of the *pao*. It comes in green, yellow, peach, moon-white but not crimson. And those who are senior in age do not wear the embroidered eight roundels but rather the rank badge surcoat (*bu fu*).⁹⁴

Xu Ke later repeated this description, but he added a further detail: “When it comes to the formal dress of the Eight Banner women, aside from the rank badge surcoat, they also have the so-called “eight roundels’ style, which uses either embroidery or *kesi* tapestry woven to create eight colourful roundels to adorn the *gua* robe, but this style is only worn by newly married women.”⁹⁵ This last point likely reprised Zhenjun who described the eight roundel formal robe as being only worn by newlywed women, underlining an association between fashion and celebration.⁹⁶ But others claimed differently. A book on late Qing Beijing customs described how Han brides wore red and green *gua* robes embroidered with eight roundels, together with a crimson hundred-pleated skirt.⁹⁷ The opposing picture presented by these sources seems to inform mostly upon the perceived need of defining a given style as either Manchu or Han, still palpable two hundred years after the establishment of the Manchu dynasty. As Elliot argues, “processes both of acculturation ... and of differentiation mattered in sustaining Manchu rule”.⁹⁸

Yet the objects suggest a more ambiguous conclusion: they imply that the *ba tuan* style carried various interpretations, a finding that also stands if we consider locale rather than ethnicity. It is striking that, contrary to the previous chapter’s observation of the power held by the southern urban centres of Suzhou and Yangzhou in determining Qing fashions, here we have seen the power of the capital in

⁹⁴ Chong Yi, *Dao Xian yilai chao ye zaji*, p.3.

⁹⁵ Xu Ke, *Qing bai leichao*, no.67, p.6178, “batuan”.

⁹⁶ Zhenjun, *Tian zhi ou wen*, juan 10, p.723.

⁹⁷ See Jin Shoushen, *Lao Beijing de shenghuo* (Beijing: Beijing chubanshe, 1989), p.95.

⁹⁸ Elliot, *The Manchu Way*, xiv.

creating fashions like the *ba tuan* jacket or the craze for the “Eighteen Borders and Trimmings”. The apparent Beijing origins of this style is intriguing because so many of the jackets studied in the thesis feature elements that would associate them with Suzhou, whether by Suzhou-style embroidery, or depictions of *Kunqu* dramas. In part, this fashion transfer from Beijing to Suzhou reflected shifts of nineteenth-century China, away from the Grand Canal route towns of Suzhou and Yangzhou, towards new urban hubs like Shanghai and Tianjin, and it points us to question how far what might have been true of seventeenth and eighteenth century fashions maintained during the nineteenth century. By then structures of controlling taste had been altered, the state system had lost much of its purchasing power; for the Jiaqing and Daoguang Emperors, frugality measures - however superficial or ultimately futile - necessarily entailed a decline in imperial patronage, as demonstrated for porcelain consumption.⁹⁹ New market mechanisms and trendsetters accelerated the decline of imperial control, as seen in the dominance of wealthy merchants in Shanghai and Beijing in areas like painting and prints.¹⁰⁰ Thus, nineteenth-century commentator Hu Shiyu argued Beijing played a dominant role in late Qing fashions:

In the capital, the style of the clothing and hats, all look to the princes’ estates for guidance, and they call this “The Style of the Inner Chambers”. All the suburbs copy this as the latest styles: within a few years it is sure to reach Suzhou and Hangzhou, but by then the Beijing styles have changed again.¹⁰¹

Furthermore, for aspiring elites, the imperial values associated with a design like the *batuan* robes seems to have been understood as a form of branding. Lai Huimin has argued that the Qianlong court’s commissions to the Suzhou Textile Workshop (*Zhizao ju*) enabled court influence over the material culture of the south, and acted as a spur to the luxurious lifestyles of Suzhou’s elites. So that rather than the “Suzhou design, Guangzhou craftsmanship” (*Suzhou yang, Guangzhou jiang*) a well-known marketing slogan of the eighteenth century, the production mechanism by which the imperial designers sent paper models and design instructions to the Jiangnan workshops for production meant

99 Simon Kwan, *The Imperial Porcelain of late Qing* (Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1983).

100 Jonathon Hay, “Painters and Publishing in late Nineteenth-century Shanghai”, in *Art at the Close of China’s Empire*, Phoebus: Occasional Papers in Art History 8, ed. Ju-hsi Chou (Tempe, AZ: Arizona State University, 1998), pp.134-88.

101 Hu Shiyu, *Doncun*, *juan* 3, pp.44-45, “shi dou”.

that Qing luxury material culture was really founded upon “Palace design, Suzhou craftsmanship”(Gongting yang, Suzhou jiang).¹⁰² Equally, Fan Jinmin notes the use of imperial marks like “shang yong”, “nei zao”, “jin gong” as a guide for Suzhou wealthy elites to orient their purchase of luxury or high-quality goods.¹⁰³ The use of these terms did not mean that the objects had actually been designed by imperial designers or produced in imperial workshops, it simply conveyed a mark of quality. But presumably there was overlap. The court evidently felt the need to regulate against actual usurpations of material culture (for example, in 1752 (Qianlong 17): “It is forbidden for the people to wear the eight roundel gauze and satin and other *nei zao* designed patterns for imperial use”¹⁰⁴) but they would have struggled in vain to control the afterlife of imperially designed objects. How could they prevent pattern templates from being copied, or stop leftover quantities and slightly imperfect imperial styles being leaked? It was perhaps more effective to move on to a new design, which was what seems to have happened to the Emperor’s *ba tuan* robe.¹⁰⁵

Interestingly, once the imperial *ba tuan* style began evolving and circulating beyond the Suzhou environs, instead of imperial style, it seems to have been re-framed as Suzhou fashion. So in mid-Qing Puyuan, a Zhejiang location long famous for its silk production: “Women’s *pifeng* capes ... come in the Gu-style embroidered version ... the striped gold fabric, and the double-colour brocade with eight flower roundels.”¹⁰⁶ But Puyuan consumers understood the *ba tuan* as a Suzhou trend: “just like that of Suzhou”. Though the *ba tuan* style had originated in the courts, and perhaps was marketed as such in the Suzhou silk shops, in the areas surrounding Suzhou, it was known as a Suzhou fashion, associated with urban fashion leaders, not necessarily court princesses.

102 Used to describe handicrafts designed in Suzhou and produced in Guangzhou, for example Qu Dajun (1630-1696), *Guangdong xin yu* (late 17th -century) (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1995-1999), *juan* 16, p.692; Lai Huimin, “Guaren huahao”, p.205, n. 63.

103 Fan Jinmin, “Qingdai Suzhou chengshi wenhua fanrong de xiezha”, in *Guoji minsheng: Ming Qing shehui jingji yanjiu* (Fuzhou: Fujian renmin chubanshe, 2008), pp.474-520, p.480.

104 Xiao Shi, *Yong xian lu* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1959), p.361.

105 Lee Chor Lin, “A Gift from Heaven: Reading the History of Silk in China”, in *Power Dressing*, p.24.

106 Yang Shuben ed., *Puyuan suo zhi* (QL: Nanjing: Jiangsu guji chubanshe, 1992), *juan* 6, p.482, *xishang*.

6. CONCLUSION: HOW DID FASHIONS TRAVEL IN QING CHINA?

The development of the *ba tuan* style and its fashionable components of border, collar, and roundel illuminate upon many aspects of the Qing fashion system, in particular the nature of stylistic influence. The hypothesis that this style originated in the capital's princely mansions and then circulated southwards to more ordinary folk, ostensibly fits the conventional model of Qing fashions whereby imperial practice inspired domestic imitation:

The precedents that gave expression to the Chinese imperial model also provided structure for domestic life, within the family personal and seasonal celebration mirrored official court structure.... At weddings, the bride was empress for the day, her clothing and accessories marked with symbols of court iconography, her movement from the house of her father to that of the groom imitated an imperial procession...¹⁰⁷

In this picture tastes run from top to bottom, a Veblenian fashion model of conspicuous consumption and mono-directional emulation: initiated by the upper classes, imitated by lower classes.¹⁰⁸ This was how Ye Mengzhu understood fashion: “Fashions begin in the families of the elites, they are copied by their maids and concubines, gradually seep through to their families and then catch on in the neighbourhood”¹⁰⁹ and Wu Renshu's work demonstrates the Veblenian model was exactly how late Ming commentators interpreted fashion - founded upon social mobility and competition.¹¹⁰ Yet whilst emulation is an undeniably powerful force in the social behaviour governing fashion, this model has in fact been discredited for its overly simplistic mono-directional analysis, and it is most vulnerable in assuming that only elites can innovate, when evidence points rather to multi-way patterns of influence.¹¹¹

107 Vollmer, *Chinese Costumes and Accessories: 17th -20th century* (Paris: AEDTA, 1999), p.x.

108 “Conspicuous Consumption” and “Dress as an expression of Pecuniary Culture” from *The Theory of the Leisure Classes* (1899) by American economist Thorstein Veblen (1857-1929) are compiled in Purdy, *The Fashion Reader*, pp.261-88; see also Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams*, (London: I.B.Taurus, 2003), chap.3; Entwistle, *The Fashioned Body*, pp.58-82.

109 Ye Mengzhu, *Yue shi bian*, p.178.

110 Wu Renshu argued mid-Ming literati society was rocked by the social encroachment presented by the lower ranks' imitation of elite dress, and that one strategy they employed to deal with this identity crisis was to create new fashions, a classic top-down explanation. (“Ming dai pingmin fushi de liuxing fengshang yu shidafu de fanying”, pp.79-87, 90-94).

111 Entwistle outlines other criticism in *The Fashioned Body*, pp.62-3, 98-101.

Consider again Yu Zhiding's painting (Fig 3.4): though Qiao Yuanzhi's arrogant stare claims the viewer's attention, we see the glamorous female entertainers through the eyes of the servant girls to the right, one with hair styled in cautious imitation of the musicians' heady hairstyles, they turn to study their colourful sashes and fancy collars, an early Qing style just beginning to be worked into the still Ming-dominated loose-sleeved robes. This image challenges the emulation-based model of fashion, for it demonstrates the ways in which women of disparate social backgrounds might mingle within an elite household, and underlines the role of transient visitors like female entertainers in bringing the latest fashions into the homes of the confined Chinese gentlewomen.¹¹² The freedom of servants and entertainers enabled them to form a point of contact for the confined women, a mechanism by which new material culture could enter. Yu Zhiding's visualisation of fashion dissemination via social intermingling is a bottom-up transmission: something that perhaps more accurately characterizes the Chinese fashion system, in which, as we have seen, non-elite groups like courtesans and entertainers possessed the power to direct trends. The cloud collar provides a good example of the role of ordinary consumers and the convoluted rise of a Chinese fashion item; likely originating in Northern minority wear, it was first bought into mainstream wear by female entertainers, who brought the style to the courts, from whence it was popularized as ceremonial wear for the masses. Similarly Yu Zhiding's entertainer's towering 'peony' hairstyles spread all the way to the Beijing imperial quarters; a poem by You Tong (1618-1704) tells us: "I have heard that in Jiangnan (the hairstyles) are higher by one *chi*, the imperial women all compete to imitate the 'peony coiffure' (*mudan tou*)."¹¹³ It was not only entertainers who possessed fashion power. Through their merchant master's access to the latest fashions, Ximen Qing's concubines in *Jin ping mei* are the first to gain contact with new styles of dress and textiles.¹¹⁴ Mercantile access to new material culture is particularly characteristic of nineteenth-century Suzhou and Shanghai, where merchant classes were the first to encounter the new materialities of foreign textiles and fashionable dress. These locations were known

112 Dauncey notes these figures as a source of information on clothing practices, "Illusions of Grandeur", p.59.

113 You Tong 1618-1704), *Xi tang wen ji*, quoted in Gao Chunming, *Zhongguo fushi mingwu kao*, p.494.

114 Dauncey, "Illusions of Grandeur", pp.58-9.

for their vibrant print and performance culture; chapter 5 examines the dynamic between the jackets and these influences.

Throughout this chapter, whether in regard to borders or robe styles, we have seen the way in which language oriented the Qing fashion system, a characteristic of fashion that fascinated Barthes: “Why does Fashion utter clothing so abundantly?” For Barthes, this “luxury of words” was a “network of meaning” that served to draw a veil around the twentieth-century clothing object, blunting the “buyer’s calculating consciousness”.¹¹⁵ In nineteenth-century Suzhou, the use of words - whether imperial terms like “shangyong”, regional attributes like “Suzhou style”, or craftsmen-named shops like “Huang Guoben’s Handkerchiefs” (*Huang Guoben shoujin*) – was just beginning to complexify. Gu Zhentao, a late Qing scholar of Suzhou customs, was evidently struck by the way in which words of place and name adhered to objects, altering their values. In *Wumen biaoyin* he classified different types of Suzhou objects and trades according to whether they were named after brandname (*zhaopai*), geographical locale or craftsmen name. Noticeably many of textile related objects featured a brandname or craftsmen name: “Tian Qizhai’s buttons” (*Tian Qizhai niukou*), “Jin Fangzhai’s purses” (*Jin Fangzhai hebao*), or “Huang Rongcheng’s silks” (*Huang Rongcheng chouduan*) (see Table 2.1).¹¹⁶ Gu Zhentao’s listings suggest a consumer culture that valued Tian Qizhai’s buttons more highly than those of an unnamed producer, in which brand words, however constituted, were a means of communicating the quality, design, and social status of material culture. In the next chapter as we turn to production, we will see how words were used to classify and evaluate embroidered objects during the mid-late Qing.

Whether they knew them first as styles from the capital or the palace or the latest fashions from Suzhou, this historical account of the roundel jacket demonstrates how, by the mid-late Qing, ever wider audiences could participate in the latest fashions. This chapter has sought to show how late

115 Barthes, *The Fashion System*, trans. Ward and Howard, xi.

116 Gu Zhentao, *Wumen biaoyin*, *fujī*, pp.351-2.

Qing women's fashion was created through a combinatorial interaction of certain silhouettes (*ao, shan, changyi* and *pao*); varying parameters like sleeve-widths and garment lengths; and applications of borders, trimmings, and appliques. These latter modular components have been emphasized as central to the development of the jacket. Modularity is of course a long-standing feature in Chinese handicraft production: Ledderose has argued for the centrality of modular processes to the quality and quantity of Chinese arts and crafts - craftsmen "assembled the objects from standardized parts, or modules."¹¹⁷ But it is also important to emphasize the role of modularity in enabling widespread popularization of fashions. Even if one could not afford a woven or embroidered *ba tuan* robe, one could purchase a set of floral roundels, embroidered in the latest *daxi* seed stitch style, depicting prunus, lotus and butterflies worked in bright shades of rose, poppy, and blue, and adhered to paper backing so as to be easily applied to one's gown (Fig. 3.19a). The pattern drafting is fair and the stitching finely worked - compared to a similar example from the Palace Museum on slate-blue satin it does not necessarily appear so unfavorably (Fig. 3.19b). Beyond formal visuality, the difference between the two objects was constructed on a matrix of social distinctions and stylistic knowledge, something blurred in the museum setting. The next chapter reconstructs the production context of embroidered dress in order to bring Qing consumer valuations in sharper focus.

117 Lothar Ledderose, *Ten Thousand Things: Module and Mass Production in Chinese Art* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

BOUDOIR, VILLAGE, AND WORKSHOP: PRODUCING EMBROIDERED DRESS IN LATE QING CHINA

1. INTRODUCTION: COMMERCIALIZING EMBROIDERED DRESS

Many Suzhou people congregate at Yao Family Alley, Li She Bridge, Peach-leaf Crossing to sell their goods. They sell handkerchiefs, nose taro, wind bonnets, umbrellas, gauze and crepe collars, leather and velvet collars, pearwood clogs, piled platform shoes, perfumed cummerbunds, foreign printed cloth sleeve facings, *Gu xiu* patterned sleeve facings, cloud collars, rain clothes, decorative knots, purses, kesi purses, coral purses, precious stone purses, decorative knot fan cases, kesi fan cases, coral fan cases, precious stone fan cases, decorative borders, embroidered borders, gold coloured foreign devil marten fur trimmed forehead covers, satin forehead bindings, wigs, dangling adornments, knotted tassels, delicate flower buds and all those goods that dazzle the eye and captivate the heart. Nine out of ten are boudoir objects, so the glamorous courtesans are very familiar with this place...¹

This nineteenth-century guide to the Jiangnan pleasure boats lays out the latest dress trimmings and accessories worn by a fashionable nineteenth-century lady; we see the range and variety, the attention to design and detail. Beyond the dazzle of desirable objects, what we observe is dress consumption in early modern China, a prototype of “modern capitalist society, (where) its enhancing qualities are, or can be, within the purview of virtually everyone.”² Objects like the cloud collar or the border were valued precisely for their “enhancing qualities”, the references to the cultured and refined boudoir lady contained in their embroidered surfaces. But if the “consumer society” formed through the escalating consumption of such enhancing objects, it was commercial production and distribution networks that enabled this escalation. Accordingly, in recent years, identifying and characterizing these networks has been a major current within studies of European and North American material culture.³ By contrast, histories of Chinese dress have little approached the question of *how* dress objects were made and sold. Where

1 Penghuasheng, *Huafang yutan*, in *Xiangyan Congshu*, no.18, vol. 69 (1818: reprint Shanghai: Zhongguo tushu gongsi, 1914), p.28.

2 Jane Schneider, “Cloth and Clothing”, in *The Handbook of Material Culture*, ed. Christopher Tilley (London; Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2006) p.208.

3 For example Neil McKendrick ed., “The Commercialisation of Fashion”, in *Birth of a Consumer Society: the commercialisation of eighteenth century England*, eds. McKendrick et al (London: Hutchinson, 1983), pp.34-99; Beverley Lemire, “The theft of clothes and popular consumerism in early modern England”, *Journal of Social History*, vol. 24, no.2 (Winter, 1990), pp.255-276; Sewell, “The Empire of Fashion”.

production has been considered, it has focused on re-asserting the elite nature of imperial dress production - dragon robe passports for example.⁴ Yet the consequences of constructing a history of Chinese dress culture absent of commercial influences is perhaps most felt in our understanding of how people outside the court consumed embroidered dress. Around the early seventeenth century, Chinese textiles underwent a quite fundamental transition, in that embroidery began to prevail over weaving as the dominant patterning technique.⁵ The ultimate cause for this aesthetic shift was the increasing commercialization of embroidery, which like many other handicrafts, came to be professionally produced in the workshop. Though commercial workshops produced the majority of embroidered objects in nineteenth-century China (for domestic and foreign markets), studies have rarely considered these workshops and their producers. How did the commercialization of embroidery impact upon fashion consumption in early modern China?

This chapter explores the production of embroidered dress during the mid-late Qing period. It will make the case that the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries formed a thriving period for the commercial production of embroidered dress, and it will examine how expanding consumption, silver monetization, and fashionable material culture enabled the formation of a complex network of producers. The nineteenth century is oft framed as in decline in respect to material culture, caught between the rising consumption of the seventeenth century, and the global markets of the twentieth.⁶ Yet, many examples of nineteenth-century embroidery and dress disprove this account. It was during the mid-late Qing that dress objects first began to be produced in large quantities outside the home, either in commercial workshops or outsourced to home workers. Contrary to the view that the arrival of foreign trade in the nineteenth-century was a catalyst for commercializing the Chinese handicrafts, we will see the vitality of

4 Wong Hwei Lian and Szan Tan, eds., *Power Dressing: Textiles for Rulers and Priests from the Chris Hall Collection* (Singapore: Asian Civilisations Museum, 2006), pp.168-9, no.34, Permit for the delivery of imperial robes.

5 Ye Mengzhu observes embroidery supplanting weaving and *kesi* decoration in *Yue shi bian*, juan 8, “Nei zhuang”, p.180

6 See Wu Renshu, “Ming Qing xiaofei wenhua de xin qujing yu xin wenti”, *Xin Shixue*, vol.17, no.4, (2006), pp.217-253; Cammann, “Embroidery techniques”, p.34.

this sector well before the arrival of Westerners in the Treaty Ports.⁷ Obviously, the demands of international markets and mechanized modes of industrial production introduced in the late nineteenth-century transformed embroidery, like many other traditional industries – printing, weaving, silver and gold making. But evidence from prior to the Opium Wars, whether guild sources, *biji* commentary, local gazetteers, or the objects themselves, suggests that domestic demand in China supported thriving markets for embroidered dress, and that many nineteenth-century features – agents, sub-contracting – were traditional systems that re-oriented themselves towards foreign markets.

The early-mid Qing growth in the commercial production of embroidery and dress created product specialities, auxiliary industries, and urban guilds. Guild organization structured connections between handicraft producers like embroiderers and dressmakers, and surviving guild stele records and other commercial data offer one perspective on these communities. But these organizations of male workers excluded women, who for cultural and historical reasons had long dominated in clothing production and decoration. The lives of Chinese women were governed by a canon of female traditions, lifecycles and practices surrounding the textile crafts – “a cultural matrix that prescribed gender roles” – symbols, stories, and rituals that celebrated the female production of dress, textiles and embroidery: from the Empress’ rituals worshipping the patron goddess of sericulture Lei Zu, to the commoners’ needle games at Double Seventh Festival.⁸ Given the intimate associations this canon established between feminine virtue and embroidered dress, how did the formation of male guild communities affect the marginalized female dress-maker and embroiderer? How did the ideal of the female boudoir embroiderer interact with the reality of the male embroidery workshop? The question highlights the two senses of *nügong* distinguished by Bray: “womanly work” – the gendered and morally validated activity of embroidery and “women’s work” – the commercial activity of embroidery as a livelihood. But as the market took over “womanly work”, a clear separation between these two senses became harder to maintain. The latter half

7 Mann, “Women’s Work in the Ningbo area (1900-1936)”.

8 Mann, “Educating Daughters in the Mid-Ch’ing period”, pp.19-49.

of the chapter considers how these two senses were materialized in the embroidered objects. How did the Qing consumer identify a piece of embroidery produced at home, as different to that produced in a workshop? Many have argued that there “is not sufficient evidence to say whether most of the embroidered sleevebands and slippers that elegant ladies wore were embroidered domestically or professionally,”⁹ and the distinction between workshop and home production is undeniably difficult to pin down on stylistic grounds. But by using guild and workshop records to reconstruct the production context, we gain a more historically accurate view of the commercial networks behind objects like the jackets that can be combined with stitchwork analysis and pattern comparison to clarify the consumer judgements invoked by embroidered objects.

Disregarding commercial embroidery has ensured the prevalence of the “womanly work” side of *niigong*, the “trousseau narrative” or home production model, the idea that Chinese women embroidered all their dress objects by themselves, secluded deep within their chambers, immune from outside influences. In Chapter 1 we considered how this vision was likely one museums and collectors wished to construct for their objects - embroidery as a highly skilled leisure activity practiced by elite women. This chapter argues that the rise in commercial embroidery makes it far more likely that many of the embroidered articles preserved in museum collections were produced commercially rather than in the boudoir. Of course, many smaller accessories may well have been produced by their wearers or produced by a friend or relation as a gift. But equally, many embroidered objects were produced by strangers entirely unconnected to the wearer, sold through commercial transactions with market stalls, urban shops, and travelling peddlers. A materially complex object like the jackets required various stages of production, necessitating interaction between different individuals varied in gender, status, and locale. By laying out the expansion of this commercial network, I wish to make the case that rather than an individual woman materializing her virtue through embroidery, the production of an embroidered dress object such as the

⁹ Bray, *Technology and Gender*, p.267.

jacket should be understood as the work of a diffuse group of individuals, with different tasks being divided and specialised in a similar manner to the projects of printing and porcelain. Behind an article of late Qing embroidery was a network that encompassed urban guilds, commercial workshops, and female cottage embroiderers. By providing an account of the interaction between these diverse producers, I aim to negate the boudoir image of these objects and demonstrate the influence of urban, professional embroiderers in the creation and conception of the jackets.

2. GUILDS OF TAILORS AND EMBROIDERERS

The growth of commercialised dress production during the mid-Qing was founded upon the “commodity economy” (*shangpin jingji*) that began as new world silver entered Ming China, monetizing the rural economy.¹⁰ Early-mid Qing urbanisation and ballooning population growth combined with factors like increased credit access and loosened labour markets to create conditions in which a commodity economy could flourish.¹¹ Expanding markets and product commodification caused prices to fall - the real price of Jiangnan silk fell by nearly 60% between the Song and the Ming - enabling wider consumption of embroidered dress.¹² The employment of tailors and embroiderers became more prevalent, not only for the wealthy or urban nor solely upon special occasions. Rising wages attracted increasing numbers of tailors and embroiderers - a skilled embroiderer might earn similar figures to that of a painter.¹³ The changing face of clothes production also benefitted producers of auxiliary industries

10 On the history of China’s bi-metallic currency of silver and copper, see Richard von Glahn, *Fountain of Fortune: Money and Monetary Policy in China, 1000-1700* (Berkeley and LA, CA: University of California Press, 1996).

11 R. Bin Wong, “The search for European Differences and Domination in the Early Modern World: A view from Asia”, *American Historical Review*, vol. 107 (2001), no.2, pp.447-46, p.451, on different lending mechanisms; The Qing court computed corvée service to silver payment, giving craftsman freedom to establish their own commercial shops and open up to wider markets.

12 Susan Mann, “Household Handicrafts and State Policy in Qing Times”, p.77; Li Bozhong, *Jiangnan de zaoqi gongyehua*, p.149.

13 Li Bozhong provides evidence of commercialised dress production both in large Jiangnan towns like Suzhou, Hangzhou and Nanjing, and also medium and smaller size towns (*Jiangnan de zaoqi gongyehua*, pp.147-8); In Canton, John Thomson noted

such as gold thread, needles and scissors, silk thread, cloth and metal buttons; all materials abundant in our jackets.¹⁴ The greater volume of consumption meant different types of clothing became necessary for different occasions: new products emerged and product ranges became more expansive, as demonstrated by the lengthy listing in the opening *Huafang yutan* quote. Socio-cultural factors interacted with this process to create the emergence of specialist production categories: officials' clothing producers gained from the increase in numbers of those "licensed" to wear official clothing; theatrical costumers (*xiyi*) profited from the growth in regional theatrical troupes;¹⁵ and the entire sector benefitted from a widened participation in celebration and the emphasis upon material culture in celebratory ritual that necessitated burial clothes (*shouyi*, lit. longevity clothes), used-clothing sellers (*guyi*),¹⁶ and religious clothing.¹⁷ Accessories also played a crucial role in widening the commercial dress market. Many of the guilds and shops specialized in hats, socks, or shoes, and contemporary observers highlighted these objects, accessible to producers in requiring fairly affordable materials and technology and to consumers in being low-cost small items. The "regional goods" listings in local gazetteers often included these accessories: fan cases (*shandai*), hat floss (*maowei*), collars (*lingtou*), purses (*hebao*), and handkerchiefs.¹⁸ Guild data

embroidery pattern-draftsmen earned about £1 5s (approximately 3.75 *taels*) per month, more than a skilled embroiderer who received just 15s. (2.69 Hk *taels*) a month with food, approximately the same as a painter and shoe-maker, although considerably less than an ivory-carver, blacksmith or silversmith (*Through China with a Camera* (London; New York: Harper, 1899), p.71; *Silk* recorded daily salaries for Shanghai pattern-draftsmen ranging from \$0.75-1 (0.54-0.72 *taels*, so approximately 16.2-21.6 *taels* per month) (p.74). For comparison, the dragon robe Li Ciming purchased in 1870 cost him \$14 (*Qingji yi ge jingguan de shenghuo*, p 134).

14 Gold thread was made by pasting gold or silver foil to a paper or animal membrane, but during the Qing, finer, more flexible thread was created by winding fine flat wires of gold and silver around a core of fine silk or cotton strips (Cammann, "Embroidery techniques", pp.17, 20).

15 The mid-Qing founding of a theatrical dress producers' *xiyi* guild (*Nishang gongsuo*) in Suzhou reflects the city's love of theatre, and as regional troupes expanded, Suzhou costume makers sold *xiyi* across the country, see Lin Xidan, *Suzhou cixin* (Suzhou: Suzhou daxue chubanshe, 2004), pp.132-141.

16 The second-hand clothing guild (*Yunzhang Gongsuo*) founded in Suzhou at a date prior to 1876, see the three steles in *Ming Qing Suzhou shougongye shi beike ji*, p.212, no.139; p.215, no.141; p.221, no.142.

17 For Buddhist clothing shops (*cengyi pu*) and celebratory clothing shops (*jiayi pu*), see *Beiping shi gongshangye gai kuang*, p.217.

18 Duan and Zhang provide a useful table of commercialized handicraft objects compiled from Suzhou local gazetteers and guides (*Suzhou shougongye shi*, pp.103-7).

suggests accessory producers were amongst the earliest to commercialize their products (Table 4.1): 80% of the guilds established in the eighteenth century were accessories: sock makers (*Waye gonghui* of Qianlong period Hankou) or ribbon producers (*Jinfeng shenghui* of Qianlong period Suzhou). The idea that mass consumption of fashion began with small outlays is familiar from European consumption history. The purchase of a handkerchief or purse formed an integral part of fashionable dress that was accessible for all but also inherently consumable, requiring regular replacement.¹⁹ So we begin to see what the objects listed in the opening *Huafang yutan* quote might represent to an aspiring late Qing fashionable woman. All these changes belie any notion of the late imperial Chinese economy as stagnant; instead, the increasingly dense networks between growing numbers of producers, brought a world of consumer goods - including commercialised dress - much closer to the ordinary consumer.²⁰

As rural-urban markets increased in number and networks of town, city and market towns became more “fleshed out” (particularly in the regions of Jiangnan, central Fujian and Guangdong, and along the Grand Canal to Beijing), commercialized dress guilds begin to appear, gathering pace during the eighteenth-century when embroiderers, dress and accessory makers first form public, urban organizations.²¹ Guild data provides some of the most concrete evidence of the expansion of commercialised dress production, and though the evidence is patchy and problematic, Table 4.1 demonstrates that most guilds emerged during the mid-late Qing, with a flurry of formation in the last half of the nineteenth-century, a distribution that tallies with other surveys.²² Since evidence of artisan

19 Lemire, “Developing Consumerism”, p.242.

20 R. Bin Wong, “The search for European differences”; Wu Renshu, *Shechi de nüren: Ming Qing Jiangnan funü de xiaofei wenhua*, pp.49-50, I thank Professor Wu for sending me a copy of his study.

21 Rowe, “Domestic Interregional Trade in Eighteenth-century China”, pp.176, 125; for an overview of the different nomenclature and the distinction between “same place” (*tongxiang*) and “same trade” (*tongye*) associations, see Peter. J. Golas, “Early Ch’ing Guilds”, in *The City in Late Imperial China*, ed. G. William Skinner (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1977), pp.555-80.

22 Christine Moll-Murata analysed the 600 dated and 130 undated guilds in Peng Zeyi’s “short table” finding that guild formation soared after the Opium Wars (1839-1841, 1856-1858) and Taiping Rebellion (1850-1864), and concentrated in the

guilds has been found as early as the Song, and tailors, accessory-makers, and embroiderers existed well before the late Qing, why does the guild data date from this period and not earlier?²³

The clustering around the eighteenth and nineteenth century partly reflects the advantages that guild formation offered to the craftsman and shop-owner. Primarily guilds served to define and constitute a community and to protect that community's interests by preventing market consolidation and price-cutting, regulating standards and wages, and restricting guild entry.²⁴ But social and philanthropic activities were also critical aspects of the guild's remit and the "population growth, urban migration and the development of the market economy" that led to guild formation also created the need for such charitable work. The impact of war, famine, and the decline in government control is evidenced by the dominance of civic and philanthropic issues in nineteenth-century guild steles, compared to earlier records, which are more likely to record land disputes, temple building or fund-raising.²⁵ Given the incomplete survival of guild data, the nineteenth-century dating of many guild texts requires a careful reading and it is well to be cautious in attributing too much to the spur of foreign merchants or global markets.²⁶ Establishing regulations and certain regulatory content can be understood as a response to the

Yangzi region. "Chinese Guilds from the Seventeenth to the Twentieth Centuries: An Overview", *International Review of Social History*, vol. 53 (2008), Supplement, pp.237-244".

23 Golas, "Early Ch'ing Guilds", p.555. Proto-guilds may be datable to the Song, though evidence of Yuan and early Ming guilds is rare.

24 Defining features included "a commonly owned, or rented, place of assembly, written regulations, and recognition by the local administration," see Rowe, "Ming-Qing Guilds", *Ming Qing yanjiu*, no.1 (Sept. 1992), pp.47-60; Moll-Murata, "Chinese Guilds", p.217.

25 Golas, "Early Ch'ing Guilds", pp.560-561.

26 Moll-Murata notes the incomplete nature of published documentary evidence ("Chinese Guilds", pp.213, 221). Suzhou guild sources illustrate this factor: a collection of surviving guild steles was published in the 1950s, but in 1960, Liu Yongcheng published a guild list that included many examples absent from that collection, see *Ming Qing Suzhou gongshangye beike ji*, and Liu Yongcheng, "Shilun qingdai Suzhou shougongye hanghui", *Lishi yanjiu*, vol. 25, (1959), pp.21-46. This is partly because records are more likely to survive from the post-Taiping era, but many comprised a revision or updating of guild regulations and omit the actual original guild foundation date; and further records tend to inform us of the larger, wealthier, and state-sanctioned organisations - guilds or trade groups might have been organised without temple ownership and hence lacked temple steles, see Golas, "Early Ch'ing Guilds", p.560.

changing socio-economic climate, but ultimately guild character and formation were rooted in mid-Qing practices.

Another factor is that only in the early Qing did the growth in luxury and everyday handicrafts enable the numbers of craftsman and merchants to reach the critical mass necessary for guild formation. Guild existence depended upon the approval of the authorities and county officials were likely unwilling to allow gatherings of ordinary people, particularly if they lacked the wealth to found a guildhall, as clothing producers probably did. Accordingly, craft guilds tended to form later than merchant guilds and same-place guilds: there is little evidence of their existence prior to 1730. The earliest example in my data is the Suzhou tailor guild (*chengyi gongsuo*) founded in 1780 (Qianlong 45).²⁷ Their regulation stele of 1898 (Guangxu 24) opened with this statement: “We are all engaged in the business of making clothes and we previously had a guild. It was created in the *Gengzi* year of the Qianlong reign, in the place of *Zhengsan*tu, north of *Jin* and *Chang*.”²⁸ The eighteenth-century formation of craft guilds also reflects the increasing ties between business owners and local government: merchants acquired low-level degrees (*jiansheng*) and officials opened shops, both of which legitimised the guild formation process. The mid-Qing handicraft guild can be understood as a network; commercialized, specialized production required closer producer connections, and guild records attest to connections between different types of handicraft producers, for example the Suzhou textile guild *Yunzhang gongsuo* lists donations from nine brocade shops (*tizhuang*), fifteen satin clothing shops (*chouyi*), seventy-six cotton clothing shops (*buyi*), in addition to numerous individuals, and eleven itinerant traders (*shuike yindang huo*).²⁹ We also see connections between embroiderers and clothes-makers, for example in the “Stele listing donations for repairing the guild hall of the Southern and Northern Gu Embroidery and New Clothes Shops” (*Nanbei Gu xiu xinyipu xindian*

27 Bradstock, *Craft Guilds in the Ch'ing Dynasty*, pp.1-2.

28 “*Changzhou xian jinzhi wuyi yimin zai chengyi gongsuo xunzhi xirao bei*” (Guangxu 24, 1898), in *Ming Qing Suzhou gongshangye beike ji*, p.225.

29 *Suzhou lishi bowuguan, Ming Qing Suzhou gongshangye beike ji* (Nanjing: Jiangsu renmin chubanshe, Jiangsu sheng xinhua shudian, 1981), pp.215-220 (Guangxu 6, 1880).

juan xiang hua ming bei).³⁰ The *Gu xiu* embroidery trade guild in Foshan bought together those working in a workshop and those who sourced embroidery work from countryside women.³¹ We can hypothesise that through these professional networks, information on styles and market could be shared between producers, for example a late Qing Beijing hatters' guild stipulated that all members should share new designs with each other: "Our guild (members) produce women's hats in new and fashionable styles, which change with the times. Therefore, for all those in our guild, when (a guild member) produces a new style, they must notify others in the trade, so as to attract customers and promote more sales."³² This suggests that stylistic innovations were viewed as a shared guild resource, an intriguing thought to consider in regard to the occasional examples of duplicated embroidery patterns. Fig. 4.1 shows borders taken from two jackets in different collections (J6, J7), both depicting the *Tale of the White Snake*. The borders are clearly worked from the same pattern, yet they are not identical: the collar shapes are different and the scenes are not ordered or positioned identically. These differences are explicable in the context of shared patterns, whether by different workshops or within one workshop, duplicated and distributed to different embroiderers. Thus, the two jackets evidence how commercial communities enabled the dissemination of fashionable narrative scenes.

Another factor in the mid-Qing formation of embroidery and dress guilds was the increasing numbers of male craftsmen and shopkeepers. Professional embroidery carried a male face: guilds and shops were owned, managed, and staffed by men. The commercialization of dress fundamentally side-lined female workers, something that should, of course, be seen in the wider early modern context, well-established by Bray, in which women were gradually marginalised in textile production.³³ The new specialist jobs created by the commercialisation of dress and embroidery were often filled by men: the embroidery agents

30 *Shanghai bowuguan tushi*, *Shanghai beike ziliao xuanji* (Shanghai: Shanghai Renmin Chubanshe, 1980), no.137, p.301-304 (n.d).

31 *Foshan zhongyi xiangzhi*, comp. Peng Zeyi, *Zhongguo gongshang hanghui shiliao ji*, p.149.

32 Toa Dobunkai, *Shina keizai zensho*, vol 2, p.648, *maoye hanggui*, cited in Bradstock, *Zhongguo gongshang hanghui shiliao ji*, p.194, n.38.

33 *Technology and Gender*, chap 5.

employed by Suzhou and Guangzhou workshops to distribute embroidery work throughout the surrounding countryside or the professional design drawers who prepared embroidery patterns and ribbon woven designs. An 1881 report, *Silk*, by a European customs commissioner noted of nineteenth-century Suzhou: “The art of preparing patterns for the composition of flowers, new designs etc is a monopoly in the hands of about 200-300 men”.³⁴ The absence of women at the public, urban surface of commercial dress and embroidery production means their major role in this sector can only be surmised; they are rarely mentioned in guild and commercial records. But beneath that surface, commercialization was connecting female home workers with the male workshop embroiderers. Western observers often remarked on Chinese male embroiderers but by the late nineteenth-century they had begun to detect the less visible role of female embroiderers. The *Silk* report observed that most of the 1050 embroiderers of Suzhou were women and young girls; and an early American visitor to the city concurred: “In and around the city embroidery employs 20,000 women. Mandarins’ robes, ladies’ dresses, and stage actors’ apparel are all embroidered. The Superintendent of the Silk Looms twice a year sends on 1000 trunks of embroidered clothing for the use of the emperor’s household. In this yamen 200 men, it is said, sublet the jobs to the women.”³⁵

This process of sub-contracting embroidery was not uncontroversial; a Wugang clothing shop regulation warned: “For clothing and other such objects which are already cut, it is not allowed for other people to take this work to do themselves, those who violate this rule will be fined 800 coppers.”³⁶ As the numbers of producers increased, guilds became more concerned with who was included and who was excluded.

³⁴ *Silk*, p.74.

³⁵ *Silk*, p.75; Du Bose, *Beautiful Soo*, p.58.

³⁶ Peng Zeyi, *Zhongguo gongshang hanghui shiliao ji*, pp.382-3 “Chengyi dian tiaogui” (Wugang). Mann notes the Qing government, unlike European states, never adopted protectionist measures to help guilds compete with the threat of cheap, home-based female labour, because they viewed women’s work as morally entwined to the “wifely way” (*judao*) (“Household Handicrafts and State Policy in Qing Times”, pp.82, 89); On women’s limited role in European guilds, see Claire Crowston, “Women, Gender, and Guilds in Early Modern Europe: An Overview of Recent Research”, *International Review of Social History*, vol. 53 (2008), Supplement, pp.19-44.

Many craft workers were barred, for example, the travelling merchants (*keshang*) and journeymen who were viewed suspiciously: “Those who carry baskets, selling on the street, are not allowed to donate funds to join our group; whether in the city or suburbs, they are not allowed to open a shop.”³⁷ But women were the most disenfranchised of craft workers, something guild formation exacerbated, since they could not join guilds. But this also meant they did not pay guild entrance fees, making them low-cost producers, and hence attractive recipients of sub-contracted work.

Explicitly gender-defined terms are rarely revealed, making it hard to detect guild unease as to women’s production role. Historian William Rowe has examined one interesting exception, the regulations of two Chongqing embroidery guilds: the Yongsheng Guild established in the mid-eighteenth-century and the Three Emperors Guild established later in 1849. In 1842 the Yongsheng Guild revised and republished its regulations, ostensibly to defend itself against the perceived encroachment by the competing Three Emperors Guild - Yongsheng members were forbidden from accepting contract work from a member of the Three Emperors Guild. In 1849, the previously unofficial Three Emperors Guild issued a regulatory code of its own, largely similar to that of the Yongsheng.³⁸ Unusually one of the regulations asserts their products in terms of gender-defined production: “Male artisans produce men’s work (*nangong*). Female artisans produce women’s work (*nügong*). It is prohibited for a female to do half the work on a job, then turn it over to a male to complete and sell as his own product;”³⁹ those who violated these regulations were punished with expulsion. Rowe presents the intriguing hypothesis that perhaps the Yongsheng Guild were mainly female, attempting to exert control over members subcontracting for jobs from the newly formed and male Three Emperors Guild, but the evidence is not wholly convincing. He points to the lack of gender identification from the Yongsheng Guild, but it was extremely rare for a guild to mention gender at all, unless it was to forbid women from entering guild property or participating in guild

37 Peng Zeyi, *Zhongguo gongshang hanghui shiliao ji*, p.374-5, “chengyi dian tiaogui”.

38 Rowe, “Ming-Qing Guilds”, pp.54-56; the Sichuan guild sources are from *Sichuan sheng dang’an guan*, *Sichuan daxue lishi xi*, eds. *Qingdai Qian Jia Dao Baxian dang’an xuanbian* (Chengdu: Sichuan Daxue Chubanshe, 1989), pp.234-6.

39 Rowe, “Ming-Qing Guilds”, p.24; *Qingdai Qian Jia Dao Baxian dang’an xuanbian*, p.236.

religious activities.⁴⁰ As public organisations, they were by default male; the state could hardly have tolerated the public activities of the Yongsheng guild if they had been female. That the guild regulations of the Three Emperors sought to distinguish themselves from the Yongsheng primarily by the ban on communal production on embroidered objects implies that sub-contracting was engaged in by the Yongsheng guild, and we will shortly examine this system by which embroidered dress was modularized and divided across a production network. It also suggests that the distinction between “nangong” and “nügong” was a meaningful one to those party to the regulations. Some aspects of this separation revolved around size and weight. The Customs report noted in Suzhou, men were required for the heavy work involved in “large hanging embroidery”, which probably meant religious or ceremonial furnishing textiles that were key elements in ceremonial occasions.⁴¹ Larger heavy items of dress were also likely difficult to embark on without the space and equipment available in a workshop setting, the home embroiderer would have worked on a simple embroidery table, not the larger, vertical structures that facilitated large hangings and robes (Fig. 4.2a,b).

The Chongqing data illustrates how far the urban, male face of commercialized dress presented by the guild records constitutes a simplified angle upon a complicated history. As men began to take on areas of work that once belonged to women, masculinizing what was culturally a feminised, home-located production and fraying the ties between textile work and female virtue, tensions began to emerge, something far more evident in popular culture than official sources. The early associations between women’s work and virtue incited prejudices against the woman who did not make her own dress and the male dressmaker who made it for her. One short story “Ren shi chuan”, based on a Tang *chuanqi*, tells of a fox-maiden who lures a scholar Wei Yin. Several oddities surrounding this beauty, Miss Ren, are early flagged up to the reader, one is her disinclination to make her own clothes: “I’d rather have ready-made

40 Rowe, “Ming-Qing Guilds”, pp.54, 56; Moll-Murata, “Chinese Guilds”, p.225, n.56.

41 *Silk*, p.75.

clothes.”⁴² Such a domestic flaw implied a woman shopping for clothing or dispatching a salesman to purchase on her behalf, both suspicious activities that may have associated her with “concubines and entertainers, women who lack practical, domestic skills.”⁴³ The truly virtuous woman provided her entire family with clothing, as extolled by the late Qing Zhejiang writer Tong Qianmeng:

My respected deceased mother Mrs Yao, the wife of a high official, excelled at clothes-making, and even when she was more than sixty years of age, still more than half of her children and grandchildren’s clothes and shoes were produced by her good self. However later generations could not reach her level and when (I) see tailor-made articles coming into the house, I can understand why.⁴⁴

He sighed, “The tailoring trade requires specialist skills and training, nowadays male workers have gradually replaced female needlework, and ladies at home no longer need work their needle, knife and ruler.”⁴⁵ Tong’s perspective on the rise of market-made clothes and embroidery was widely shared: “In the past things like shoes and socks were generally made by hand by women, nowadays however this work has been taken over by the market.”⁴⁶ The “qugei yu shi” in this comment highlights the moral ambiguity perceived in this process: who was to blame for the commercialization of embroidered dress? Had the market “taken over” this work, or had women “given over” this work to the market?

Regardless of one’s position on this issue, what is undisputable is that the male dressmaker was uniformly maligned by Qing society. The lowly status of the tailor was clear from the “Gusu fanhua tu” data examined in Chapter 2 (Table 2.1), where the dressmaking shops either had no sign or a very plain sign and a far humbler shop-front than the textile establishments. Craftsmen held fairly lowly positions to

42 William H. Nienhuaser, Jr. trans., “Miss Jen”, in *Traditional Chinese Stories: Themes and Variations*, eds. Y.W.Ma and Joseph S.M.Lau (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), pp.339-45, p.343; Shen Jiqi (ca. 741-ca.805) in *Taiping guangji* (Hu section), *juan* 452.

43 Rania Huntingdon, *Alien Kind: Foxes and Late Imperial Chinese Narrative* (Cambridge, MA; Harvard University Press, 2003), p.225.

44 Tong Qianmeng, *Longjiang zhuzhici*, in *Yi geng xuan yigao* (1887), *juan* 2, p.8.

45 Tong Qianmeng, *ibid*, p.8

46 (Qianlong) *Changshu zhaowen bezhi*, *juan* 1, *fengsu*, cited in Li Bozhong, *Jiangnan de zaoqi gongyehua*, p.145.

begin with, but tailors seem to have been particularly defamed, something scholar Louise Crane observed in Beijing:

... in the old days the Chinese tailor enjoyed little respect in the community, received a wage lower than that of almost any other craftsman, and was universally believed to be on the watch for ways and means of defrauding his patrons. Indeed in the amount of material submitted, allowance had to be made for the percentage that would be filched, and even this did not always suffice him.⁴⁷

The dishonest tailor was a common trope in fiction and non-fiction alike; an example of an honest tailor (*yigong*) was unusual enough to warrant a short essay by Li Guangting (1812-1880) who began by contextualizing: “Weaving and sewing this is women’s work... ever since men started making clothes, it has been commonly called tailoring, and this occurs increasingly.” He then told of a tailor from his hometown, who had practiced some seventy years earlier, who was fairly honest and produced good quality work, but, he qualified: “Generally speaking, for men to do women’s work is to be in an inferior position, this is an act of evil that will store up trouble for future generations.”⁴⁸ Beyond mere dishonesty, the traits associated with the male tailor or embroiderer might be still more insidious, for example in the tales of male usurpers of *nühong* and their wicked intentions. The mid-Qing female-themed encyclopaedia *Lianshi* contains a section entitled “Jiao cixiu zhi bian” (Changes in the teaching of needlework), which anthologizes several stories narrating the dangers of evil men who dress up as women in order to be hired by wealthy families to teach their daughters needlework, and are only discovered after the girls get pregnant.⁴⁹ These tales reflected the suspicions running through Qing society that clung to the men who embroidered and tailored, to the women who purchased their embroidered and tailored objects, and likely to the objects themselves.

The maligned position of the male tailor or embroiderer explains why so many of the guild records include a claim to a more legitimate identity, an attempt to validate a group of craftsmen long denigrated

47 Crane, *China in Sign and Symbol*, p.56.

48 Li Guangting, *Xiangyan jieyi* (1850; Beijing: Zhonghua shuju chubanshe, 2006), *juan* 3, p.42.

49 Li Yonghu, ed., *Lianshi Xuan Zhu: Zhongguo gudai junü shenghuo daguan* (Beijing: Zhongguo renmin daxue chubanshe, 1994), pp.437-8.

in literary and popular traditions. This, for example, from the founding records of a Zhejiang clothes shop:

It is said that the design “fufu” (embroidered axe pattern) began in antiquity with the proper hats and clothes regulated by the Tang dynasty our clothes-making trade is not like other crafts, it requires special training, and this skill can benefit all the people, repairing by sewing with honesty and diligence.⁵⁰

Guild deity worship can be understood as further expression of this desire to self-aggrandize the position of their members through cultural associations. Many clothing and embroidery guilds established guild-temples to worship the Yellow Emperor.⁵¹ The textual source of this allegiance to Huangdi as the creator of clothing was the *Zhouyi* passage cited in the last chapter, where Huangdi “allowed the upper and lower garments to hang down, and the world was in order.”⁵² By connecting their trade with the remote past, they sought to strengthen and embellish their trade; claiming heredity to Huangdi’s venerable tradition gained the guilds a veneer of hegemonic literary culture that may have helped to assuage the conflicts inherent in their pursuit of traditionally female activities.⁵³ But the search for a male model of embroidery also located more recent figures of worship. The main Suzhou embroidery guild *Jinwen Gongsuo*, first established during the Daoguang period (1821-1850), honoured Gu Mingshi (1508-1588) and his elder brother as the progenitors of the trade.⁵⁴ Today, Gu, an official of late Ming Songjiang (Shanghai), is remembered more for the three women of his family associated with the formation of the seventeenth-

50 Peng Zeyi, *Zhongguo gongshang hanghui shiliao ji*, p.378-9, “Dongping chengyi dian tiaogui” (Anhua, Zhejiang, 1904).

51 Li Qiao, *Zhongguo hangye shen chongbai*, pp.187-188; Peng Zeyi, *Zhongguo gongshang hanghui shiliao ji*, p.181, pp.376-7, “Chengyi dian tiaogui” (Yiyang). Huangdi worshipping clothing guilds included Dongbei, Foshan, Dazhu, Neijiang, Beijing, Changsha, Shanghai, and Jinhua.

52 Chap 3, n. 59.

53 Craft guilds often worshipped historical or legendary figures, giving the oft-looked down upon handicraft workers some self-esteem and respect against the official ideology that placed them below scholars, see Bradstock, *Craft Guilds in the Ch’ing Dynasty*, p.210; Li Qiao, *Zhongguo hangye shen chongbai*, p.480.

54 A group of embroiderers had initially made offerings at a temple in Fengxi. This site was destroyed in 1860 (Xianfeng 10) during the Taiping rebellion, but just a couple of years later in 1864 (Tongzhi 3) embroiderers began to return, and in 1867 (Tongzhi 6) embroiderers in the west part of town held a meeting and agreed to donate money to buy a property in *Xiangdeng nongkou* in the Golden gate area (*Xiatang jie* 142 *hao*), in order to establish a place to make offerings and to assist the welfare of its members. The stele “Cixiu ye chuangli Jinwen gongsuo yuanqi bei”, 1884 (Guangxu 10) listed 65 embroidery houses who had donated funds to the guild (*Ming Qing Suzhou gongshangye beikeji*, pp.39-42).

century Gu family school of embroidery (*Gu xiu*): Miao Ruiyun - the concubine of Gu Mingshi's son Gu Jiying (Gu Haihui), who first established the family reputation; Han Ximeng - the wife of Gu's grandson Gu Shouqian, who developed the family reputation; and Gu Yulan - Gu Mingshi's great-granddaughter, who consolidated and expanded the *Gu xiu* school.⁵⁵ To understand why this guild wished to associate themselves with male representatives of a female embroidery tradition, we turn now to different ways of categorizing Qing embroidery.

We have seen how socio-economic developments of the Qing period commercialized embroidery, creating local markets, urban guilds, and male apprentice-staffed workshops. Embroidered textiles dominated Qing material culture to an extent that is hard to fathom from the perspective of the multi-materiality of twenty-first century life; as embroidery become a requisite materiality in weddings, funerals, birthdays, festivals, and celebrations, it was applied to every imaginable object, and though we tend to think of this embroidered Qing world mainly in connection to elite families, the more widespread embroidery became, the more accessible it became to people who previously probably couldn't consume it – maidservants, lowly clerks, small-time artisans or traders. In turn, the more widely consumed embroidered dress, accessories and furnishings became, the more embroidery provided an income-stream for many parties of different status and class, and the more different ways of categorizing and distinguishing embroidered objects emerged: categories of place, object type, and particularly categories that divided the producer according to their socio-economic position: palace (*gongtingxiu*), boudoir (*guigexiu*), market (*shangpinxiu*), village (*minjianxiu*). Since the producer behind these objects is very rarely documented in any way, these were visually based categories, based on imagery, palette, and stitchwork that distinguished both producer and consumer. But as Qing embroidery became more commercialized, these different categories also increasingly entwined, each genre influencing the other in style and imagery. Accordingly, the next section considers how the kind of commercial embroiderers who belonged to the

55 See *Gu xiu guoji xueshu yantaohui wengao ji* (Shanghai Museum, 2008).

Suzhou *Jinwen gongsuo* can be understood as connecting the boudoir and the village, and how the kind of commercial embroidery found in the jackets can be understood as a dialogue between the embroidery styles of each.

3. MARKETING THE BOUDOIR: *GU XIU* AND *SHANGPINXIU*

“For the best in women’s work, none can surpass the gentlewomen of Wu prefecture.”⁵⁶

Of the different embroidery genres, the boudoir embroiderer was both the most influential and the most romanticized - the elite, educated beauty sewing in her boudoir, as elegant, erudite, and talented as the literati painter. Only a small fraction of Qing embroiderers would have possessed the life-style required for this style of practice, but as an ideal, it came to define Chinese embroidery, penetrating even the palace where Manchu imperial consorts sewed pouches and other embroidered items for their menfolk.⁵⁷ The idealization of *guige xiu* owed much to the Gu women: they were hardly the first boudoir embroiderers but they were the first to imbue their embroidery with this setting and its associated attributes. In so doing, they transfigured embroidery into art: signed by the embroiderer, merging literati imagery and calligraphy, endorsed by collectors and tastemakers, infused with elite cultural capital.

Gu xiu built upon a tradition of Suzhou embroidery that originated in the Song period, utilizing both imagery and stitchwork to make an explicit connection with late Northern Song pictorial embroidery.⁵⁸ Thus, the standard narrative locates the genesis of *Gu xiu* in the spring of 1634 when Han Ximeng first

56 Wang Shizhen (1634-1711), *Chi bei ou tan* (1689; Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1892), *xia*, no.928, p.487.

57 The historian Wu Xiangxiang (1912-2007) records the Qianlong Emperor asking his Empress to make him a flint pouch in 1761, *Zijincheng mi tan* (Taipei, 1953), p.91).

58 Northern Song Emperor Huizong (r.1100-1126) was the first to establish an imperial embroidery workshop based at court. He was also one of the first emperors to include fine embroidery and *kesi* hangings and albums within imperial art collections (See *Guoli gugong bowuyuan kesi cixiu*, p.20; Vainker, *Chinese Silk*, p.135).

acquired an album of Song and Yuan paintings and was inspired to translate them into embroidered format.⁵⁹ This account is gently satirized in *Hong lou meng*, when Cao tells of the latest sensation, a Suzhou girl named Hui-niang, “an accomplished amateur painter and calligrapher”, who “embroidered only occasionally for her own diversion and not as a means of making money”. Since her flower designs “were copied from flower-paintings by famous masters”, the design and colouring of her screens “were far superior to the cruder, more garish productions of professional embroiderers”. She is described in the model of Han Ximeng: “Since Hui-niang did not depend on her embroider for a living, specimens of it, despite its great fame, have always been hard to come by.” And like Han, the market’s demand for such objects led many to copy her style: “imitations deliberately made to take in the inexpert buyer.” When Miss Hui dies tragically young, the Hanlin official “Mr Wenmo” so treasures “Hui embroidery”, that he decides “embroidery” inadequately describes her achievements, and instead after discussion with his peers, settles on “wen” – pattern, and as a result “Hui embroidery” becomes an art form with a “unlimited” price on the market.”⁶⁰ Cao recapitulates key aspects of the *Gu xiu* narrative: the embroiderer’s training in calligraphy and painting; her use of classical models; object rarity; market imitation; the ostensive lack of commercial intent that might taint the object’s artistic integrity.

In fact, recent scholarship has shown that commercial viability was always part of the *Gu xiu* agenda. Traditionally the narrative drew a curve: *Gu xiu* rose during the Wanli reign (1573-1620); was established during the Chongzhen period (1627-1644) - the “high point of a tradition: the women of the Gu family made their art for private appreciation, not for financial gain”⁶¹; and declined during the early Qing when Gu Shi, the granddaughter of Gu Mingshi, was widowed and left dependent on the needle and thread to support her family. Huang Yifen has destabilized this account by demonstrating that Gu women had long

59 Kuhn ed. *Chinese Silks*, p.410.

60 Adapted from Hawkes trans., *The Story of the Stone*, vol. 2, p.578; Cao Xueqin, *Hong lou meng* (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1985), chap.53, p.749.

61 Kuhn, *Chinese Silks*, p.110.

engaged in embroidery primarily to support themselves and their families.⁶² Indeed their ability to market the boudoir was perhaps their most remarkable achievement: they manipulated the trope of the boudoir beauty in order to add value to their embroidered creations, and in so doing, they facilitated a legitimate means by which gentrywomen could support their families. It has been argued that their “elevation of embroidery to a respectable art form” divided women into economic producers and cultural producers: “as needlework became divorced from household production for gentry artists, it became a means of subsistence for lower-class daughters.”⁶³ Yet asserting this model of Qing embroidery where professional (embroidering for a living) and amateur (embroidering for leisure) embroidery were clearly separated along class lines, appears to take the *Gu xiu* spin at face value. If you were a young widow with small children to raise, embroidering paintings and accessories for people in your wider social circle was one of the few acceptable means of supporting your family, and there is considerable evidence to show that both gentry and common women depended upon embroidery work. The talented Zhang daughters of mid-late Qing Changzhou sold embroidery to a wealthy grain broker in exchange for rice.⁶⁴ Elite embroiderers were recorded in local gazetteer records classified as virtuous women; for example Mrs Zhao, wife of Zou Tao, forced to turn to needlework after both families’ fortunes declined, labouring day and night through the hot summers and bitter winters.⁶⁵ This hyperbolic emphasis on their handicraft labour was common, for example one Miss Zhang, recorded in the Qianlong period *Fuzhou fuzhi*, whose husband had died when she was just 24, and whose unceasing pursuit of embroidery work caused her to go blind.⁶⁶ Their talents were a source of pride for local literati, who described their skills with admiration. For example, Wang Daozhao of Songling (Wujiang), famous for its female writers: “(She) sketches the pattern, selecting the latest styles; lightly, sparsely, a few dots of spring; a leaf, a petal, embroidering with close

62 Huang Yifen traces this back to the luxurious lifestyles of the second generation, Gu Mingshi’s sons Gu Jiying and Gu Douying (“Gu xiu xinkao”, p.34) I thank Huang for sending me her paper.

63 Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers*, p.175.

64 Susan Mann fictionally reconstructs their lives based on historical sources in *The Talented Women of the Zhang Family* ((Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), p.26, n. 54.

65 Zhu Qiqian, *Nühong zhuan zhenglue* (Cunsutang, 1928), p. 21

66 Xu Jingxi et al, *Qianlong Fuzhou fuzhi* (Shanghai: Shanghai shudian, 2000), vol. 2, *juan* 66, *Lienü* part 2, p.291.

attention; how she excels in expressing the spirit.”⁶⁷ Typically the artistic nature of their skills was emphasized, they produced embroidered pictures (*huaxin*) not embroidered objects (*riyong shipin*); in a distinction made by collector and scholar Zhu Qiqian (1872-1964), they engaged in embroidery (*cixin*), not needlework (*zhengong*).⁶⁸ And the disdain for explicitly discussing financial transactions of women’s work means the process by which they made a living is glossed over in the manner of literati painters.⁶⁹ But after the Taiping, as embroidery schools opened and Shen Shou validated a public face for the female embroiderer, named professional female embroiderers start to appear: Xu Meibao of West Village was employed by the Suzhou’s *sizhi yamen gonghuojun* as *xingong* - she specialized in *pingjin*-couched embroidered rank badges for officials, and embroidered sleevebands, jackets, and skirts for their wives; or the Xu sisters of Wang Family Village, renowned for gold-couched rank badges and sleevebands, they once used Dutch gold thread to embroider a “longevity robe” containing 600 *shou* characters.⁷⁰

67 Sun Peilan gives some examples of elite embroiderers recorded in *Wuxian zhi* and the *Song Ling Nüzi shizheng* (*Zhongguo cixin shi* pp.87-88).

68 An important connoisseur of Chinese textiles, Zhu Qiqian was a premier of the Beiyang region during the Republican period. He made a study of the imperial collection (*Qing neifu cang kesi shuhua lu*) and compiled short biographical accounts of embroiderers and other textile artists/artisans in *Nühong zhuan zhenglue*.

69 See Cahill, *The Painters’ Practice: How Artists Lived and Worked in Traditional China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), chap.2.

70 See Zhu Feng, “Su xiu fazhan jian shi”, *Wenshi ziliao xuanji* (Suzhou), no.8, pp.121-136, p.127. Zhu (courtesy name Ruicheng, 1910-1993) was one of the last traditional Suzhou embroiderers: born in Shanghai, she moved to Suzhou in 1915 aged 5. Early taught painting and embroidery by her mother, in 1924 she moved to Danyang to study embroidery at the *Danyang Zhengze nüzi zhiye xuexiao*, where she was taught by Yang Shouyu, at that time introducing modernist stitches like *luanzen xiu*. After the Republic was established, she made her home in Suzhou where she taught embroidery in various institutions. Well respected for her own embroidery (including her famous portraits of Mao Zedong), whether by artistry, education or research, Zhu exerted considerable influence over Suzhou embroidery circles. I have leaned heavily on her writings, for she spent her formative years, professionally and personally, in Suzhou embroidery circles, and would have been able to record oral testimonies from craftsmen and women alive in the late nineteenth century. Though her historical research is often uncited, this reflects contemporary practice and an implicit understanding from her audience that her knowledge and authority stemmed from her own experience of Suzhou embroidery. See Ko, “Between the Boudoir and the Global Market”, on Shen Shou’s contribution to the shift whereby women could legitimately and publically compete in the profession of embroidery.

The commercial embroidery sector was far more explicit in their marketing of the boudoir. It was common by the mid-Qing if not before to utilize the craftsmen name as a shop brand (witness the name branded shops listed by Gu Zhentao in Table 2.1).⁷¹ From Chongqing to Foshan, late Qing commercial embroidery workshops and retail shops widely adopted the *Gu xiu* name and the *Gu xiu* style:

The common people all learn *Gu xiu* to make a living, rather like (they once practiced) weaving and the like. They use the technique of splitting the thread and use fine needles like the tip of a brush. More than half are male workers. Nowadays screens are made from embroidered silk damask, and they are very expensive, everyone scrambles to buy them.”⁷²

As the techniques by which the Gu family had once distinguished themselves became commonplace, the style was devalued. Their famous technique of integrating brush and needle (*jiese* lit. borrowing colour), once praised by contemporary enthusiasts, was viewed as overdone, evidencing nineteenth-century decline. Even the lowly “scissors trade” embroiderers used the *Gu xiu* term, seeking to associate their objects with the aspirational image of elite gentry-women - her elegance, education, and privileged lifestyle.⁷³ Huang argues that by the late Qing, the term *Gu xiu* was used as a shorthand for embroidery, but what *Gu xiu* conveyed was a very specific idea of embroidery as imagined in the setting of the Jiangnan boudoir, and it was employed to distinguish objects from the folkier market style embroidery in order to increase their market worth.

The commercial workshops utilising the *Gu xiu* name were obviously not boudoir embroiderers (though it is possible that they sub-contracted work to gentlewomen embroiderers). A Qing consumer would have classified these types of producers as commercial or market embroidery (*shi xiu*), a genre little noticed in

71 The term “branding” seems appropriate in the context of the circulation of craftsmen names, sign names and publicizing of fashionable material culture through guide books, gazetteers, and encyclopaedia, see Wu Renshu, “Ming Qing de guanggao wenhua yu chengshi xiaofei fengshang” for a study of the uses of advertising and branding to build “urban consumer networks” in Ming and Qing China (conference paper “*Zhongguo chengshi shenghuo de jingyan: 15-20 shiji* (Dec, 2008) pp.1-22) I am grateful to Professor Wu for sharing his paper.

72 *Shanghai xianzhi* (Qianlong), *juan 1, fengsu*, p.23, cited in Huang Yifen, “Gu xiu xinkao”, p.22.

73 Foshan’s *Gu xiu* trade guild is detailed in *Foshan zhongyi xiangzhi*, comp. Peng Zeyi, *Zhongguo gongshang banghui shiliao ji*, p.149); the Chongqing *Gu xiu* trade issued regulations in 1842 and 1849 (*Qingdai Qian Jia Dao Baxian dang’an xuanpian*, pp.234-6); on “Lingjian Gu xiu ye”, see Sun Peilan, *Wudi cixiu wenhua* (Nanjing: Nanjing daxue chubanshe, 1997), p.25.

Chinese embroidery history, shunned by both art historical accounts of boudoir embroidery and anthropological accounts of folk embroidery. Nonetheless these workshops produced a large proportion of Qing embroidery, purchased by officials high and low, landowners, merchants and upper classes in contexts spanning ritual and relationships, celebration and festivity: “requisite social lubricants for friends and strangers”.⁷⁴ Used to mark birthdays and anniversaries, shop openings and guild gatherings, their range and multitude is illustrated in the listings of an early twentieth-century Hunan embroidery department (Table 4.2): longevity hangings, hanging scrolls, banner flags, door hangings or table frontals like the example in Figure 4.3. Made of silk satin, lined in cotton, it was commissioned by the Iron Merchants of Zhoujiakou, Henan in 1820 and gifted to the ROM collection in the mid-twentieth century by dealer Miss Alice Boney. An imperial-esque long dragon billows out over mountainous rocks, with auspicious motifs like vases filled with flowers of four seasons to express the wish for peace year-round. The piece is embroidered in a basic range of satin, split, seed, and net stitches, in a palette of blue, red, black and white with minimal shading transitions. Commercial embroidery often contains paratext with information about when, where, and why the object was made; here an inscription is embroidered neatly in *kaishu* style along both side columns: “Jiaqing twenty-fifth year, fifth month, respectfully presented with unsullied hands by the Zhoujiakou Iron Merchants.” Six of the member workshop names are recorded beneath the top flap. Figure 4.4 shows a more extravagant piece, an embroidered silk hanging given to the V&A by Mrs Stewart Lockhart (1894-1985). Her father, the military official Sir James Stewart Lockhart (1858-1937) was based in Hong Kong from 1882-1902, where the hanging was most likely acquired. It dates to 1863 and was commissioned for the ninetieth birthday of a Mr Huang of Guangdong; at the top is a large scene depicting *The Insignia-laden Bed* (See J8) surrounded by a border of various figural scenes, and at centre a lengthy painted dedication listing the numerous wellwishers.⁷⁵ The urban, commercial aesthetic presented by such objects is not easily integrated into the museum’s notion

⁷⁴ Ko, *Cinderella’s Sisters*, p.220; Sun Peilan, *Zhongguo cixiu shi* (Beijing: Beijing tushuguan chubanshe, 2007), p.279 on Jiangnan *shixiu*.

⁷⁵ Verity Wilson, *Chinese Textiles*, p.61.

of Chinese embroidery as artistic and genteel, but they should be celebrated as historical source, as vital informants in establishing regional embroidery styles (in this case *yuexiu*) and the role of the commercial embroidery workshops in marking celebratory life in Qing China.⁷⁶

4. EMBROIDERY NETWORKS IN LATE QING SUZHOU

If boudoir embroidery and *Gu xiu* albums formed the ideal of Qing embroidery, then guilds like the *Jinwen gongsuo* and the Henan iron merchant's table frontal comprised the reality. But in the end, how separate was ideal and reality? To address this question, I wish to consider Suzhou - famous then as now as the China's "embroidery market" - as a case study of how commercialization connected different kinds of embroidery producers.⁷⁷

Suzhou's reputation rose during the Qing upon two currents: the fame of *Gu xiu*, which had become entwined with the local *Suxiu* embroidery style;⁷⁸ and the location of the Suzhou *zhiqiao ju*, one of three imperial textile workshops tasked with producing embroidered garments and furnishings for imperial elites.⁷⁹ The *zhiqiao ju* itself employed very few embroiderers (*xinjiang*), partly because there was an embroidery workshop within the Imperial Household Department that worked on the assembled robe when it arrived from the southern textile manufactories.⁸⁰ Still some imperial and official items were

76 *Yuexiu* embroidery was primarily produced in Guangzhou, Chaozhou and Shunde, see Shen Congwen, "Tan Guangxiu", in *Huahua duoduo, tantan guanguan: Shen Congwen wenwu yu yishu yanjiu wenji* (Beijing: Beijing waiwen chubanshe, 1994).

77 Suzhou is extolled as "*xiushi*" in the guild stele "Wuchang Qianjiang huiguan paiji", Qianlong 37th year (1772), in *Suzhou lishi bowuguan*, ed., *Ming Qing Suzhou gongshangye beike ji* (Collection of Ming and Qing Suzhou Commercial Stele Inscriptions from Ming and Qing Suzhou) (Nanjing: Jiangsu renmin chubanshe, Jiangsu sheng xinhua shudian, 1981), p.19, no.15.

78 On the relationship between *Su xiu* and *Gu xiu*, see Gu Gongye, "Gu xiu yu Su xiu", *Wenwu cankao ziliao*, no.9 (1958), pp.17-19.

79 Kuhn, ed. *Chinese Silks*, p.469.

80 See Sun Pei, *Suzhou zhiqiao ju zhi* (Nanjing: Jiangsu renmin chubanshe, 1959), pp.94-6; Zhu Feng, "Su xiu fazhan jianshi", p.22, 135; This workshop was one of seven in the Six Storehouses, which was under the jurisdiction of the Storage Office, one of seven offices in the Imperial Household Department. See Yan Yong, "Production Processes and Imperial Textile

embroidered in Suzhou. For these items, when the palace order was made, the Beijing based *Guangyuan jingzhuang* notified the Suzhou based *Guangyuan fenzhuang* to prepare the patterns, and an imperial envoy was dispatched to Suzhou to examine these patterns until these were satisfactory. Only then would the production process begin: purchasing the material (*gou liao*), preparing the garment or furnishing pattern on the fabric (*da yang*), drawing the embroidery design (*hui hua*). It was at this point that the object began to travel along lines of networked producers. “Project managers” (*faxiuren fentou*) working for the *Guangyuan fenzhuang* distributed the work to the Suzhou embroidery workshops (*xiu pu, xiu hu*), as the 1881 *Silk* report described: “A certain number of houses known for their speciality receive orders and divide work out among different families.”⁸¹

Suzhou’s embroidery workshops were divided into three sectors: those that produced goods for imperial and official sectors; the theatrical, religious and ceremonial shops (*xiyi bangtou ye*), who produced objects like deity costumes (*shenpao*), banner umbrellas, and burial garments; and at the lowest level in the pecking order, the “scissors” trade (*lingjian Gu xiu ye*) who produced miscellaneous commercial objects like pillow ends and purses.⁸² But what united all three types of workshop was the use of intermediary agents (*baotou, xington*) - by the late Qing numbering around one hundred and fifty - who sent out piecework to female embroiderers in the surrounding Wu countryside, as detailed in Figure 4.5.⁸³ Embroidery production in Suzhou, like many other Chinese handicraft production systems, was a pyramid: the upper layers occupied by imperial and official management and urban guilds; the middle layers by urban workshops and embroidery agents; and at the bottom, large in number if not power, the female embroiderers who

Manufactures”, in *Imperial Chinese Robes from the Forbidden City*, ed. Ming Wilson (London: V&A Publications, 2010), pp.99-101, p.99.

⁸¹ *Silk*, p.75.

⁸² Lin Xidan, *Suzhou cixiu* (Suzhou: Suzhou daxue chubanshe, 2004), pp.18, 66-68; Zhu Feng lists the following *pubu* from the *Zhizao ju* records: The Shop of National Gold (*Guojin pu*) and The Shop of Fortune and Gold (*Fujin pu*), p.22; Sun Peilan, *Wudi cixiu wenhua*, p.24.

⁸³ Zhu Feng, “Su xiu fazhan jianshi”, p.135.

were ultimately responsible for the production of the embroidered object and whose historical past is accordingly preserved in the embroidered object.⁸⁴

The *baoton* system took advantage of two central characteristics of Chinese handicrafts: specialization and labour division. For example, though object management was located inside the town, for embroidery expertise the workshops looked to the surrounding suburbs. The Republic era survey *Zhongguo shiye zhi* described: “Embroidery is a speciality of Suzhou women; folk women especially practice this trade, mostly from farming households in their leisure time from farming, the embroidery shops distribute silks and floss to the embroiderers, (who are found) particularly in Hushuguan, Mudu, Guangfu and the Xiangshan area.”⁸⁵ Figure 4.6a,b illustrates how this system evolved to become remarkably specific, interlacing place and technique to develop material nuances that spanned the Wu countryside: goldwork (*pingjin*) was produced in Hengtang; seed stitch (*dazhi*) in Lishu; embroidered dragon scales (*kelin xiulong*) in Xiangjie and Baima; gauze embroidering (*chuosha*) in Soutou outside Feng Gate; robes and badges (*paogua puqi*) in Shanren Bridge; quilts and pillows (*beimian, zhentao*) in Guangfu, Xihua, and Dongzhu; longevity dress and quilts (*shouyi, shoubei*) in Xiangshan. Only portraits, net embroidery, *soubezhen* pictorial embroidery, and gauze embroidery was produced inside the city walls. This system was a microcosm of the larger model of place and locale as an integral component to Chinese material culture, intrinsic to the concept of “famous local products” (*wuchan, techan*), the “idea that goods possessed a locality”, which is well illustrated in the four famous regional embroidery schools: *Suxiu* from Suzhou; *Yuxiu* from Guangdong; *Shuxue* from Sichuan; *Xiangxiu* from Hunan.⁸⁶ More than simply make a strange product familiar by locating its production, the locations invoked by specialties like “West Lake Crepe” (*Xihu*

84 Ledderose, *Ten Thousand Things*, p.79.

85 *Zhongguo shiye zhi, Jiangsu juan* (Shanghai: Shiye bu guoji maoyi ju, 1933) p.74.

86 The four schools grouping omits other significant local styles like Beijing’s *Jingxiu* or Wenzhou’s *Ouxiu*, see Wang Li, “Si da Mingxiu yu nühong xianxiang”, *Zhejiang gongyi meishu*, no.3 (2003); Sun Peilan, *Zhongguo cixiu shi*, pp.83-105; Karl Gerth examines the evolution of *wuchan* in twentieth-century China in *China Made: Consumer Culture and the Creation of the Nation* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Asia Center and Harvard University Press, 2003).

zhousha) were entwined with the growth of domestic tourism, utilised by producers and distributors to convey associations of travel and romance that augmented the value of textiles, dress and accessories (J18).

Secondly, in order to exploit the possibilities of labour division, the *baotou* system modularized the process of producing an embroidered object. When a garment was cut and assembled, in order to create a continuous design across the divide of garment opening and fabric width, it was ideal to paste and sew together the central seams prior to marking out the design. But one could also draw the design onto a piece of cloth, cut out the pieces, send them out for embroidering, and assemble them when they were returned. It was this practice that was critiqued by the aforementioned Wugang clothing producers' guild regulation: "For clothing and other such objects which are already cut, it is not allowed for other people to take this work to do themselves, those who violate this rule will be fined 800 coppers."⁸⁷ This modularized production system explains the direction of late Qing fashions towards the embroidered modular component; hence the use of entire textile lengths with embroidered borders laid out (Fig. 3.11) or paper sheets with applique motifs ready to be cut out (Fig. 3.19a). In this way, different stages of the production process could be divided across a network involving participants of different gender and social status.

Re-interpreting Qing embroidery as the work of networked individuals is to beg the question of where autonomy and expression lay in this process. To give a concrete example, when the Guangxu Emperor (1871-1908) placed a order with the *Suzhou zhizao ju* on the occasion of his wedding that included a request for the Empress' trousseau to include "200 clothing borders, skirt borders and sleevebands in

87 Reference cited in n.40.

satin and *Jiang* damask each finely embroidered in the latest patterns”, well might we ask, whose idea of the latest patterns?⁸⁸

A modularized production network entailed layers of design responsibility that were built into the system at separate stages. The embroidery agents were likely responsible for some portion of the design specifications. Zhu Feng cites a late Qing embroidery manager (*xiutou*) employed by the *Guangyuan fenzhuang*, Tao Youting, who was responsible for ensuring the embroidery was completed on time and for specifying stitch and color.⁸⁹ While much of the design specifications were either oral, or else in written ephemera long lost to us, objects sometimes feature annotation detailing shop or workshop names and design details – thus preserving a residue of communications between countryside female embroiderers and urban male workshops. For example, Figure 4.7 shows a late nineteenth-century tablecloth, bought into the ROM by George Crofts (1872-1924), a fur merchant based in Tianjin at the turn of the century, who played a vital role in establishing their dress collection.⁹⁰ Embroidered in flowers in shades of blue and grey floss, two red stamps detail the shop name, ink notation along the outer edge details arrangement of central round floral motif. Figure 4.8 shows another example from a private collector, a robe textile length, one edge is annotated in a combination of *Suzhou ma* numerical marks and characters detailing the producer’s name, the main decoration and the object type. Such evidence is fragmentary and hard to decipher, but when placed in a historically grounded context, the object appears in a new light – not as a piece of art to be admired in formal terms – but as evidence of communications between networked producers, and the role of objects in mediating different producers.⁹¹

88 Ding Jinjun ed., “Guangxu di dahuan beiban yiliao deng jian shumu qingdan”, *Zhongguo di’yi lishi dang’anguan*, 1887-8 (Guangxu 13-14), *Lishi dang’an*, no.4 (2007), pp.21-30, p.23.

89 Zhu Feng, “Su xiu fazhan jianshi”, p.134.

90 See Barbara Stephen, “Introduction to the Royal Ontario Museum Collections”, in *Royal Ontario Museum, Homage to Heaven, Homage to Earth* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), pp.45-6, 105.

91 There are examples of theatrical patterns with written labels specifying colour (PMA 55-84-95 to 55-84-108); in the theatrical costume workshops, the object’s performative functions meant stitchwork was less finely appraised and colour was a key mode of communication.

Another object that served to mediate these relationships was the pattern book. Earlier we noted that one of the auxiliary jobs enabled by the growth in commercial embroidery was the professional male pattern drawer (*huahua zuo, huagong*), often called “hua baifen” or white chalk drawers because they used white chalk and ink to produce the black-and-white outline under-drawings. In 1887, English missionary Edwin Dukes described one: “He is drawing with a camel’s hair pencil dipped in Indian ink patterns to be sold to persons skilled in working with coloured silk”.⁹² The appearance of pattern drafters as “design middleman” reduced the number of tasks and skills involved in embroidery, so that instead of having to prepare the design, the embroiderer could focus on interpreting and executing the design, specifically selecting the design characteristics in terms of thread, stitch, and colour.⁹³ This development favoured the domestic and workshop embroiderer alike: the workshop employed draftsmen, the home practitioner utilized printed pattern books. Very few of these pattern books survive, something explained by the ephemeral nature of the patterning process; printed on flimsy paper that enabled the embroiderer to trace the pattern onto the cloth or to repeat the design onto paper, but often destroyed the pattern in the process.⁹⁴ But in poetry women often refer to their favourite embroidery patterns: “Ever since I learned to embroider as a young woman, I would collect the best patterns and turn them over in my hands over and over again.”⁹⁵ And despite the few surviving examples, books of embroidery patterns were likely widely available. Samuel Wells Williams writes of mid-nineteenth century China that “Books are prepared

⁹² Wilson, *Chinese Dress*, p.107, n.181.

⁹³ “Between the Boudoir”, p.43; By design I mean surface pattern-making rather than conceptual control over object production, the latter being a by-product of mechanization, see Anne Puetz, “Design Instruction for Artisans in Eighteenth-century Britain” on the role of print in this transition.

⁹⁴ The seventeenth-century woodblock printed manual *Jianxia ji* compiled by the Zhejiang calligrapher Shen Linqi (1603-64) is a rare example of early pattern album, see Sören Edgren et al, *Chinese rare books in American collections* (New York City: China House Gallery, China Institute in America, 1984), no. 34; either tracing or pouncing were used to transfer the paper design to textile: tracing from underneath the cloth (if the silk base was fine enough) or else “pouncing” the design (shaking white chalk or powdered charcoal through the tiny pricked holes of a template, and then fixing the chalked outline with black ink) (Wilson, *Chinese Dress*, pp.101-107).

⁹⁵ Jin Xiang’s colophon to Ding Pei, *Xiupu*, cited in Fong, *Female Hands*, p.35.

for embroiderers containing patterns for their imitation or combination” sometimes the design was cut from the book, pasted onto the fabric, and then stitched over until completely covered.⁹⁶

The Don Cohn collection conveys some sense of the feel of these products and the range of imagery (Fig. 4.9a-d). Figural and dramatic themes are common; in these turn-of-the century examples, often re-workings of Wu Youru images, like “huamei tianchun” (4.9a); sometimes in roundel format (4.9b) or divided into top and bottom sections like the printing “image top, text bottom” (*tu shang wen xia*) format, here showing the climbing the wall scene from *Xi xiang ji* (4.9c). Marketed with cloth coverings, decorative paper, and colour printing (4.9d); with titles like *Huayang tupu*; they clearly target the domestic embroiderer: “For twenty-two cash or tseen, I purchased an elegant book, filled with choice subjects of the graphic art, as patterns for the use of the young needle-woman. She is assumed to be poor, and hence the little manual is priced at about one penny of our money.”⁹⁷ The eighteenth-century household encyclopaedia, *A Precious Mirror of Feminine Virtues* (*Kunde Baojian*), exemplifies this trend. Two *juan* are devoted to embroidery patterns, all small objects - sleevebands and collars, headbands and purses - most accessible to the home embroiderer and the earliest to be commercially produced by the workshops. Given the simple pattern style and object functions of the patterns, the target audience was likely the countryside women supplying commercial workshops: “minimally educated group of daughters who wanted to produce value-added piece goods for the market but lacked artistic education.”⁹⁸ Yet, like the object annotation, the embroidery pattern rarely specified stitch or shade - it communicated little beyond

96 Samuel Wells Williams, *The Middle Kingdom: a Survey of the Geography, Government, Literature, Social Life, Arts, and History of the Chinese Empire and its Inhabitants* (1848; revised New York: Charles Scribner, 1882), chap.15, p.36.

97 One example was printed by the publisher *Guangui shuju yinhang*, I am extremely grateful to Don Cohn for allowing me to study his collection; Miss Lambert, *The Handbook of Needlework*, pp.168-9, quotes from Mr. (George) Tradescant Lay, *The Chinese as they are: their moral and social character, manners, customs, language* (1843).

98 Tanmian Daoren (Zhang Lüping, Taoist adept who sleeps in a jar) comp., *Kunde Baojian* (n.p.Yuxiutang, 1777) stayed in circulation throughout the nineteenth-century; *juan* 8 “nanpei chengshi” (patterns for male ornaments) and *juan* 9 “nügong chengshi” (patterns for female ornaments); see Ko, who argues that the introduction’s moral rhetoric legitimized its contents: “May they (female readers) know that such household chores as drawing water, grinding grain, and needlework are not just the preserve of the poor and the mean, but should not be ignored even by daughters of privilege” (*Cinderella’s Sisters*, p.219).

the graphic lines.⁹⁹ The embroidery's autonomy existed in the process of interpreting the two dimensional pattern for a three dimensional media, just as the porcelain painter or the wood-carver did for their material.

This interpretation depended on a tool-set of colour and texture: the number of strands, the type of thread (twisted for matt, untwisted for lustre, or plied twist for further texture), the colour of thread, and the type of stitch, through which she might implement and interpret each element of the image. Stitches could be utilized to create a rich sense of geometric patterning redolent of printed textures and textile surfaces. They could be used to emphasize narrative detail by highlighting key objects or characters in gold couching or raised satin stitch as in Fig. 4.10c, where Lady White turns back to her snake form, the scene is given narrative specificity with the upset cup, two pairs of shoes, (one tiny pair of women's shoes, the other larger men's shoes), and Lady Bai's discarded hairpiece. Or they could be used to divide background and foreground, bringing figural subjects into focus by contrasting glossy satin stitch tones with the pixelated effect of seed stitch (Fig. 4.11). Consider how the needle is deployed in the *Bai she chuan* scene: the ornamental detailed net stitch overlay of Lady Bai's robes contrasts with the simply worked satin stitch of the dress of Fa Hai, the Buddhist monk determined to capture her snake spirit regardless of Xu Xian and Lady White's love (Fig 4.10.a,b). His hat has been dimensionalized with brown satin stitch layered over a cream satin stitch foundation simulating its woven materiality, his beard detailed with tiny seed stitches, his face shadowed with carefully placed *souhezhen* stitches that gives him a rather impish look – as befits his status as the villain at this point in the White Snake's narrative evolution.

To be sure, this autonomy should be neither exaggerated nor romanticized. A great range and variety of stitches existed by the late Qing, but equally for many image elements the correlating stitch was

⁹⁹ In the theatrical costume workshops, where the performative functions meant stitchwork was less finely appraised and colour was a key mode of communication, there are examples of patterns with written labels specifying colour and body parts, for example PMA 55-84-95 to 55-84-108, Miscellaneous Imperial Designs in Black Ink for Imperial City.

conventionalized. “Every girl would learn how to apply the multiple layered shading stitch for flower petals, leaves and feathers on birds, the outward encroaching stitch for wings of butterflies, the peking knot seed stitch for stamens of flowers.”¹⁰⁰ An example of these shared conventions can be seen in the two border renditions of the scene “Touring the Lake” from *Bai she chuan* where scholar Xu Xian and snake spirit Lady White, accompanied by her maid, another snake-beauty named Miss Blue, meet for the first time whilst boating on Hangzhou’s West Lake, and fall instantly in love (“yijian zhongqing”) (Fig. 4.1). Both embroideries use rolling stitch (*gun zhen*) to work the willow trees and basket stitch (*jiao zhi*) for the boat roof; the differences lie in costume patterning and colour. This evidence further corroborates the argument that commercialization created active networks conveying knowledge between producers, but it also evidences how geo-socio-economic groups operated within stylistic boundaries set by formulas and conventions. Still, these formulas appear to have been generationally distinct. Urban bamboo ballads suggest that the connotations of a stitch or shade were constantly changing in terms of what was construed as conventional or fashionable: in 1795 (Qianlong 60) it was “popular to embroider seed stitch chain stitch in gold”, by the Jiaqing period (1796-1820) seed stitch was passé, and instead the “thatched gate girls” (poor girls) expended their efforts in gauze embroidery (*chuo sha*)”.¹⁰¹ The range covered by these stitching styles might seem narrow from a modern-day perspective, indeed the inability to recognize the distinction between seed stitch and *chuo sha* as being just as significant to their wearers as the distinction between *Chantilly* and *Point de Gaze* lace is central to the Western world’s possessive relationship with fashion.¹⁰² But ultimately these parameters - of stitchwork, palette, and image - comprised the visual identity of the embroidered object and in turn, constituted its socio-economic classification as boudoir, commercial, or folk embroidery.

100 These standardizations are discernable from nineteenth-century embroidery but Ko bases her description on Shen Shou, *Xueyi xiupu*, 5a-9b, see “Between the Boudoir and the Market”, p.49, fn.39.

101 Yang Miren, *Dumen zhuzhici* (Bamboo ballads of the Capital); Gu Ting, *Caozhu yi chuan* (A strand of grass pearls), cited in Sun Peilan, *Wudi cixiu wenhua*, p.39.

102 Elizabeth Davis discusses different lace types in her study of how the rise of machine-made lace democratized women’s dress during the nineteenth century, “Ladies of Taste and Refinement: How Lace democratized Women’s Dress, 1870-1890”, *Dress*, vol.36 (2010), pp.1-21.

5. XIFENG'S GLANCE: DISTINGUISHING THE BOUDOIR FROM THE MARKET

Distinctions in design, stitch, and colour between boudoir, commercial and folk embroidery communicated the difference between an elegant lady, an urban consumer and a countryside bumpkin. The *guige xiu* style implied certain standards of working conditions; the literati imagery, highly variegated palette, and finely shaded stitching communicated the hours of leisurely practice and privileged environment. By contrast *shangpin xiu* bespoke crowded workshops, long hours, minimal pay and poor materials. Consider Xifeng's defence in *Hong lou meng*, when Lady Wang accuses her of having bought an erotic purse (*chunyi xiangdai*) ("the design embroidered on it consisted not of the usual birds and flowers, but on one side a pair of naked human figures locked in an embrace and on the other some writing") into the Garden: "It wasn't made here. One can see at a glance that it is a poor commercial imitation of "Palace" embroidery (*waitou gugong fangzhuo neigong xiu*)." She bolsters her case through material analysis: "Even the tassels are the kind you would buy from the market (*shimai buo*)", forcing Lady Wang to agree that such an object would be incongruous in her hands: "I may be young and frivolous but I'd be hardly likely to want a trashy thing like this (*zhe lao shenzy*)."¹⁰³ Her use of culturally loaded vocabulary – commercial, imitation, trashy – is enormously revealing of the standards of embroidered goods and the markers of taste. Xifeng and those of her ilk did not consume commercial embroidery; they had no need of imitation "Palace embroidery" when they could access the real thing.¹⁰⁴ The encoding of status, gender, age, and even virtue within embroidered objects, was achieved through both maker identity and object style and iconography. By craftsmen meeting the visual expectations of those for whom they produced – creating objects with appropriate decorative schemas, iconographical content, and stylistic identity – they maintained the separation of different consumption spheres. Thus visibility constituted a meeting or "constellation of intellectual and executive skills" possessed by the producer and the viewer: or in terms of Baxandall's "period eye", socio-cultural experience engenders a certain way of seeing: "Much of what

103 Cao Xueqin, *Hong lou meng*, chap.74, pp.1048-9; adapted from Hawkes, trans. *Story of the Stone*, vol. 3, p.459.

104 Palace embroidery (*gong xiu*) is stylistically similar to boudoir embroidery (*guige xiu*).

we call ‘taste’ lies in this, the conformity between discrimination possessed by a painting and skills of discrimination possessed by the beholder”.¹⁰⁵

We gain a sense of the “taste” of the boudoir, of how Xifeng’s glance distinguishes commercial embroidery from boudoir embroidery by comparing two renditions of a “Su Wu bie Li Ling” scene (Fig. 4.12a,b). Han dynasty imperial envoy Su Wu, held prisoner by the Xiongnu, bids farewell to his close friend Li Ling, knowing that they will not see each other again. The first is by famous *Gu xiu* embroiderer Han Ximeng, the second by an anonymous commercial workshop. The *Gu xiu* visualization is clearly beholden to painterly conceptions: the backdrop of the desolates steppes weighs heavily in the composition, the main figures occupy a small part of the entire scene, offset by the servant and sheep, and portrayed in duller shades of brown, yellow, and blue. By contrast, the *shangpin xiu* zooms in on the pair of close friends, cutting off the role of landscape setting. The embroiderer has clothed them in bright shades, filled the scene with floral and auspicious motifs, and set them within a gilded, decorative frame. The palette and gilding gives the roundel a cheerful tone, evoking the loyalty of friends, rather than the sadness of parting. The distinction between the sedately shaded *Gu xiu* scene and the technicoloured *shangpinxiu* scene reflects differing emphasis on the role of colour and stitch. The *guige* embroiderer was valued according to her ability to achieve carefully harmonized colouring (*xiangse heshun*), and the process of determining how to best interpret a painted palette in thread - “selecting colours” (*duo xian*) - occupied much of her work. Late nineteenth-century Customs reports refer to 35 colours of sewing thread available in Suzhou, but in *Xue Huan xiupu*, Shen Shou stipulated 88 colours to be used in embroidery, with the potential total of 745 different shades.¹⁰⁶ By contrast, both *shangpin xiu* and *minjian xiu* sought a less blended and hence less elegant palette, partly due to the need to save money by using coarser and fewer threads. Palette was, in a sense, the least democratic element of embroidery; subtly blended shading

¹⁰⁵ Allan Langdale, “Aspects of the Critical Reception and Intellectual History of Baxandall’s Concept of the Period Eye”, *Art History*, vol.21, no.4 (Dec 1998), pp.479-497, p.483 p.490; Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy: A primer in the social history of pictorial style* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p.34.

¹⁰⁶ *Silk*, p.106; *Xuehuan xiupu*, pp.814-816.

necessitated an expensive range of coloured threads, time to split threads and meticulously build up areas of tone and light through complex shading stitches. Hence Cao Xueqin's description of the professional embroiderer's "cruder, more garish" creations.

In stitchwork, boudoir embroidery was valued according to the qualities of *Suxiu* "fine, flat, neat, spare" (*xi, ping, qi, bo*), an ideal that can be traced back to the Song embroiderers, who had first used finely split threads, short stitches placed over long stitches to create pictorial realism, heighten naturalism, and simulate literati painting techniques.¹⁰⁷ This emphasis on realism would be particularly stringent in regard to figural scenery. Dong Qichang (a man who did much to establish the success of *Gu xiu*) valued Song embroidery for "Glances cast by human figures have an expressive feeling of life-like movement".¹⁰⁸ Lian Ying's wife, one of the embroiderers recorded by Zhu Qiqian, was famed for her embroidered Buddhist figure; she was praised for achieving lifelike realism no matter what angle the work was viewed.¹⁰⁹ In order to achieve these effects, they relied particularly on the shading effects of long and short satin stitch (*tao zhen*), built up over single and multiple layers (*dan tao, shuang tao, ji tao*), irregular long and short stitch or mixed straight stitch (*chan zhen, souhe zhen*), swirling stitch (*xuan zhen*), and hair and fur stitch (*shi zhen*) (Table 4.3). Boudoir embroiderers were prized according for their ability to hide the traces of the needle (*zhen jiao*, lit. the needle's foot), partly so that their images might stand as a visual equal to painting, but also because it was considered vulgar to display the tool by which they worked. This kind of display was more characteristic of *minjian xiu*, which - not having recourse to extensive thread palettes and painterly models - evolved to emphasize other effects: dazzling the eye through vivid colouring and textural interest created from an impressive array of stitches.

107 Zhu Feng, "Su xiu fazhan jianshi", p.125.

108 Dong Qichang, *Yunjing kanmi lu*, cited in *Guoli gugong bowuyuan kesi cixiu* (Taiwan: Palace Museum, 1970), *Cixiu* vol, p.20.

109 Zhu Qiqian, *Nühong zhuan zhenglue*, p.24.

Despite these separate stylistic spheres and distinct visual expectations, I have argued that the commercialization of embroidery led to increasing connections between producers of different social classes. Indeed, commercialization effectively structured mechanisms of interaction between distinct embroidery styles, causing each genre to develop both in reaction to, and influenced by, the other. The connections detailed in Figure 4.5 demonstrates points of contact between the commercial workshops of Suzhou, and countryside women and gentrywomen: the use of embroidery agents linked countryside women with urban workshops, and perhaps also outwards to more educated, gentry households; or the yamen's employment of gentlewomen from the surrounding Suzhou countryside villages. For example, Zhang Xushi (1866-?) - employed by the yamen and considered so exceptional at embroidery that she once embroidered a dragon robe for the Emperor Tongzhi and a *xiapei* for the Empress - came from Lishu village, renowned for seed stitch; Xu Nüda, who specialized in inlaid gold couched robes, came from Twin Bridges in *Hengtang*, famous for its goldwork.¹¹⁰ The visual acuity and technical knowledge that each woman brought to the production of these palace objects had been created in communion with vernacular women from their locale. We can hypothesize that it was nodes of contact like this that enabled interaction between systems of taste, allowing folk embroidery trends to go mainstream, for example, the “three blues” (*san lan xin*) palette that originated from vernacular embroiderers of Qianlong period Suzhou.¹¹¹

Forums by which ideas and techniques could merge also occurred at the domestic level, where commoner women possessing embroidery talents would be employed within wealthy official and mercantile households, whether permanently as dress-making maids, or temporarily in periods of spiked production for a wedding or celebration.¹¹² The social mingling of embroidery tastes is well illustrated by an energetic discussion in *Hong lou meng* as to the right palette and pattern to choose for a fringed sash

110 Zhu Feng, “Suzhou fazhan jianshi”, p.127.

111 Wang Li, “Si da Mingxiu yu nühong xianxiang”, p.8.

112 Patrick Dowdey ed., *Threads of Light: Chinese Embroidery from Suzhou and the Photography of Robert Glenn Ketchum* (Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1999), p.39.

Oriole is making for Baoyu. The debate spans the choice of fringe type (fan-tassel, rosary-net, and net-and-tassel); the nuances of combining the palette of knotting with the sash (they settle on black for the contrast, peach-pink for the colour, and leek-green for a tasteful combination); and the netting pattern (stick-pattern, ladder-pattern, diamond, double diamond, linked rings, flower-pattern, willow-leaf). But Cao also pauses for a moment to dwell on the craftswomen, fourteen-year old Oriole, presenting her to the reader through the eyes of Baoyu, a young man entranced with the world of women and their expertise. We see his admiration for Oriole, and how for this young rural girl, the act of embroidery engendered, to quote Grace Fong, an “empowerment, knowledge, and authority”, that would surely have escaped her in other realms of her existence. Though simple and artless Oriole is some distance from the literate elite women studied by Fong, she exemplifies her argument that modes of female experience and agency were negotiated through everyday acts of textile creation, and that accordingly embroidery offers us a means of exploring women’s subjectivity.¹¹³ And notably it is the socially inferior participant whose talent and taste is deferred to: “Black or navy-blue would go well with crimson,” she advises Baoyu and Baochai, “With anything lighter the crimson would be too overpowering.”¹¹⁴

Thus, instead of polarized stylistic distinctions, the direction of commercialization was to “extend the circle of participants in the system” through graded and modular production.¹¹⁵ An early twentieth-century Hunan embroidery company listed and priced products at three levels: top, medium and ordinary quality (Table 4.2), suggesting that social distinction through materiality were a matter of degree than sharply separated dichotomies.¹¹⁶ This grading differential was likely adopted from the longer tradition of professional painting workshops, which had evolved a process of producing paintings of a same theme for a range of customers - adjusting the number of figures, architectural elaborations and palette

113 Fong, “Female Hands”, pp.2-3.

114 Hawkes, trans. *The Story of the Stone*, vol.2, chap.35, pp.190-192.

115 Ledderose notes the advantages of graded systems for both consumers and producers, *Ten Thousand Things*, p.5.

116 Though this source dates to the early twentieth-century, its objects and styles suggest little had changed by this juncture, hence my use of it to explore late nineteenth-century embroidery.

complexity according to the target price.¹¹⁷ The Hunan price-list distinguished objects according to the degree of decorative complexity, for example, in the two sets of hanging scrolls, identically proportioned and coloured, the one embroidered with figural scenes cost more than twice as much as the one with only birds and animals.¹¹⁸ Determining the decorative content and corresponding price was likely a negotiated process between customer and workshop based on objects like pattern-books or other examples. But evidently embroiderers knew well how to tailor the stitch complexity and pattern density to their object's requirements: "Categories such as grasses, a sprig of cut flowers, bees, butterflies, animals and birds all can be entered additionally, subtracted, or increased according to what you consider suitable."¹¹⁹

The *yamen* embroiderers, Oriole's sash, the Hunan embroidery pricelist; these examples all illustrate how far the commercialized and socially mobile Qing society confounds any possibility of simplistic mapping between class and taste. Indeed accounting for the complexity of interactions between social groups and the role of the object in these interactions was a challenge for Baxandall's "period eye". His study on Quattrocentro Italy was limited to a small sub-set of the population who engaged in the commissioning, producing and viewing of painters - the painters and their "patronizing classes" – and he prominently avoided claiming that the period eye could define the way of seeing for all Quattrocentro inhabitants. Yet implicitly the "period eye" has rather wider reach, not only in the sense of its broader theoretical potential as "a roaming, wide-angled sociological explanation of the visual habits of a given culture," but also because many groups beyond other than the most privileged would have participated, to some extent, in socio-cultural activities like mercantile gauging or listening to the preachers visual imaginings, just as many other groups other than the elite gentlewoman engaged in embroidery connoisseurship or watching

117 Richard Barnhardt, "Rediscovering an Old Theme in Ming Painting", *Orientalism*, vol. 26, no.8 (1995), pp.52-61, p.54, in regard to the output of Dai Jin's workshop.

118 40 *liang* against 16 *liang* at the finest quality, see Table 4.2, nos 9 and 10.

119 Ding Pei, *Xinpu*, in *Congshu jicheng xubian* (preface dated 1821; reprinted Shanghai, 1994) vol. 79, p.795-804, *juan 2, xuanyang*, "On embellishing" (*dianzhuai*), p.797.

plays.¹²⁰ Thus, even if one specifies beyond any given group “ever more specialized and particularized sub-groups and sub-communities until one arrives at the individual, unique and exceptional, embedded in, yet separate from society”, the period eye’s mapping from social activity to cognitive thinking cannot capture overlapping social groups or inter-related visualities. Accordingly, this issue was most visible at the edges of social circles, in the encounters between groups: sites of emulation and derivation, where fashion worked its perpetual cycle of creation, imitation, rejection.¹²¹ One of the consequences of the new order of the late Qing, in which wealthy merchants could buy a *mangpao* woven to order from Song Mao’s shop (Table 2.1a., no.12), or their wives could purchase a painting embroidered by a famous but poverty-stricken boudoir seamstress, was that visual expectations became ever more entwined.

The mid-Qing commercialization of embroidery that created increasing numbers of workshops, agents, and embroiderers also encouraged a dialogue between rural and urban, elite and vernacular, allowing ideas, techniques, and themes to circulate. Interactions between elite and vernacular visual culture in embroidery are not necessarily obvious in palette or pattern imagery, a form of cultural capital more easily controlled by a given socio-economic group: if boudoir embroiderers sought inspiration in literati painting collections and professional embroiderers looked to urban prints, then countryside embroiderers utilized folk paper-cuts, their inability to reproduce the outlines of both urban professional patterns and literati art themes displaying their lack of access (Fig. 4.13).¹²² Yet if we look beyond these blunt outlines, we find that narrative themes in embroidery well illustrate the interaction between the boudoir and the village, and the need to view the spheres of boudoir, folk and commercial embroidery as interconnected not separate.

120 Langdale, “Aspects of the Critical Reception”, p.488, 543.

121 This difficulty creates a certain tension for Baxandall between the individual and society; an ambiguity runs through *Painting and Experience* as to whose visual experience is under investigation (*Painting and Experience*, p.40).

122 For examples of drama figure paper-cuts used for embroidery patterns, see *Zhongguo zhuangshi jianzhi yishu*, pp.179-222; also Lin Ximing, *Zhongguo xiqu jianzhi* (Shanghai: Shanghai jiaoyu chubanshe, 1998); Wang Bomin, *Zhongguo minjian jianzhi shi*, pp.630-635. For regionally organized collections of paper-cuts that include embroidery designs and dramatic characters, see Zhang Ding, *Minjian jianzhi* (Beijing: Renmin meishu chubanshe, 1952).

6. NARRATIVE IMAGERY IN EMBROIDERY

To grasp how conceptions of suitable embroidery subject matter widened between the late Ming and the late Qing, consider the figural spectrum assembled by Ming embroiderer Zhang Shuying (n.d.) in her short eight-part treatise, *Cixin tu*:

Apart from embroidering the Buddha, then the Nymph of the Luo River, the Dragon Girl; crimson trees and blue zither like the Xiangjiang River, Spring morning in the Han palace; Prince Teng's butterflies, the Pei family's parrots, single-rooted lotus, the seventy purple mandarin ducks... all of these may be chosen.¹²³

Her list of sanctified figural subjects like Buddhist figures and mythical females is a highly literate and confined one, filled with allusions to poetry and literati paintings.¹²⁴ By contrast, during the late Qing, figural imagery appeared in an extraordinary range, stocked with figures current in the offerings of drama troupes and dramatic prints. The vast imagery bank of figural imagery made available to artisans in pattern and printed motif books enabled many more graphic designs to become usable and adaptable, particularly given the mediations of design professionals working within each medium like the specialist embroidery pattern-drawers.¹²⁵ In embroidery, historians have tended to attribute this shift to the Gu family; many of their classical painting models involved historical narrative themes, for example Miao Ruiyun's ten-leaf album "Miscellaneous Album" featured well-known scenes like "Su Wu bids farewell to Li Ling" and "Wenji returns to the Han". The emphasis *Gu xin* placed on historical narrative themes has been viewed as re-energising pictorial embroidery (*hua xin*), validating the transition away from high-minded classical exemplars towards a more literal and vernacular humanity that eventually spread to the market and the village (a turn echoed in fiction, painting and porcelain as we will see in the next chapter).

123 Prince Teng or Li Yuanying (?-684) first built the Teng pavilion and excelled at painting butterflies, and became a reference for women who skilfully painted butterflies (Sun Ta, *Zhongguo huajia renming da cidian* (Shanghai: Shenzhou guoguangshe, 1944), p.183); "The seventy purple mandarin ducks frolic in pairs in the quiet pavilion" from a poem by Li Bai; *Cixin tu*, part 2, *tu* (patterns), p.1.

124 Since no dates are given, we cannot know if Yu Yunzhu, one of the embroiderers described in *Nubong zhuan zhenglue*, was from this period, but her figural range corresponds to Zhang Shuying's list (Zhu Qiqian, p.17).

125 *The Mustard Seed Garden Manual* (*Jiezi yuan hua zhuan*) exemplifies this process, published in 1679, 1701, 1782, 1800; the 1887-8 lithographic edition was apparently of much lower quality to previous editions.

As *Gu xiu* became a marketing term used to sell clothes and paintings alike, the Gu family's distinctive pictorial subject-matter spread from art to clothing, knocking down generic boundaries: “*Gu xiu* paintings: these come in all kinds of designs - figures, scenery, birds and flowers.... *Gu xiu* clothing: the *Luxiangyuan* tradition uses split silk thread to depict flowers, birds, and scenery.”¹²⁶

This account presents *Gu xiu* influence as responsible for the extension of figural imagery from elite art albums to stylish jackets and fashionable accessories. Yet this picture is complicated by the interactions outlined above, which presented the boudoir embroiderers as connected to commercial and folk embroiderers. These interactions suggest that rather than credit the *Gu xiu* school as initiating this trend, as another case of top-down fashion transmission from the boudoir gentlewoman down to the village woman, we might also be able to locate influence from *minjian xiu*.

In fact, narrative was and remains a vital theme in folk embroidery. The folk embroidery scholar Carl Schuster, who travelled around rural China in the early twentieth-century, found numerous examples of the use of embroidery to record dramatic narrative themes. Narrative is found in strongly localized forms in many regions of China: in Liaoning province, where Chaoyang folk embroidery was embroidered with characters from plays performed in the locality; or Shanxi province where local drama was a dominant theme in embroidered clothing and furnishing.¹²⁷ Figure 1.3 shows an early twentieth-century folk-embroidered roundel depicting the scene “Li Yangui sells water” (*Li Yangui mai shui*) from *Huo yan ju*, popular in the Shaanxi play repertoire (*Qin qiang*).¹²⁸ The once wealthy Li Yangui has been forced to sell water to make ends meet, and carries two buckets to go and meet his love Huang Guiying and her maid in her garden, in defiance of her powerful father, Huang Zhang, who no longer favours the match because Li's father (Li Shou, the Minister for Military Affairs) has fallen from power after being framed

126 *Shanghai xianzhi* (Qianlong), *juan* 5, *tuchan, fuyongzhi shu*, p.69, cited Huang Yifen, “Gu xiu xinkao”, p.23.

127 Wang Yaorong, *Chinese Folk Embroidery*, p.155; further examples in Gao Mingchun, *Zhongguo chuandong zhixiu wenyang*, pp.372, 413; Zhang and Duan, *Shanxi xiqu cixiu* presents a collection with numerous examples from the local Shanxi drama.

128 Jiao Wenbin, *Zhongguo Qinqiang* (Xi'an: Shanxi renmin chubanshe, 2005), pp.270-271.

by a jealous colleague. Commonalities with the jackets are found in colour and stitch. The palette is bright and gaudy, using encroaching stitches (*zheng qiang, fan qiang*) to lay down blunt washes of colour in one or two shades of reds and pinks that brings out the auspiciously significant floral and bird motifs. The stitches are emphatically decorative; there are approximately nine different stitches used on this roundel, combining seed stitch, fish-bone stitch, stem stitch, net stitch, and couching to produce a highly textured, embellished effect. Like the jackets, this style of embroidery is little concerned with eliminating the needle's traces or achieving the painterly effects of the boudoir embroiderer, but rather emphasizes narrative detail and decorative textures. Given these shared aesthetics, it is not surprising that the closest patterns to the jackets' roundel scenes are found in vernacular paper-cut patterns of dramatic scenes set within decorative roundel formats (Fig. 4.14).

The *minjian xiu* evidence prompts us to view the fashion for narrative embroidery not as folk and market embroiderers responding to an initiative established by elite embroiderers, but rather as involving contributions by different producers working in various embroidery styles. Since we have no examples of early Qing vernacular embroidery, we cannot know whether these folk traditions influenced the Gu family, or vice-versa, and perhaps this is beside the point. If we separate these genres too sharply, then we risk overlooking their many commonalities. For both the embroidering gentlewoman and the village woman, embroidery provided a legitimized means of making a living, of gaining autonomy and recognition, and perhaps sometimes, of creative expression.

This last point is something of a conundrum. Given the expansion in patterns caused by the commercialization of embroidery, how should we interpret the creative autonomy of the female embroiderers behind the object, who were, evidently, much mediated by male agents and workshop bosses? One can see commercialization as expanding women's expressive spheres: the "subtle reinterpretation of the traditional virtue of 'womanly work'" that enabled embroidery to become both art and commodity also caused it to transmute "into a self-chosen means of expressing individual

creativity”.¹²⁹ Alternatively commercialization can be viewed as inhibiting: the “formulaic modular designs” of the commercial pattern book reflect the “intrusion of the market into domestic textile production”, the reliance upon male pattern-drawers in the case of commercial embroidery and the use of literati artistic discourse in the case of boudoir embroidery, impeded expressive potential, circumscribing women within a male-defined canon.¹³⁰ This question is a complex one and we will return to it in more depth in chapter 7 after closer study of the embroidered narratives. But to conclude this chapter, I would like to briefly contemplate how the early modern embroidery manual - a genre that validated the female embroiderer - might answer this question.

Given the male dominance in workshop ownership, guild leadership, and pattern-book designing, the fact that all three surviving embroidery manuals are penned by women is worthy of some emphasis: the late Ming *Cixiu tu* by Zhang Shuying; the late Qing *Xiu pu* (Treatise on Embroidery) by Ding Pei (fl. First half of 19th century); and the early Republic *Xueyi xiu pu* (Treatise on Embroidery by Xuehuan) by Shen Shou (1872-1921).¹³¹ A comparison between the structure and contents of the three works makes apparent mid-late Qing developments towards practicality and vernacular content. In particular *Xiu pu* is worth singling out for its practical advice on pattern selection and composition. Section two, *Xuan yang* (Choice of Patterns) contains eleven sub-divisions: the first half devoted to creating, forming and interpreting the pattern; the second half presenting pattern themes in more detail. The final topic is figures and landscape imagery (*shanshui renwu*), considered the pinnacle of difficulty, given the need for realism and expression.

129 Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers*, p.172.

130 McLaren makes this point in a literary context, “Women’s Voices and Textuality: Chastity and Abduction in Chinese *nushu* writing”, *Modern China*, vol.22, no.4 (Oct 1996), pp.382-416, p.398.

131 Zhang Shuying, *Cixiu tu*, in *Luchuang nushi*, ed. Qinhuai Yuke (Chongzhen period (1628-1644); reprinted Taipei: Tianyi chubanshe, 1985); Ding Pei, *Xiupu*; Shen Shou, *Xueyi Xiupu*, in *Congshu jicheng xubian* (1919; reprinted Shanghai, 1994), vol. 79, pp.805 - 819; see Grace Fong, “Female Hands”, pp.1-58, for a fascinating comparison between the conception of embroidery expressed in these manuals and women’s poetry. The first two circulated in manuscript form and it is likely that other *xiupu* existed; by contrast Shen Shou’s public status and educational role meant her work dominated the early twentieth-century.

But Ding Pei's manual told her readers exactly how to use their needle and threads to achieve successful figural motifs:

When it comes to human figures the hair and beards are the most difficult. When doing (these parts) the silk thread is split into the finest possible strands. You should also use a special needle for this work. Skin is similar - it must be lustrous and well blended, without any needle marks. The outline of the ears, the edge of the eyes, the tip of the nose, and the corners of the mouth should each have a slight trace of thread, to give (the figures) a sense of depth. This principle should also be applied to robes, pleats, sashes, and shoes."¹³²

Ding wrote her work at least half a century before Shen Shou first established schools where women could learn embroidery skills, but her advice was a precursor of the empowering voice of the female embroidery authority.

We see what a text like *Xiu pu* represented in a scene from *Feng yue meng*, when would-be gentlewoman, Phoenix, manages to shed her inferior status as courtesan and get "married" as a concubine (*cong liang*) to Jia Ming. Now set up in a house she spends her time embroidering her husband gifts like calligraphic pillows:

As Jia Ming took it in his hands, he noticed that it had a covering of crimson imported fabric that was embroidered with black silk thread and had a green hibiscus-style trim. Its white imported-crepe top had lettering in black characters: "Cheek to cheek, willing to follow the embroidery thread; heads together, wishing to dispatch the golden needle" Two seals in ancient scripts were embroidered on the sides in fine crimson floss silk; one said, "Perfect harmony", the other "Presented by Phoenix". Jia Ming treasured the pillow, noting how perfectly the characters were embroidered and how skilful the strokes were. Later he took it home with him and put it safely away.¹³³

Phoenix's skilful strokes and perfectly embroidered characters permitted her to align herself with a boudoir embroiderer, rather than the commercial embroiderer whose "stilted, wooden attempts at copying" more artistic calligraphy only "mangled and deformed" the characters. Here, the description functions ironically, allowing the author to affirm the lack of aesthetic taste possessed by his characters'

¹³² *Xiupu*, 2.11, p.799.

¹³³ Hanan, trans. *Courtesans and Opium*, chap 25, p.244. The golden needle reference is likely sexual. I thank Stephen McDowall for his help with this text.

social class and thus their lowly status.¹³⁴ And it is implausible that a courtesan like Phoenix would have read a work like *Xinpu*, which carefully distinguished the different calligraphic styles - “standard, cursive, clerical, seal” (*zhen, cao, li, zhuan*) - explaining how each should be embroidered; there is little evidence of Ding Pei’s work circulating beyond the men and women in her local community, and her rhetoric is couched in terms suitable for this elite readership.¹³⁵ Yet Phoenix’s pillow shows how Ding’s achievement reflected trends beyond the *guige* community, and it suggests that her contribution rippled outwards.

7. CONCLUSION

One of the peculiarities of the museum collection of Chinese dress is the manner in which institutionalization mingles objects that historically existed in distinct and separate realms. A Cixi-esque waistcoat sits in a drawer atop a folk belly-cover (*dudou*); an official rank badge next to a Buddhist priest’s crown. Yet in Qing China, embroidered objects possessed socially distinct identities that conditioned the kind of circulation they might achieve. Each member of Qing society identified themselves partly by the textile objects they used and those they did not. Textiles and dress provided a primary means of constituting social status, laying claim to an elite fashion system, with imagery, stitch work, and colouring serving as the coded markers of taste. When embroidered textiles were transferred from Chinese society to the Western museum, they were typically framed as boudoir embroideries, as the Met curator Jean Mailey emphasized to her readers: “We remember that Chinese ladies of rank traditionally embroidered parts of their costumes in their courtyard gardens among their birds and flowers.”¹³⁶ I have argued this essentially followed the marketing spin of the embroidery shops of Suzhou and Shanghai, who used the image of the boudoir embroider as a means of branding their objects with associations desired by their Chinese customers, just as they were ultimately desired by foreign collectors. Here I have sought to

134 Hawkes, trans. *The Story of the Stone*, vol.2, chap.53, pp.578.

135 *Xinpu*, *juan* 2, no.8, p.798.

136 Jean Mailey, “Ancestors and Tomb Robes”, pp.101-115.

restore the jackets to a more realistic setting, that of the commercial workshop. Rather than see the jackets as produced by the individual woman who wore them, I have suggested they should be read as the products of a professional community, a collaborative network enabled by guild foundation and handicraft specialisation, crossing boundaries of gender and location, and connecting the urban male workshop embroiderer with the countryside female cottage embroiderer through urban agents. The jackets exemplify the influences from folk and boudoir embroidery upon the late Qing network of clothing, textile, and accessory producers. Their complex materiality of woven borders and embroidered collars, appliquéd roundels and knotted buttons depended on producer connections between tailors and embroiderers, border makers and gold thread producers. With their densely patterned surfaces, hyper-pigmented palettes and dramatic imagery, the jackets speak both to the tastes of their urbane, nineteenth-century consumers and the influences of their commercial producers.

Commercialization can be understood as widening the possibilities of embroidered expression for many socio-economic groups. The stimulus of market demand provided new employment opportunities; the growing sophistication of pedagogical embroidery manuals explained and refined embroidery techniques so as to depict a wider range of figural and narrative themes; the widespread dissemination of printed embroidery patterns; all this enabled women to use embroidery as a means of reflecting upon contemporary themes of popular culture. As the American missionary Mr Tradescant Lay marvelled, the Chinese pattern book with its “cover of a fair yellow, studded with spangles of gold” containing “between two and three hundred figures, culled from the varied stores of nature and art”: “was so well selected and so numerous, that they might serve as illustrations to a small encyclopaedia. One acquainted with Chinese literature and Natural History, might deliver several lectures with this book before him.”¹³⁷ The range of material encompassed in the Chinese pattern book enabled women to explore fictional

137 Miss Lambert, *The Handbook of Needlework*, pp.168-9, quotes from Mr. (George) Tradescant Lay, *The Chinese as they are: their moral and social character, manners, customs, language* (1843) I thank Felicity Lufkin for telling me of this source.

inspirations, acquire literate expression, and most of all, utilize embroidery as a means of asserting a cultured female identity.

The pattern book also connected Qing embroiderers to contemporary print works like illustrated drama anthologies and popular prints. This “imagery circuit” is the subject of the next chapter, which considers how the conception of narrative depicted in the jackets derived from the influences of print and performance. A further consequence of networked producers was the transfer of “complex visual schemes” previously restricted to a single media.¹³⁸ Thus narrative imagery transferred from one medium to the next: the performative re-interpreted as the carved; the painted reworked as the lacquered; the printed reimagined as the embroidered. Commercial embroidery was a product of the town and the marketplace, informed by vernacular media not literati painting, and drawing models from illustrated dramas and novels, popular prints and professional paintings.¹³⁹ We recall that in the description of local Suzhou embroidery specialities, most embroidery was produced outside the city, but that which was done inside the city gates included figures and portraits (*renwu kaixiang*) and the *soube zhen* pictorial embroidery.¹⁴⁰ By locating this figurally-themed production within the city, producers could imitate the latest artistic themes emerging from professional painters and the *Taohuawan nianhua* workshops or follow the latest dramatic trends coming out of locations like Jin and Chang, where the Suzhou tailors’ guild established their guild hall and where Wu county scholar Gu Gongxie (act. 18th century) wrote: “the merchants gather and hold banquets at all hours, there are ten different playhouses, every day there is a performance”.¹⁴¹

138 Stacey Pierson, *Chinese Ceramics*, pp.36, 97.

139 Sun Peilan, *Zhongguo cixiu shi*, p.89.

140 Zhu Feng, “Su xiu fazhan jianshi”, pp.134-5; the other styles produced in town were the *soubezhen* pictorial embroidery and the latest styles of gauze embroidery (*chousha, najin*).

141 Gu Gongxie (act. 18th century), *Xiaoxia xianji zhaichao, juan shang* (Preface 1785; Shanghai: Shanghai shudian, 1994).

PERFORMANCE, PRINT, AND PATTERN: DECORATIVE NARRATIVES, AUSPICIOUS NARRATIVES

1. INTRODUCTION

When *Hong lou meng*'s Grandmother Jia celebrates her birthday, the biggest of the numerous screens she receives as a gift was from the Zhens of Nanking: "a twelve-panel folding screen with a scene in silk tapestry on crimson satin from "A Heap of Honours" on one side and Symbols of Longevity in powder-gold on the other."¹ As appropriate to the Jia matriarch's birthday, the decoration of both sides is directed towards the idea of longevity. "Symbols of Longevity" likely included the peach, crane, or bamboo, or perhaps the objects associated with the Eight Taoist immortals. "A Heap of Honours", on the other hand, references a scene from the drama *Manchuang hu*, in which great Tang general Guo Ziyi celebrates his sixtieth birthday, attended by his seven sons and eight sons-in-law, all of whom held high office and pile their insignia high on the reception-hall table, giving name to play and scene (J8). Scholars have tended to view both the Symbols of Longevity and *Manchuang hu* scene as representing values of longevity and success, thus conflating two distinct symbolic systems, the first using auspicious motifs like the icon-functioning peach, the second a single narrative scene synecdochically referencing an entire play. Each of these signs differed fundamentally in their signifying capacities, or in Peircian terms, their possible interpretants.² As an auspicious motif, the peach referenced the concept of longevity, which was relative (how long is a long life?) and somewhat inchoate (what kind of long life?), and accordingly often combined with other icons to inflect further meaning. As a narrative scene, the *Manchuang hu* image referenced a more specific entity, but one whose layers of meaning and potential for literary, historical, and dramatic allusions or shifting interpretants were determined by the viewer's own experience of the

1 Cao Xueqin, David Hawkes, trans., *The Story of the Stone* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1979-), vol.3, chap.71, p.409 (also chap.29, p.81).

2 Charles Sanders Peirce (1834-1914), "Logic as Semiotic: The Theory of Signs", in *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, ed. Justus Buchler (New York: Dover Publications, 1955), pp.98-119.

Guo Ziyi tale. We will return to the implications of the interaction between viewer and narrative, and the resulting polysemy in relation to the *Manchuang hu* narrative in ensuing chapters; here I wish to consider how narrative capacity was decoratively deployed in the jackets.

Earlier, we noted that auspicious motifs dominated accounts of Qing women's dress decoration in the museum setting, long listings of mono-semantic correlations between icon and meaning. But in the jackets, though auspicious motifs certainly play their decorative part, the main role has been awarded to narrative figures. In the context of the Chinese predilection for auspicious decoration and the more universal cultural inhibition against figural decoration on dress, I would suggest that the presence of such narrative imagery is curious. Figural and narrative scenes have some history in Chinese textile traditions, they appear early in religious contexts, where the growth of Buddhist imagery led to the mid-Tang innovation of satin stitch, supplanting chain stitch in order to better render figural scenes. But by the early Qing, though acceptable in artistic formats like embroidered or *kesi* furnishings, hangings, and albums, figural scenes seem to have been more exotic in dress. Hence the earliest example I found of the figural roundel jacket was the Guo Qinwang tomb mid-eighteenth century example (Fig. 1.1). Thus, in presenting secular imagery in a dress format, the jackets represent a significant shift that requires explanation. How did figural imagery come to be considered suitable decorative matter for Qing women's dress? How were narrative scenes channeled into a format governed by the conventions of decorative auspicious imagery?

In regard to the question of how pattern motifs transition between different mediums, Lemire's account of the English absorption of Indian textile designs in "Domesticating the Exotic" – though culturally removed from the jackets – is instructive. She argued that foreign or strange motifs were more easily accepted via objects or materials removed from the personal body, rather than immediately being taken onto one's person. New Indian calicoes of exotic floral motifs were first adopted in seventeenth-century English furnishings – becoming symbols of "genteel repose". Only once the consumer's eye had grown

accustomed to their novelty, did they made another leap onto the body; in Defoe's famously melodramatic words "It crept into our houses, our closets and bed-chambers; curtains, cushions, chairs and at last the beds themselves were nothing but Callicoes or Indian stuffs."³ In this case, the survival of datable objects and texts allow the development and its directionality to be described and analysed in some detail, though even here Lemire is loath to consider this a linear process of pattern-transfer. Her wider point is the way in which consumers accept newness in design and material, and that dress - as one of the most personal genres of material culture, as a medium worn next to the body "swaddled at birth and shrouded at death" - is less likely to be the first to take on novelty. Lemire's finding suggests an onus to explain not only how the relatively exotic theme of figural and dramatic imagery became an acceptable theme in dress, but also why this transition occurred during the mid-late Qing. We have already explored key factors: the evolution of imperial styles like the roundel robe outside court control; the commercialization of embroidery that directed stitch techniques towards the effective depiction of narrative scenes, the widespread dissemination of narrative themes in printed pattern books creating a mass of figural imagery; all this gradually habituated the viewer's eye to figural scenes in different media. But to explain the presence and form of narrative imagery in nineteenth-century women's dress, this chapter argues for the primacy of theatrical performance and popular prints.

We begin with a brief overview of studies of figural imagery in other genres of material culture, highlighting the pivotal influence of dramatic performance as cultural mediator, but revealing concerns central to the jackets: How were scenes selected for adorning material culture? How far did material objects reflect the standards and conventions of mid-late Qing dramatic performance practice? What was the nature of the relationship between object, narrative, and occasion of usage? In addressing these questions, I will make two arguments. Firstly, in order to understand the presence of narrative scenery in material culture, we must look first to mid-late Qing performance conventions and the relationship

³ I thank Professor Riello for telling me of this paper. Lemire, "Domesticating the Exotic: Floral Culture and the East India Calico Trade with England, c.1600-1800", *Textile: the Journal of Cloth and Culture*, vol.1, no.1 (2003), pp.65-85, esp.pp.70-76; Defoe quoted p.74.

between celebration and theatrical performance. These allow a means of understanding how correlations formed between popular acts and celebratory occasions, and in turn, how auspicious values were awarded to figural imagery, enabling dramatic scenes to be considered suitable subject-matter for the auspiciously-framed decoration of women's dress. Secondly, print culture played a central role in forming the jacket's aesthetic of narrative, hence the many examples of shared content and presentation between embroidery and print. Yet despite this influence, through a close study of two jacket examples, I demonstrate how the embroidery pattern designer presented a wholly distinctive portrayal of narrative, in part by manipulating the possibilities and restrictions offered by the dress format to make figural scenery acceptable for wearing on the clothed body. By showing the visual and thematic continuities between performance, prints and jackets, I seek to evidence the participation of the embroidery designers and producers in an urban, professional circuit of print imagery, but I also emphasize the embroidered narrative's unique visuality - connected with performance and print culture, but not derivative of it.

Before commencing, a word on definitions: a variety of terminology is used to capture scenes containing the human figure. Where the narrative has not been identified, and where the reference seems to be fairly oblique (the depiction verges on the generic), "figural imagery" has tended to provide the most uncontroversial term of reference. Where the image is clearly referencing dramatically associated representations, either by depicting a narrative well known in theatrical genres (amongst others), or else by including dramatic element, "dramatic imagery" is usually employed, though there is a distinction between this and the "performance illustration" sense utilized in scholarship of illustrated drama.⁴ In Chinese art, which historically lacked an equivalent indigenous category, "narrative imagery" has been a controversial term; overlaid with the difficulties of reaching a definition that bound the image group to the satisfaction of all. Julia Murray's seminal paper, "What is Chinese Narrative Illustration?", sets out

⁴ Li-ling Hsiao characterizes a group of Wanli illustrated dramas as performance illustration, see *The Eternal Presence of the Past: Illustration, Theatre, and Reading in the Wanli period (1573-1619)* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2007). On theatrical *nianhua*, see Wang Shucun, *Zhongguo xichu nianhua* (Beijing: Beijing gongyi meishu chubanshe, 2006) and Zhang Daoyi, *Lao xiqu nianhua* (Shanghai: Shanghai huabao chubanshe, 1999).

many of the issues involved in categorising “pictures that illustrate a story”, and I follow much of her conceptualization: narrative illustration is defined as that which references or recounts a story with a textual or oral basis; and her analysis of the variables involved in the mode of presentation underlines much of my interpretation of the embroidered narratives. Where I diverge from Murray’s account is in her inclusion of the function of narrative illustration as a determining factor, which I find confuses an otherwise lucid model. She proposed: “narrative illustrations record, affirm, inform, instruct, indoctrinate, proselytize, propagandize, or even entertain the viewer,” but as she acknowledged, images can attempt and achieve more than one function.⁵ Moreover, the functions of narrative illustration may overlap with the functions of non-narrative imagery (which she wishes to exclude from the narrative genre): cultic icons that enable worship; portraits that commemorate; and decorative paintings that adorn surfaces and please the patron’s eye. Such a divide is problematic in relation to the jackets. Many of the images that performed narrative functions in Qing society belonged to vernacular genres like popular prints, which were guided by long-established traditions like auspicious balance and harmonious structure. It will be seen that embroidered imagery adopted many of these conventions; to some extent, the jackets’ aesthetic can be understood conflating narrative and decorative functions. Furthermore, since Murray’s account omitted any consideration of the viewer’s role in the identification process, it is unclear who determines whether imagery is narrative or decorative, or indeed how an interpretation of a narrative scene might vary according to the familiarity of the audience with that narrative. In contrast, a central precept of my understanding of narrative is that the process of interpreting a given figural scene as possessing narrative meaning is dependent upon the individuals’ visual capacities and narrative knowledge, a post-structuralist account of narrative imagery that we will return to in chapter 7 to address the jackets’ varied interpretations. Accordingly, this chapter will argue that it is preferable to understand narrative imagery as a spectrum that encompasses different permutations of figural content.

5 Murray, “What is Chinese Narrative Illustration?”, p.608.

2. NARRATIVES ON OBJECTS

The earliest location of figures as decorative theme is burial architecture; good omen pictures and well-known stories have been found in elite graves in the form of mural imagery and tomb engravings, starting as early as the Han period. This subject matter widened to include the performance itself; bas-relief stone engravings and murals depicting household celebrations intended to entertain the occupants during the afterlife have been found from the Ming period and earlier.⁶ And though many of the funerary figural scenes refer to specific and identifiable narratives: the conservative filial classics, or dramas from folk traditions, some scenes communicate the idea of celebration and occasion, the pleasure and participation of audience rather than recounting a specific narrative.⁷ The Han dynasty *Wu Liang* shrine's montage of omens, filial stories, and historical scenes well illustrates this figural patchwork of fact and fiction.⁸ Early tomb images provide valuable evidence of drama's early significance, and its desirability, even necessity, in the after-life; they are also vital evidence in charting the development of illustration, particularly multiple frame imagery (*lianhuan tubua*), a format of some relevance to the jackets.⁹

There is also evidence that figural imagery was not confined to funerary material culture - that the pictorial decoration found in tombs of this period actually reflected contemporary decorative practices in the elites' palaces and grand houses.¹⁰ In his ekphratic poem, Wang Yanshou (ca.124-ca.148) described

6 See Anne McClaren, *Chinese Popular Culture and Ming Chantefables* (Leiden; Boston: E J Brill, 1998) pp.27-29, for a good overview of the development of the graphic representation of drama in tombs.

7 Deng Fei, "Guanyu Song Jin zangmu zhong xiaoxing tu de sikao", *Zhongyuan wenwu*, no.4 (2009), pp.75-81; A convenient table of dramatic imagery found in tomb excavations, is found in Liao Ben, *Song Yuan xiqu wenwu yu minsu* (Beijing: Wenhua yishu chubanshe: 1989), pp.102-110.

8 Wu Hung, *The Wu Liang Shrine: The Ideology of Early Chinese Pictorial Art* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1989)

9 A Ying begins his history of *lianhuan tubua* with Western Zhou copper decoration, but highlights the use of single story illustration frames in the Wu Liang shrine imagery and later in Dunhuang, the emergence of multiple image frames, see *Zhongguo lianhua tubua shihua* (Jinan: Shandong huabao chubanshe, 2008), pp.1-6.

10 Jessica Rawson, "Tombs and Tomb Furnishings of the Eastern Han Period (AD 25-220)", in *Ancient Sichuan: Treasures from a Lost Civilization*, ed. Robert Bagley (Seattle: Washington: Seattle Art Museum; Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University

the “Hall of Numinous Brilliance” built by the Han Lord of Lu, Liu Yu (r. 154-129 BCE), “High, high among the roof-beams Gods and Fairies walk, Magic maidens peep around the windows and look down... many riotous damsels and turbulent lords, Loyal knights, dutiful sons, Mighty scholars, faithful wives, Victors and vanquished, wise men and fools, None was missing from his place.”¹¹ This painting of “all living things” constituted an expression of political power, but by the early modern period, the power to represent the figural within one’s lived surroundings was more widespread. Wider distribution of theatrical themes in print culture and the commercialization of handicraft production that connected craftsmen with urban print and publishing caused figural imagery to become increasingly popular in architectural components, particularly in the Jiangnan region. Rich overlaps may be observed between the jackets and carved-wooden components of Chinese houses and temples, as may be seen in Figure 5.1, which shows layers of *langan* borders from *Zhenyuan tang*, a merchant’s mansion in Jinan, Jiangxi province, some carved with figural imagery.¹² Figural decoration was found throughout “socially active or ritually relevant” locations: domestic entranceways, reception halls, and bedrooms, temples and ancestral halls. In these locations, families gathered to worship ancestors, hold festive meals, and entertain guests. Here inner and outer circles might legitimately meet in the same space: for ancestral ceremonies, coming-of-age rituals (capping and pinning of the hair), betrothals, weddings, and funerals.¹³ These spaces were also performance locations: sites where drama was staged for the purposes of entertainment and education; the development of figural imagery within domestic architecture reflected the growing popularity of private theatrical performance. These wood-carved figures provided a visual record of the performances that once echoed through the walls, a memory of the entertainment experience and a reminder of the instruction imparted. More than pure decoration, the scenes served to reaffirm morally sanctioned

Press, 2001), pp.253-309, p.267; A.G. Bulling, “The Eastern Han Tomb at Holin-ko-erh (Holingol)”, *Archives of Asian Art*, vol.31 (1997-78), pp.79-103, p.88.

11 Arthur Waley, trans. *The Temple and other poems* (London: G. Allen & Urwin, 1923), pp.95-97

12 See Wang Kangsheng, *Minjian mudiao* (Beijing: Zhongguo qingongye chubanshe, 2005); Xu Huadang, *Zhongguo gu minju mudiao* (Beijing: Zhongguo linye chubanshe, 2007).

13 Francesca Bray, “The Inner Quarters: Oppression or Freedom?” in *House, Home, Family: living and being Chinese*, eds. Ronald Knapp and Kaiyin Lo (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press; New York: China Institute in America, 2005), pp.259-281, 262.

behaviour and accepted gender and status roles, hence conservative themes like the filial exemplars appear to have been prevalent in settings like ancestral halls where new brides were acknowledged and newly born sons entered into the lineage registry.¹⁴ Within such spaces, a variety of carved-wooden features might carry narrative decoration: doors and windows, spirit walls and gates, beams and columns, arches and ceilings, features Hay titled the “architectural envelope,” a neat phrasing particularly appropriate to elite women given the restrictions these features posed to their daily existence.¹⁵ Knapp characterizes these architectural features as “instructive ornamentation”, the didactic process by which decorative themes might “reinforce, however passively, the inculcation of orthodox neo-Confucian values that are more fully and formally expressed in domestic ritual, in primers and other books, and in storytelling and opera performances geared to people at all levels of society.”¹⁶ Given the confined lives of elite women, and the observed associations between location and narrative theme, one area of investigation is whether the jacket’s figural imagery is also characterised by such moralistic ambitions; whether the selection of scenes is grouped around images confirming Confucian values of womanhood, or alternatively more risqué, romantic themes challenging parental and social binds, an issue we return to in the final chapter.

The commonality found between the architectural envelope and embroidered dress is hardly arbitrary. Architecture and dress formed the metaphorical and literal boundaries of women’s existence; narrative-decorated architectural spaces were designed for ritual and celebration, just as the style and form of the jackets was intended for special occasions. Both forms were used to mark status and occasion, and the

14 See Puay-peng Ho, “Ancestral Halls: Family, Lineage, and Ritual” in *House, Home, Family: living and being Chinese*, pp.295-325, 318-20 for examples.

15 *Sensuous Surfaces: the decorative object in Early Modern China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2010), p.8; for examples of imagery on arched and central beams, see Nancy Berliner, *Yin Yu Tang: the architecture and daily life of a Chinese house* (Boston: Tuttle Publishing, 2003), pp.141, 148; narrative and figural imagery was also commonly applied to the engraved components of doors and windows, in particular the waist panels (*yao huan ban*) and apron panels (*qun ban*). See Ma Weidu, *Zhongguo gudai men chuang* (Beijing: Zhongguo jianzhu gongye chubanshe, 2002).

16 Ronald G. Knapp, *China’s Living Houses: folk beliefs, symbols, and household ornamentation* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1998), p.133.

meaningful symbols employed to achieve this were highlighted and framed through structure and position. Figural scenes were often placed on the decorative brackets (*niu tui*) that supported and transitioned columns and beams; like the borders these were originally structural but evolved towards decoration. There are other instances of overlap. The most important and fashionable feature of nineteenth-century women's dress were the controversial *langan* borders, much abhorred by male commentators. The terminology for this fashion was drawn from the architectural decoratively-carved wooden borders that adorned houses, and the linguistic borrowing is immediately explicable when we compare the layers of carved edges in Figure 5.1 with the similarly dissonantly decorated series of borders that trimmed the jackets.¹⁷ Though disparate in materiality and technique, both architectural woodcarvings and embroidered dress served to delineate the borders of women's existence, and more practically, both wood and textile craftsmen might access the same imagery circuit, each adapting the graphic lines of the pattern book to their own materials, tools and depictive capabilities. The fact that over the mid-late Qing period, narrative imagery extended ever more widely suggests certain characteristics about the handicraft systems that produced such objects. The widespread circulation of a design repertoire throughout different media - the fact that *langan* carved in wood and *langan* embroidered on silk could accommodate similar material - was predicated upon the development of sophisticated representational techniques. It also reflected regional production specialities, with much narrative-adorned material objects coming from Suzhou, whether carved, painted, or embroidered.¹⁸ For increasing numbers of craftsmen to access networks of narrative imagery, they had to be able to imitate the visual schemes native to another material, so embroidery had to be able to reproduce the hatched effects of

17 See Dong Hongquan, *Ming Qing minjian mudiao*, pp.32-33, for different forms of wood-carved *langan*.

18 The Long Corridor at the Summer Palace winding its painted way across 728 miles and spanning some 14,000 paintings, exemplifies this reputation: this treasury of narrative paintings are executed in the "Su shi caihua" (Suzhou style colour painting) style, see *Yibeyuan changlang caihua gushi quanji*. Cahill's recent work on vernacular painting draws attention to the dominance of Suzhou workshops in this genre and the use of historical and narrative scenes by professional female artists like Fan Xueyi or Fu Derong (*Pictures for Pleasure*, pp.136-7)

printing or enamel-painted porcelain simulate palettes that originated in watercolour for example.¹⁹ And we shall see that objects often reveal their producers' awareness of this process of material transfer.

Much of the most fruitful research on the question of pattern sourcing of figural imagery has been on more portable material genres, such as porcelain and lacquer. Hsu Wen-chin and other scholars highlighted the seventeenth-century as a transition, when new money began to demand luxury porcelain with new themes, particularly popular novels and landscape.²⁰ In Hsu's study of the visual relationship between printed drama and porcelain, he demonstrated how potters incorporated fashions from contemporary illustrated literature and art into Ming-Qing porcelain design, even conjecturally deducing the porcelain consumer from the identity of the print resource.²¹ By the late-Qing, the sheer volume of narrative imagery being churned out in a wide range of media meant narrative themes were less confined in terms of material and also audience: neatly cut conclusions are accordingly harder to reach and pattern-sources harder to identify.

Though Hsu's work highlighted the importance of the relationship between pattern-sources and consumers, he did not approach the question of interaction between consumer and narrative, nor how the occasion of usage affected the choice of narrative decoration.²² Clunas gets closer to this critical

19 Pierson, *Chinese ceramics*, p.97; I found few examples of nineteenth-century porcelain comparable to the jacket style. Only the Daoguang period (1820-1850) "Medallion bowls", with their multi-coloured background palettes and roundel-framed imagery offer suggestive parallels. See Rose Kerr, "A Group of Chinese Porcelains of the Daoguang Period (1821-1850)", in *The V&A Album, Volume 3* (London: Templegate Publishing, 1984), pp.232-239.

20 Hsu Wen-chin, "Fictional Scenes on Chinese Transitional Porcelain and their sources of decoration", *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities*, vol.58 (1986), pp.1-146; Julia B. Curtis and Stephen Little, *Chinese porcelains of the seventeenth century: landscapes, scholars' motifs and narratives* (New York City, China Institute Gallery, 1995).

21 He argued that since the porcelain *Xi xiang ji* scenes bear the greatest similarity to the finely designed and carved illustrations found in woodblock printed editions of *Xi xiang ji* produced for the landowner classes (*Muqiyukai Xi xiang ji*, *Wang Li heping bei Xi xiang ji*, *Jiaozhu guben Xi xiang ji*), this suggested that these same landowner classes were the primary consumers of such porcelain, rather than the court, merchants, or peasants ("Fictional Scenes on Chinese Transitional Porcelain", p.28).

22 Recent work by Jan Stuart on display practices, has demonstrated how the themes of objects changed according to season and festival. Talk given at Harvard Yenching Institute, Dec 6th 2010, "Timely Images: Chinese Art and Festival Display".

question of the relationship between the consumer, the narrative, and the occasion of usage, in his investigation of a group of rectangular lacquer boxes, produced around the late sixteenth century, early seventeenth-century. The boxes, scattered through European museums, share the same narrative themes and were likely designed to contain the written horoscopes exchanged between the bride and groom's families.²³ The images allude to narratives involving marriage and matchmaking, for example Li Yuan wins Dou Yi's daughter as his bride by winning an archery competition, from *Jiu tang shu*. Clunas demonstrated how the figural imagery participated in the elite rituals of object giving that signalled different stages in the marriage negotiations; the scenes are vertically positioned so they could only be 'read' when one of the short sides of the box was held towards the recipient. Although the sources of these scenes lay in the orthodox dynastic histories, he concluded they represented a popular interpretation of elite culture, and highlighted the role of key "cultural mediators", specifically theatrical performance, in allowing the dissemination of elite culture transmitting cultural values beyond the literate minority to a wide social and geographical set of producers and consumers.²⁴ In the next section we turn to the role drama played in the formation of the figural roundel jackets.

3. AUSPICIOUS NARRATIVE: CELEBRATION, RITUAL, AND DRAMATIC PERFORMANCE

Drama evidently exerted a primary influence upon the formation of narrative-decorated material culture, and scholars have identified dramatic influence as a common denominator in visual narrative uniting objects diverse in materiality and audience: from *Xi xiang ji* porcelain to folk paper-cuts, from *Qian jin ji* illustrated editions to *Three Kingdom nianhua* prints.²⁵ There were a variety of ways in which craftsmen

23 Craig Clunas, "Books and Things: Ming Literary Culture and Material Culture", *Chinese Studies* (London: British Library Occasional Paper 10, 1998), pp.136-42. Not all the narratives have been identified, but the boxes are only found in lacquer, and seem to have only been produced during this period.

24 Tanaka Issei, "The Social and Historical Context of Ming-Ch'ing Local Drama", in *Popular Culture in Late Imperial China*, eds. David Johnson, Andrew J. Nathan, Evelyn S. Rawski (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), p.9.

25 James Flath provides a concise view of the relationship between drama and *nianhua* in *The Cult of Happiness: Nianhua, Art, and History in Rural North China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004), chap.4; for an insightful discussion of dramatic

might convey a performative visuality, some of which are seen in the jackets. Theatrical costume and make-up, stage props, dramatic gestures and standard poses combined with a pared-down minimalist scenery made clear reference to the stage. Theatrical costume or make-up is common to the scenes (Fig. 5.2), perhaps reflecting the fact that many characters were more recognisable in their costumed forms. Props like lowered flags to simulate the carriage, or the whip for the horse are less usual. But there were also more oblique characteristics that might have communicated dramatic associations to their viewers: Yao Dajun has argued for *Xi xiang ji* illustrations that the use of fixed vantage point and viewing distance simulates an audience's perspective, the reader in a stationary position watching characters perform the narrative against a backdrop of scenic devices.²⁶ We see a similar constancy in viewing angle and figural proportions in the jackets. The roundels are further marked by a keen awareness of gesture and movement, and the use of objects in mediating these movements; hands brought together in obscence, servants kneeling in offer to their mistress, martial actors fencing with spear and sword, fans fluttering between lovers. Such gestures are often conventionalized, and Li-ling Hsiao's analysis of late Ming "performance illustration" suggested that one of the key means of reproducing theatrical conventions was through acting gestures (*ke, jie*) that conveyed greeting and speaking, kneeling, crying, bowing, and shyness.²⁷ Some of these gestures are reprised in the embroidered scenes, for example in Figure 5.3, a departure scene from *The Hairpin and the Bracelet*, mistress Shi Bitao stands shyly to one side, her left arm raised to conceal her face, while her maid Yun Xiang gives her loved one a memento of her feelings.

influence on late Ming literati dramatic paintings, see Scarlett Jang "Form, Content, and Audience: A Common Theme in Painting and Woodblock-printed Books of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644)", *Ars Orientalis*, vol.27 (1997), pp.1-26; For paper-cuts, Wang Bomin, *Zhongguo minjian jianzhi shi* (Hangzhou: Zhongguo meishu xueyuan chubanshe, 2006).

26 Yao Dajun, "The Pleasure of reading drama: Illustrations to the Hongzhi edition of the Story of the Western Chamber" in *The Moon and the Zither: the story of the Western Wing*, eds. and trans. Stephen West and Wilt Idema, Appendix III, pp.437-468, pp.445-7.

27 Li-ling Hsiao, *The Eternal Presence of the Past: Illustration, Theatre, and Reading in the Wanli period (1573-1619)* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2007).

Yet it would be mistaken to over-simplify this idea of material culture as a direct reflection of performance. After all, artists often appear to deliberately reject a theatrical telling of narrative images, something Yao observes in a set of *Xi xiang ji* illustrations *absent* of theatrical accompaniments (costumes, make-up, poses and gestures).²⁸ If we conceptualize theatrical performance' influence on visual narrative as forming a continuum between the completely dramatic representation (the depiction of costumed actors performing with props on stage) and the more realistic or naturalistic representation (without stage, costume or props); then most representations surely lay somewhere in between. Both the theatrically conditioned and the realistic presentation had their virtues: we have already seen the advantages of the dramatic mode, but equally a realistic presentation may have garnered fictional characters a more empathetic communication to the viewer. The power of print enabled narrative imagery to exceed the limitations and conventions of a given medium, whether drama or song, to create a richer and more complex message. An innovative Taohuawu print from the Ding workshop in Jinchang district (Fig. 5.4) suggests that print designers realized this potential.²⁹ Once part of a set of four large monochrome prints, only one survives, now in the collection of the British Museum, entitled “Twelve Picking Tea Songs”.³⁰ It appears to contain consecutive illustrations of one story, but actually brings together stories from three different dramas: the story of Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai, the Story of Orphan Zhao (*Zhaoshi gu'er ji*), and one of the plays from the Lü Mengzheng story-cycle, respectively. Each of these scenes function to represent a ballad for each of the months: October, November, and December in the case of the surviving print. Architectural and plant structures separate the narrative scenes, bringing clarity to the complex figural conception and creating visual and decorative coherence. It brings together different mediums - folk song, popular drama, wood-block print - into a single cohesive

28 Yao also notes of this illustrated album that the narrative progression follows hand scroll reading conventions of movement (right-to-left) rather than stage movements (left-to-right) (“The Pleasure of Reading Drama”, p.462).

29 The Taohuawu printing industry rose during the early Qing to replace previous Ming centres of excellence, and absorbing migrating craftsman from these old localities. Like Suzhou embroidery, it was known for fine compositions and subtle palettes, see Zhou Xinyue, *Suzhou taohuawu nianhua* (Nanjing: Jiangsu chubanshe, 2009).

30 Kobayashi, “Seeking Ideal Happiness: Urban Life and Culture Viewed through Eighteenth-Century Suzhou Prints”, in *The Printed Image in China: from the 8th to the 21st Centuries*, ed. Clarissa von Spree (London: British University Press, 2010), p.45. n.18.

design, and though novel in print terms, it reflects the close ties between *nianhua* imagery and Jiangnan songs (*xiaodiao*).³¹

Accordingly, the emphasis this chapter places upon drama is not intended to deny the multi-media identities possessed by Qing fictional narratives, arguably richer and more varied than ever before, encompassing local opera, ritual opera, shadow or puppet opera, folk songs (*shan ge*), the prosimetric genres of “plucking rhymes” (*tanci*) and “drum ballads” (*guci*), and other genres. Each form had their own “generic conventions and performance contexts” conditioning the narrative telling;³² as each retelling of the story sought to satisfy a specific social setting, it was constructed in reaction or relation to other versions. A *tanci* or mountain song interpretation might lack the visual potency of the theatrical interpretation, but these genres still possessed the ability to shape the conceptualization of the narrative in the minds of different members of Qing society. For example, narrative versions developed in oral storytelling versions have been shown to exert influence upon the plots of popular novels.³³ Moreover many stories circulated in a number of forms other than the dramatic or visual. The linguistic use of *dian gu* or “canonical incident” “a literary phrase based on a historical story or historical antecedents” was equally widespread during the Qing. Given the range of media in which the embroidered historical or fictional personage might circulate, it is not a foregone conclusion that the reference was to a theatrical representation.³⁴ Yet the special position of drama across social classes and urban-rural divides, its role in marking celebratory occasions, its ability to provide a visualization of narrative, often integrated into print culture, granted it a particularly close influence on the formation of these narrative embroidered jackets. And despite the influence of these other media and the ability of print to merge different media, it is hard

31 *Nianhua* often combined song and image, each visual section would be accompanied by a song section to be sung by the *nianhua* seller (Wang Shucun, *Zhongguo nianhua shi*, p.123).

32 Anne E. McLaren, “Folk Epics from the Lower Yangzi Delta Region: Oral and Written Traditions”, in *The Interplay of the Oral and the Written in Chinese Popular Literature*, eds. Vibeke Bordahl and Margaret B. Wan (Copenhagen: Nias, 2011), p.184.

33 Boris Riftin, “Chinese Performing Arts and Popular Prints”, in *The Interplay of the Oral and the Written in Chinese Popular Literature*, pp.187-222, p.220.

34 On the relationship between *dian gu* and figural image, see Clunas, *Pictures and Visibility*, p.169.

to escape the dominance of drama in providing a visual interpretation frequently reproduced in print. Of course other media also influenced the visualization of narrative, but the average, functionally or semi-literate, professional artist or pattern drafter was likely far more conditioned by theatrical performance and popular prints of historical narrative.³⁵ Moreover the influence was self-perpetuating; once a theatrical performance had been reproduced or referenced in a popular print, the print rendition would itself be imitated, thus propagating the dramatic interpretation: visual culture reinforced the theatrical performance. By the nineteenth century, each of the diverse material forms that presented drama-influenced narrative - lacquer, porcelain, wood, textiles - likely looked to print culture for inspiration and patterns; and print culture in turn typically preserved and popularized theatrical interpretations. One can imagine the difficulty with which an illustrator could conceive of an alternative creative design, such was the imaginative weight of dramatic influence.³⁶

Yet whilst dramatic performance as “cultural mediator” was undoubtedly an important mechanism, the mediative process itself remains rather unclear: we know little of the relationship between the object, the figural imagery, and the occasion of usage, nor how theatrical performance affected the selection and popularity of scenes as object decoration. Scene popularity in material culture may have largely arisen through performance as a selection strategy, with the proviso of influence from other genres.³⁷ But can we establish a more detailed account for how craftsmen selected narrative scenes? Murray’s account of narrative imagery addresses the question of scene selection only obliquely, through her analysis of the narrative image’s conceptual approach “the relationship between the story and the pictorial treatment.”³⁸

35 See Alekseev’s first-hand interviews with the *nianhua* artists on this topic, cited in Riftin, “Chinese Performing Arts and Popular Prints”, pp.189, 205.

36 Yao Dajuin, “The Pleasure of Reading Drama”, pp.461-462.

37 For example, Pagani demonstrated the choice of subject matter as a function of theatrical performance in a group of Three Kingdoms *nianhua*, “The Theme of Three Kingdoms in Chinese Popular Woodblock Prints”, in *Three Kingdoms and Chinese Culture*, eds. Kimberly Ann Besio and Constantine Tung (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), pp.87-111, esp.pp.88-89; p.94, n.11.

38 Murray, “What is Chinese Narrative Illustration?”, p.610.

She distinguishes between images that evoke the story (by alluding to or symbolizing the main characters or significant objects), and images that recount the story (by depicting highlighted excerpts). This establishes an important continuum between the single allusive image and the complete pictorial account, but glosses over the scene selection process involved at the latter end of this spectrum. Dore Levy suggests an alternative structural principle in her notion of vignettism: Chinese visual narrative “proceeds by a succession of lyric tableaux”, in which moments of emotional insight and awareness are privileged over those of dramatic action, with associative position communicating significance rather than temporal and spatial sequence.³⁹ Such cultural and artistic principles were likely fundamental to the craftsmen’s rationale of scene choice, but vignettism does not fully account for the direction in which narrative imagery developed into the nineteenth-century. By then, a fictional entity like *Xi xiang ji* or *Bai she zhuan* had been so widely circulated throughout different material genres, geographical locations, and social classes that it had become a visual narrative best-seller, vulnerable to standardization in terms of which scenes were selected. This is apparent, for example, if we compare the jackets depicting the *Xi xiang ji* tale (J1, J2, J3), where key scenes dominate: “Student Zhang climbs the wall to meet Cui Yingying” or “Bidding Farewell at Chang Pavilion” for example (Table 5.1).

One way of accounting for the process of narrative selection is through an aspect of Qing theatrical performance that has received little scholarly attention, and that is the way in which choosing a dramatic-tinged depiction might convey ideas of celebration and occasion. Drama had long been an integral component of celebration, ritual, and festival in Chinese society, something well documented particularly for elite and imperial rituals, when plays were offered to ancestors for their blessings on occasions such as festivals, sacrifices, celebrations, and ceremonies. The mid-late Qing version of these events is notable in two respects. Firstly, there was widespread participation in theatrical performance at different social levels; urban and rural, elite and vernacular, domestic and public; diverse locations (private residential

39 Dore Levy, “Vignettism in the Poetics of Chinese Narrative Painting”, paper presented at “Visual Narrative in Asian Art”, Hong Kong, 8-9th June 2009.

gathering, communal village festival, commercial guild meeting) and occasions (sacrifices, festivals, weddings, funerals and birthdays, institutional meetings).⁴⁰ These distinct settings were differentiated at a variety of levels, as the work of scholars like Tanaka Issei has established in some detail in regard to the language and content of the spectacle enacted.⁴¹ But one aspect uniting eighteenth and nineteenth century celebratory performance was the performance of scenic highlights (*zhezixi*) rather than play entire, a characteristic of Qing theatrical performance rather overlooked in its impact of material culture.

The earliest theatrical genres of Song *nanxi* and Yuan *zaju* both called for the plays to be performed in their entirety (*zhengben xi*, *quanben xi*), but around the mid-sixteenth century, it became popular for *chuanqi* plays to be abbreviated.⁴² By the Wanli period (1573-1620), the *zhezixi* style of performance had become increasingly prevalent, and it was to define Qing theatrical performance. The trend towards *zhezixi* had a number of factors: the inconveniently lengthy and loose structures of *chuanqi* plays, the time and financial costs of performing such plays in their entirety.⁴³ By the mid-late Ming, the drama repertoire was increasingly familiar, and plot lines were no longer the main attraction, lessening an audience's patience to sit patiently through the entire performance, particularly scenes lacking in interest or excitement. In turn, as audiences sought a more perfect rendition of the most prized scenes, and actors began to specialize in the best parts of the repertoire, so audiences began to value actors according to their ability to provide this dramatic perfectionism. During this transition period, contemporary accounts note the performance of half a play or else the selection of several scenes, chosen for their dialogue, arias, or lively action.

40 Guild meetings commonly involved theatrical performance, particularly upon the guild deity's birthday. Wang Ning provides a good analysis of variations in *zhezixi* performance in "Ming Qing minsu dui zhezixi de yingxiang", *Yishu tansuo*, no.1 (2010), pp.68-83.

41 See Issei, "The Social and Historical Context of Ming-Ch'ing Local Drama".

42 *Chuanqi* refers to musical plays of the Ming in the southern tradition (with more than two singing roles and unlimited number of acts), as distinct from *Zaju*, with a single singing role and four-act structure in the northern tradition, popular during the Yuan.

43 The best acts of these long plays might occupy just a quarter, for example, *The Peony Pavillion* comprises 55 acts, of which only about 10 or 20% are the most performed. (Qi Senhua, "Shilun Ming Qing zhezixi", p.60) Staging entire plays was lengthy, inconvenient, and tiring for both performers and audience, particularly for family household troops (*tanghuixi*). Liao Ben, "Zhezixi de chuxian" p.49.

Initially these scenic highlights were not called *zhezixi*, and the acts selected did not possess independent performance value.⁴⁴ But as it became more commonplace to perform highlighted scenes, and as scenes from different plays were performed together, attention was increasingly paid to the aesthetics of the combination itself and *zhezixi* began to become status quo. The anonymous Qing text “Jiaqing dingsi, Wuwu guanju ri”, records one anonymous writer’s 1797 viewing diary, detailing dates, locations, and troops. On the first day of the first month of that year, he watched amongst other scenes, “Finding the picture” (*shi hua*) and “Calling the picture” (*jiao hua*) from *The Peony Pavilion* (*Mudan ting*), and “Worshipping the Moon” (*bai yue*) from *A Series of Strategems* (*Lian huan ji*) (J16.2). It was unnecessary for any of these scenes to be referenced by their play titles, for the scene had acquired independent status, typically referenced with abbreviated two-character titles, able to be performed in isolation of their preceding or ensuing scenes or in combination with scenes from other plays, a dramatic structure that is re-enacted in the medley jackets (J13-17).⁴⁵

The possibility of the *zhezixi* mode - that a scene could be self-contained - derived from the structure of the *chuanqi* play itself, the degree of audience familiarity with the play’s narrative and characters, and the social mechanisms intrinsic to private theatrical performance. Hosts sought an atmosphere suitable to the occasion, and this was easier to achieve through the more flexible *zhezixi* format, than through the performance of entire plays. Performance programs were determined by occasion and location, but for those lacking the ability to create an appropriate selection of scenic highlights, publishers and printers filled this need through *zhezixi* anthologies.⁴⁶ Dramatic anthologies (*qu pu*) evidence how this genre of what Clunas terms “how-to literature of material culture” served to popularize and standardize *zhezixi* performance, meeting the needs of a wide social range of audiences and performers for assistance in

44 See Liao Ben, “Zhezixi de chu xian” for some other terms used in the earlier stage of scenic highlights, around the Jiaqing period (1521-1567).

45 See Anon, “Jiaqing dingsi, Wuwu guanju ri”, *Xiqu yanjiu*, no.9 (1983), pp.261-280.

46 Liao Ben, “Zhezixi de chuxian”, *Yishu baijia*, no.2 (2000), pp.49-52; Qi Senhua, “Shilun Ming Qing zhezixi de chengyin ji qi gongguo” *Journal of Shanghai University, Social Sciences*, vol.13, no.2 (March 2006), pp.60-62; Wang Ning, “Ming Qing min su”.

choosing an appropriate play scene.⁴⁷ Anthologies start to appear around the Jiajing period (1521-67) and key works punctuate the evolution of *zhezixi*, preserving content and categorization principles that has enabled research into changes in play popularity, audience knowledge, and reader priorities.⁴⁸ There are earlier examples of *zhezixi* anthologies seeking to fill an overtly social context, but one late Ming compendium stands out as evidence of how print might standardize correlations between drama, celebration, and occasion.⁴⁹ The *Yuefu hong shan* (Red coral ballads), prefaced in 1602, but reprinted in 1800, preserves one hundred dramatic scenes categorized into a framework of sixteen thematic *juan* covering the “full range of celebratory and ritual occasions that governed elite dramatic performance in late imperial society” that have been placed by Issei in the context of elite control of entertainment: “the selection process can be seen as a way of editing or anthologizing popular drama to bring it into line with the moral and educational aims of the influential members of the lineage or family.”⁵⁰ So for example both the “Zhang Junrui reports success in the imperial exams” (*Zhang Junrui nijin baojie* (“Cui Yingying happily learns the news of exam success” (*Cui Yingying xiwen jiebao*) scene from *Xi xiang ji*, and the “Pan Bizheng reports success in the imperial exams” (*Pan Bizheng jidi baojie*) from *Yuzan ji* are anthologized in

47 On the proliferation of this genre in the late Ming see Clunas, *Superfluous Things*, esp.chap.1, pp.34-5, which has a useful chronological list of texts.

48 Many have been published in the series *Shanben xiqu congkan* by Taiwanese scholar Wang Qiugui, allowing scholars to reconstruct the development of theatrical programs, particularly Kunqu, from Wanli to Qianlong.

49 In the earliest dramatic compilations, like the 1553 *Brocade pouch of Romances* (*Feng yue jin nang*), the entire dramatic structure is preserved as a framework from which the acts were selected - five to ten acts from forty popular *nanxi* plays, see James J.Y.Liu, “The Feng-yueh chin-nang: a Ming collection of Yuan and Ming plays and lyrics preserved in the Royal Library of San Lorenzo, Spain”, *Journal of Oriental Studies*, (1957-8), pp.79-107. Illustrations in this early compilation are in the “image top, text bottom” (*tushang wenxia*) format. The anonymous 1392 *ci* anthology *Caotang shiyu* is also arranged by topic so as to facilitate finding songs for a given occasion, but it was perhaps more common to organize material according to literati-themed *juan*, for example, *Yichun jin* categorizes according to “the six skills of the scholar” (*Linyu*), or the early Ming anthology, *Cilin yixiang*, which organized under the headings *feng hua xue yue* (wind, flowers, snow, moon).

50 I have used the *Shanben xiqu congkan* reprint of the 1800 edition in the British Library collection: Qinhuai moke (Ji Zhenlun), comp.and ed. *Jingke xinxiang Yuefu hongshanqingke* (Preface dated 1602, reprinted 1800; reprinted Taibei: Taiwan xuesheng shuju, 1984). For a history of the different editions and scholarship on *Yuefu*, see Patrick, D. Hanan, “The nature and contents of the Yuefu hongshan”, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African studies*, vol.26 (1963), pp.346-361, esp.pp.348-350. On the *Yuefu* as a representative picture of suitable dramatic material for family or lineage sponsored performances, see Issei, “The Social and Historical Context of Ming-Ch’ing Local Drama”, pp.151-2.

juan 8, “Announcement of Success” (*Jie bao lei*) (Table 5.2). We may hypothesize that audiences would have, at some level, associated the scene with the associated celebratory context.

Performance customs and anthologies caused standardized selections to become commonplace. The mid-Qing novel *The Scholars* describes an instance of when Qu Xianfu and Lu Xiaojie (Miss Lu) celebrate their wedding with a performance of “Dance of Official Promotion” (*jia guan*), followed by “Immortal Zhang brings a son” (*Zhang xian song zǐ*)⁵¹ and finally “Golden Seal” (*Feng zeng*). This might be read as a satirical dig at the foolish Qu Xianfu’s dismal prospects of gaining official promotions, at least through exams, an irony given edge by the intellectual talents of his bride. But this combination was widely performed together, so often that the trio of scenes had gained a title - “Three raised heads” (*San chu tou*).⁵² Records allow us to reconstruct some of these conventions, at least in elite arenas: the imperial court’s performance repertoires have been well documented with play scenes recorded for each festival and celebration, allowing us to know which plays were suitable for imperial betrothals, weddings, and births.⁵³ *Hong lou meng* provides similar evidence for an eighteenth-century elite family, demonstrating the strictures involved in the choice of dramatic performance. Consider Grandmother Jia’s discomfort when the three acts “chosen” by the gods to be performed at the Taoist Temple of the Lunar Goddess include “The Insignia-Laden Bed” (J8), which implies the family is conceited, and “The South Branch”, which likens the world to an ant-heap, a tale of power and glory ultimately revealed as a dream.⁵⁴ After all, just as important as performing a scene appropriate to the occasion, was avoiding scenes inappropriate to the occasion. In *Six Records of a Floating Life*, when Shen’s family celebrate his mother’s birthday, his father’s

51 This scene is also found in *Feng yue meng*, pp.131, 137 on the occasion of Fragrance’s birthday, a dramatic troupe performs fan plays from the “standard repertoire”, including “Zhang the immortal provides a son”.

52 Wu Jingzi, *Rulin waishi* (Changsha: Yuelu shu she, 2008), chap.10, p.77; Wang Ning, “Ming Qing min su”, p.69.

53 Ding Ruqin, *Qing dai yanxi shi hua* (Beijing: Zijincheng chubanshe, 1999), pp.54-58, for sources recording imperial theatrical programs.

54 The names were shaken from a pot in front of the altar, thus allowing the gods to communicate their choice of program, see Cao, Hawkes, trans., *The Story of the Stone*, vol.1, chap.29, pp.79-80.

request for “The Sad Parting” (*canbie*) from *The Legend of the White Snake* (J6, J7) upsets his wife Yün because it is an inauspiciously tragic scene to perform on such a happy occasion.⁵⁵

There was of course any number of reasons why a scene might have been selected for performance and the type of occasion was just one factor: the audience might have felt like a noisy, lively play or a quiet, elegant one, they might have selected a play on the basis of musical accompaniment or the singing role, or the actor’s speciality role. Selection would have depended on the season and place, the individual’s temperament and taste, the occasion’s setting and significance. Neither do I wish to assert a simple correlation between auspicious value, celebratory occasion, and narrative scene, for the celebratory associations possessed by a narrative scene may have been fundamental or superficial to the craftsmen’s choice. But what does seem likely is that the relationship between a dramatic scene and the kind of occasion upon which that scene was conventionally performed, impacted on the scene’s depiction in material culture, and that the correlations formed between scene and occasion conferred auspicious associations upon narrative imagery. This enables a means of understanding the growth of narrative imagery in late Qing objects, with the jackets exemplifying this development. Indeed, textile objects often also depict these performance conventions. A late Qing tablecloth recently sold at the China Guardian Spring 2013 auction features Immortal Zhang at centre, to his right Ma Gu and the Old Man Immortal (*xianweng*), to his left Liu Hai playing with the golden toad. Zhang is embroidered as a genial figure that holds a young top-knotted boy and wears a bow on his back, punning symbols that emphasize his bringing of sons.⁵⁶ What this object demonstrates is not so much the primacy of the dramatic performance - the embroidery as simple reflection of theatrical culture - but rather that if we simply interpret an object like this as expressing auspicious wishes like the desire for a son, then we overlook the

55 Shen Fu, *Fosheng liuji* (Beijing: Beijing Chubanshe, 2003), part 1, pp.28-29.

56 Rather than an arrow, his bow contained a pellet (*dan*), which punned on the homophonous “to be born” (*dan*). Further auspicious symbols are found in the peach of immortality tree (for a healthy and happy long life), a pomegranate tree for much wealth and offspring, lingzhi, bats, clouds, flowers. See *Jinxin huazhang: Jiashu tang cang Ming Qing zhixiu: Zhongguo Jiade 2013 chunji paimai hui* (Beijing: Zhongguo jiade guoji paimai youxian gongsi, 2013).

rich associations a narrative image might convey of its existence in different media: visual, performance, religious, material.

4. DECORATIVE NARRATIVE: THE JACKETS AND PRINT CULTURE

If dramatic performance offers the best understanding of how narrative imagery gained auspicious values, then it is the relationship between popular print and embroidery pattern that provides the best perspective for contextualizing the design of the embroidered scenes. Influence from print culture can be found in both the narrative content and visual aesthetic of the jackets. The jackets share much of the typical visuality of the late Qing popular print: vividly coloured, structured to emphasize balance and symmetry, close-up perspective on the figural focus, often framed with auspicious elements. This is evident if we compare three renditions of the Flooding the Golden Temple scene from *Bai she zhuan*: a embroidered cloud collar, an illustration from the dramatic anthology *Zhui bai qiu* and a late Qing “lianhua tushi” *nianhua* (Fig. 5.5a,b,c). The *Zhui bai qiu* image presents spare, hatched textures, structured along the diagonal of the river that emphasizes the mountain scenery and diminishes the human presence in the scene. It contrasts sharply with the colourful palette of the popular print, which hones in on the figures, placing our heroine Lady White at centre, resolute and brave despite the towering presence of the monk Fa Hai, who sits atop the mountain, implacable in his desire to capture her. Contemporary print influence on the embroidered jacket is found in the emphasis on colour and texture, and the use of close-up, detailed views of the characters that define the scene according to their actions and their emotions.

We also find examples of shared content between *nianhua* prints and embroidery patterns. Figure 5.6a,b. shows two pairs of sleeveband pairs from different museums, one in Suzhou, the other in North America. Both are embroidered with a striking narrative structure in which zodiac animals are paired with an appropriate dramatic scene, for example snake for The Legend of the White Snake (J6, J7) or sheep for “Su Wu looks after sheep” (J9.9). The same combination of zodiac animal and play scene was also

found in the late Qing Shanghai calendars (*Yue fen pai*), antecedents of the new twentieth-century commercial visual culture. One example was published in February 1885 by the *Dianshi zhai huabao*, distributed free to subscribers, and it was introduced with some fanfare: “China and the West have combined their expertise to create Twelve Drama Scenes, each correlated with the Zodiac Animals of the Terrestrial Branches, printed on quality white paper and designed by famous artists.”⁵⁷ I have not been able to locate an image of this calendar, so it is not possible to establish whether the lithographic and embroidered versions shared content in addition to conception, but overlap can certainly be seen in a later version, a 1906 “Huaying shengxiao yue fen pai” based on a 1896 print from a Shanghai print shop (Fig. 5.7). A comparison between the calendar and the sleevebands is presented in Table 5.3 and it demonstrates that they did not originate from a single pattern; in each, the figures vary and are depicted in differing orders: this is a relationship of common conception rather than direct imitation. These instances of shared, often traditional themes are not surprising: it was the *Taobuwanu nianhua*-trained Suzhou designers, who were to become key players in the Shanghai print industry - Wu Youru being one of the best examples of this - hence *nianhua* themes are particularly characteristic of transitional print objects like the early *Yuefenpai*. But here we see how professional dress production formed one node in a web of commercially produced visual culture: along with producers of popular prints, professional paintings, carved woodwork, and lacquer, producers of embroidered garments participated in an imagery circuit of designs and ideas.⁵⁸

57 Quoted in Li Kanghua, *Manhua lao Shanghai zhishe jie ceng* (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 2003), p.141. On the calendar posters see Wang Shucun, “Yue fen pai nianhua shi hua”, *Meishu jia*, no.67 (1989), p.66, and Ellen Johnston Laing, *Selling Happiness: Calendar Posters and Visual Culture in early-twentieth-century Shanghai* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2004). Note that in the prints, the zodiac animals are not always shown but can be inferred from the dramatic characters and the two character titles.

58 J9 provides another good example of this imagery circuit. Many of its medley of figural pairs were adopted from *Wu shuang pu* (Peerless Paragons) by Jin Guliang (fl. 1661). This album of famous historical figures became a popular theme on Guangxu period porcelain, and the jacket-designer likely appropriated the design from one of the many Jingdezhen-produced examples. For further details on *Wu shuang pu*, see J9.

To make use of the wealth of narrative imagery that circulated in nineteenth-century China, dress designers utilized the roundel and border as a mode of presentation, manipulating these formats to depict and highlight narrative. Murray outlined three main variables involved in the presentation of narrative imagery: format, compositional structure, and conceptual approach, observing that the different permutations possible within each variable combine to produce a certain mode of presentation, and that each culture tended to develop several characteristic modes of narrative imagery.⁵⁹ Chinese visual culture often used the “mono-scenic” composition, where the narrative is symbolized or epitomised within a single image set in a single frame, and the “sequential composition” of excerpted highlights, sometimes called “multiple frame” pictorial narrative, where multiple episodes are presented in a linear series, either arranged in continuous flow or segmented into distinct units, often separated by devices like textual passages, architectural or landscape elements. Broadly speaking, these two modes define the two forms of narrative depiction found in the jackets: “narrative medleys” and “single narrative”. In this section, I wish to consider how the roundel format was employed to depict a single narrative, *The Pearl Pagoda*.

The Pearl Pagoda originated in eighteenth-century Suzhou and was hugely popular in the Jiangnan area in both oral and written *tanci* genres during the nineteenth century. It tells of the love between the beautiful Cui’e and her cousin Fang Qing, a talented, handsome scholar whose family has fallen on hard times. In the jacket (J11), the story is recounted through ten roundel scenes, and in Table 5.4, I compare the selection and ordering of narrative scenes with three nineteenth-century *nianhua* renditions: all two-part prints entitled “Zhenzhu ta qian /houben” (Fig. 5.8a,b,c) produced by well-known print shops of the period. The earliest is a 22-scene version by the Lu Jiashun workshop, active in the Daoguang period (1820-1850) (Fig. 5.8a). The next two, a 16-scene (Fig. 5.8b) and 20-scene version (Fig. 5.8c), are clearly related, with near-identical scenes.⁶⁰ The latter is signed by the Wang Rongxing workshop, active during

59 Murray, “What is Chinese Narrative Illustration?”, p.608.

60 They are not identical and the new designer simplified certain extraneous details. Perhaps the original blocks were purchased from Sun Wenya; used woodblocks were often purchased as a money-saving practice to decrease designing and carving time (Zhou Wu, *Huizhou banhua shi lunji*, p.12).

the Xianfeng (1850-1861) and Tongzhi (1861-1875) periods. The former is unsigned but is very similar to the Wang Rongxing print and also a *Bai she zhuanyan* print in the same format, signed by Sun Wenya, one of the small Shanghai printshops that flourished in the late nineteenth century, following the Taiping destruction of the traditional Taohuawu print quarter in 1860. The success of Shanghai *nianhua* was predicated upon the move of many Suzhou printers and designers to Shanghai following this devastation, and *Taohuawu* print culture was to provide a foundation for the new visual cultures of photography and photo-lithography.⁶¹ It seems likely therefore that some differences between the different versions may be attributed to this design shift and the development of different devices to target new audiences in Shanghai. This may explain variations in reading direction and paratext: the earlier 22 act version offers the reader lengthy explanatory titles; the later 16 act version provides more concise, *zhezixi* title-style two-character titles and labels for most of the characters; and the latest 20 act version helps the reader with both explanatory titles and character labels. Such textual differences constitute one aspect of the range of narrative versions presented in the prints.

Though all three prints are in the “multiple frame” or “cartoon strip-style” representation format, only the later two prints actually separate the scenes by equal-sized square grids. It is this grid sectioning that enables the extension from 16 to 20 scenes, and though it might be anachronistic to accuse the print designer of a “cut-and-paste” attitude to narrative, this term goes some way towards explaining the conception of narrative that operates in the prints, one that casts light on the presentation of narrative in the jackets.⁶² Given that the black and white prints may have provided an affordable pattern source for amateur and professional craft practitioners, it also may not be so far from the truth. As I have suggested, any number of craftsmen would have been able to use such cut up frames as the basis for an object

61 Zhou Xinyue, *Suzhou Taohuawu nianhua* (Nanjing: Jiangsu renmin chubanshe, 2009), pp.42-44.

62 On the development of “comic-strip” style narrative illustration, see A Ying, *Zhongguo lianhua tubua shi hua*. The term “lianhuan tuhua” was not used until 1927 (p.1), but A Ying argued that as a narrative format, it began in the Yuan dynasty and had matured during the Ming dynasty, as evidenced by the 1498 completely illustrated Hongzhi *Xi xiang ji* edition (p.83). Single sheet *lianhuan* narrative *nianhua* first appear in the Qianlong period (pp.169-170); Wang Shucun also traces the serialization of dramatic *nianhua* to the Qianlong period when novels would be divided up into 10-20 scenes (*Zhongguo nianhua shi*, p.123).

pattern.⁶³ In any case, the *nianhua* comparisons imply that narrative imagery, by this juncture, was conceived of as a series of frames, comprising both main story and sub-plots, which might be inserted or removed, in a manner that may be compared to the oral storyteller's practice of combining longer narratives from already mastered segments (*tiao shan ge*).⁶⁴ Thus, as Table 5.4 shows, whilst certain scenes are common to all four versions: the giving of the pearl pagoda, Censor Chen promising Fang Qing his daughter, Fang Qing assuming the guise of Taoist monk to test Cui'e's commitment; other scenes are optional. The earliest Lu Jiashun version provides the most complicated telling, introducing military and supernatural elements through the sub-story of Marshall Bi Yunxian (Fang Qing's old classmate, who rescues him after he is robbed of the pearl pagoda during a snow-storm, cares for him while he recovers, and promises him his daughter Xiujin as second wife), who is sent into battle by the emperor and is assisted by Golden Boy (*jintong*), who has been sent by the Primal Woman of the Nine Heavens (*Xuannü jitian*). It seems that this military tale is offered instead of the sub-story of thief Qiu Liuqiao, who robs Fang Qing of the pearl pagoda, and then attempts to sell it in the pawnshop where he is caught. Both of the later prints devote three scenes to his apprehension, trial, and execution. Each telling lays a slightly different emphasis, the four scenes added to create the 20-act version form a more didactic rounding of the main characters: so we see Fang Qing the filial son bidding his mother goodbye, or Bi Yunxian rescuing Fang Qing from the snow. The jacket goes the furthest in shunning nearly all unpleasant content, dispensing with any kind of military or supernatural narrative details. So whilst Fang Qing is shown abandoned in the snow, this is only to enable the inclusion of his rescue by his loyal classmate. The reason behind this - Qiu Liuqiao's theft of the pearl pagoda - is avoided, the only reference to this character is the pawnshop scene, and there is no account of him meeting justice. The embroidered version has selected a resolutely positive telling, freeze-frame shots of the characters in their most virtuous moments.

63 Riftin argues the peculiar numbering order found in a *Wuqiang* print is explicable if it was intended to have been cut up ("Chinese Performing Arts and Popular Prints", p.219).

64 McLaren, "Folk Epics from the Lower Yangzi Delta Region: Oral and Written Traditions", p.164.

The substantial differences found between presentations of the same narrative by print-designers from the same region demonstrate the great variations that might exist within a single narrative. But it is to be noted that such variability is more characteristic of *nianhua* than the jackets. Nearly every scene found on the jacket is also found in the prints: seven of the ten jacket scenes feature in all three prints, and the remaining three scenes feature in two of the three prints. This resonates with Hegel's argument, in a detailed analysis of elite and vernacular versions of the Li Mi story, of an "essential unity of ideology", a common core of events that constituted the narrative's identity.⁶⁵ The jacket appears to reflect this essentialized version - a view of the *Zhenzhu ta* prototype as understood in late nineteenth century Jiangnan.⁶⁶ The selection process has been directed towards the most positive and virtuous scenes, scenes presenting *Zhenzhu ta*'s most auspicious moments - farewell of a filial son, rescue by a loyal friend, talented man marries virtuous women - rather than the sub-plots that tended to feature less desirable themes. This auspicious rather than narrative reading is confirmed by the ordering of the scenes upon the jacket surface. Laid out in the museum study room, there is little to suggest coherent order: the last scene, Fang Qing's marriage is placed in the front central roundel, nearest in position to the first scene, Fang Qing bidding farewell to his mother in the front bottom right roundel. And yet it is not the case that the ordering of the scenes is haphazard, for if this was so, why would scenes 2 and 3 appear together on the front shoulder and scenes 4 and 5 on the back shoulder? One way of explaining the odd ordering is by considering how print and performance ideas of dramatic narrative were adapted to dress: the need to compromise narrative and decorative functions. For narrative to function, preceding scenes needed to be close to their ensuing scenes; and for decoration to succeed, the scene of Fang Qing and Cui'e's marriage had to be in front central position, both because this is the most auspicious and important scene, and because, as we saw in Chapter 3, the figural roundel jacket evolved from the dragon roundel robe and accordingly preserved some of the dragon robe's conventions as to the positioning of important visual

⁶⁵ Hegel, "Distinguishing Levels of Audiences for Ming-Ch'ing Vernacular Literature: A Case Study", in *Popular Culture in Late Imperial China*, eds. David Johnson et al, pp.112-142, p.142.

⁶⁶ My conception of prototype here follows the theory surveyed in George Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and other Dangerous Things: What Categories reveal about the mind*, especially chap.2.

information. Thus, many of the jackets place the finales of marriage and union in the highlighted position of centre front roundel (Fig. 5.9a,b); presumably most prominent in the viewer's field of vision and allowing the wearer to participate in the metaphorical and literal joining of husband and wife as the jacket was fastened, a technique recalling the bodily symbolism of imperial dress.⁶⁷

The manipulation of narrative to accommodate the dress format is also evident when we examine how the two White Snake jackets (J6, J7) use the border format to present narrative imagery. After all, it may be argued that ordering of any kind is difficult within the roundel format where there is no real beginning or ending position (other than perhaps the front and back central roundel): linearity is elusive when the concept of first and last roundel depends more on the viewer than the wearer.⁶⁸ Given this, border format may offer a better structure for narrative progression, at least in terms of linearity. How then is narrative ordered in these jackets? Here, as in *Zhenzhu ta*, little narrative order can be located. Table 5.5 sets out the scenes depicted in the jackets as compared to a 16 act late Qing *nianhua* rendition, which originated in the Sun Wenya printshop (probably contemporary to the 16 act *Zhenzhu ta* print) (Fig. 5.10). It demonstrates that it is nonsensical to consider the viewer as reading the embroidered narrative in any meaningful or chronological manner. Discontinuous scenes are placed side by side: Madame White surprising Xu Xian in her snake form set next to Xu Xian meeting Madame White for the first time whilst boating on the West Lake. And whilst it is important to remember the borders were likely designed upon a single silk sheet (Fig. 3.11), reconstructing the scene order in this original format does not offer any more insight. And nor should it, the commercial origins of these modular sleevebands mean it is more likely that the placement of the border shapes stemmed from the economic use of fabric rather

⁶⁷ Vollmer has argued the Qing re-visioning of the Imperial dragon robe formed a deliberate communication of imperial symbolism, the emperor positioned centrally within the cosmos. See *Silks for Thrones and Alters: Chinese Costumes and Textiles* (Myrna Myers, 2003).

⁶⁸ The imperial dragon roundel structure offered little in respect to ordering conventions. Significantly when the *Zhenzhu ta* scenes were applied to a "Daoist" roundel robe in the Field Museum collection, the ordering followed the lay-out principles of the Daoist robe. I am grateful to Yuhang Li for sharing her thoughts on this object.

than logical narrative sequences, hence the horizontally constrained boating scene is placed on the bottom border, for example.

What the pattern designer appears to prioritize is not narrative order, but rather a meaningful interaction between narrative imagery and jacket format, for example in the flooding scene, the designer has portioned out the participants of the scene onto the four lobes of the cloud collar, each character isolated in their separate water battle upon their lobe, but joined in their experience of the flooding through the totality of the cloud collar (J6.14). Or the use of the sleevebands to depict the two theft scenes: the first when Madame White and her side-kick, Miss Blue, steal the silver from the government treasury so as to help Xu Xian with money; and the second where the two ladies go to the Southern Peak of Mount Song in order to steal the magic herb to save Xu Xian's life, who has nearly died after the shock of seeing his beautiful wife turn into a large snake! In doing so, the pattern-drafter has been able to draw a parallel not necessarily explicit in the linear-bound narrative, but effectively communicated through dress. This parallel is emphasized through narrative detail: not only between the two scenes of robbery, but also the two thieving Snake-Beauties, with the fantastic detail of the snakes – white and blue – peaking out from each of our heroine's hats (Fig. 5.11a,b).

Once we understand this drive to unite narrative and decoration, other aspects of the jackets' aesthetic make more sense. The jacket designer often attempted to cast narrative in decorative terms. For example, the vast majority of the roundel scenes portray couples rather than individuals, and they typically do so through a zoomed-in perspective that highlights the interactions between these players. Of course, the size of the roundel and restrictions of an embroidered depiction are factors too; the most peopled roundels are the ones worked in *kesi* tapestry (J10), which probably allowed for a more complex pattern conception. But this emphasis on the couple can also be understood as a means of admitting novel figural content into the established auspicious repertoire of dress decoration: paired figures provided connotations of happy and harmonious marriage. Hence the related jacket design of the “animal roundel

style” in which paired animals are embroidered within an auspicious setting, which similarly communicated ideas of paired communion (Fig. 5.12). We find the use of couples even in a *Hong lou meng* jacket (J12.3), where an iconic scene like “Daiyu buries the flowers”, commonly depicted as a single portrait in painting and prints, is given a companion of Baoyu in embroidered dress format.⁶⁹

Another method was to integrate narrative scenery with auspicious motifs, re-contextualising the figural content amidst auspicious setting. Rather than attempt more complex stage scenery or realistic settings, the embroidery designer relied on the standard pavilion, rocks, and trees conventional to “baimei tu” (beauty) *nianhua*, which neither added narrative interest nor located the figures in an identifiable setting.⁷⁰ Instead this *nianhua*-type contextualisation served to ornamentally ground the figures, and to smooth unfamiliar decorative content into a more recognisable frame for the viewer. By placing the figures in an auspicious setting, and surrounding them by motifs well-established in women’s dress adornment - birds and butterflies, peony and plum - the nineteenth-century viewer’s eye was eased into more conventional textile surroundings. This strategy becomes particularly effective in the “narrative medley” jackets, which contain diverse scenes taken from multiple dramas. In J16 for example, the viewer’s eye is not jarred by the disparate dramas, partly because of their commonality in terms of figural pairings, their shared proportions and motions, but also because of their auspicious framing, which gives the roundels coherence as an decorative set, harnessing the visual expectations of nineteenth-century consumers.

69 The Gai Qi portraits are among the most representative of this style. See *Qing caibui Hong lou meng tuyong* (Beijing: Zhongguo shudian, 2010); also notes in J12.

70 Catherine Yeh observed that these traditional romantic settings isolated the beauty within natural and private locales of gardens and boudoirs, and argued late Qing Shanghai lithographic prints formed a break with this tradition by placing illustrious women in recognisable, public, urban settings. See “Creating the Urban Beauty: The Shanghai Courtesan in Late Qing Illustrations”, in *Writing and Materiality in China: Essays in Honor of Patrick Hanan*, eds. Judith T. Zeitlin and Lydia Liu, with Ellen Widmer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2003), pp.397-447.

5. CONCLUSION

The spare, reduced visualization of narrative observed in the *Zhenzhu ta* roundels and the *Bai she zhuan* border suggest a highly developed degree of audience familiarity with these narratives. We will return to the implications of this kind of audience knowledge for interpretations of meaning in following chapters, but the factor of the viewer is also worth dwelling upon here, after all, both format and conceptual approach were channelled through the viewer. Hence the prioritised visual information was placed in front and back centre roundel, where it would have most impacted on the viewer's visual field. There are other ways in which the interpretation relied on the viewer, for example, the interaction of size and recognition: at a distance the figures presumably possessed more decorative than narrative characteristics, and in many cases, the narrative would only become identifiable at a very close distance. Synecdochic depictions, in which the narrative whole is conveyed through key characters or objects, with the burden of interpretation lying with the viewer, may be said to function rather like a literary illusion. Should we therefore suppose the embroideries incorporated some kind of challenge to the identification, awarding the successful viewer a feeling of achievement comparable to that of the reader who traces the obtuse allusion in a poetic text? And like the reader and writer of a poetic allusion, did it serve to unite the viewer and wearer in the communion of shared cultural knowledge? Or was this more simply a function of controlling who was awarded the opportunity to make the identification, a use of "social distance", where only those whose relationship to the wearer was sufficiently intimate would be granted sufficiently close visual access?⁷¹ Much of this must remain conjectural, dependent on a more exact knowledge of how and by whom the jackets were worn, but the speculation points to the unique characteristics of narrative portrayed on dress, exemplified in the *Zhenzhu ta* case-study: the conventions of auspicious imagery channeled narrative into a visually appealing, prototypical version of events, not easily equated to contemporary representations in other media.

71 Clunas, *Pictures and Visuality in Early Modern China*, p.113.

In this chapter, I have argued for the primacy of dramatic performance in determining which narrative scenes became the most popular and prevalent in visual culture. By demonstrating the associations between theatrical scenes, celebratory occasions, and auspicious values, I have suggested that the absorption of narrative imagery into the decorative repertoire of nineteenth-century dress was enabled by the auspicious significance awarded to dramatic scenes. These auspicious associations were partly achieved through their performance upon celebratory occasions, but they were also a function of print culture, particularly the dramatic compilations and popular prints that disseminated theatrically tinted interpretations of narrative imagery. Thus the jackets can be seen as part of an imagery circuit, linked to other urban professional media, as exemplified by the *Zhenzhu ta* jackets or zodiac animal sleevebands. Yet however much the commercial embroiderers were influenced by contemporary prints, narrative-embroidered dress possessed its own unique characteristics. By manipulating the narrative imagery within the dress format, the embroidery designer could take advantage of the interaction between the narrative pattern and the format of the embroidered dress. This account highlights how fundamentally different embroidered dress was as a mode of representation: worn on the body instead of hung on a wall, viewed in glances and snatched shots restricted by social relationships and cultural conventions, rather than the controlled viewing of album leaves turned upon a table. So despite these close ties, we return in the end to the independence of the embroidered format, the lack of examples of exact copying from print to embroidery demonstrating how pattern drafters took inspiration from drama and *nianhua*, but manipulated narrative formats to suit the dress medium, and in so doing, developed an independent aesthetic of decorative narrative.

PLAYING WITH NARRATIVE IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

A Chinese picture consisting of familiar, conventionalized – and emotionally charged – elements, transcends time; its effect is not only to suspend time but further to unite times and events long past with those of the present, to re-create by invocation rather than any mere representation the emotional power and even the moral significance of a human situation, to identify the viewer with the artist as he participated in the (re-)creation of the human experience depicted or implicit in the picture.¹

1. INTRODUCTION: MEANINGLESS DECORATION?

In the last chapter we explored how performance and print influenced the presentation of narrative found in the Pearl Pagoda and White Snake jackets, both examples of single narratives. This chapter investigates the other style found in the jackets, “narrative medleys” (J9, J13-17), which feature a number of scenes taken from different dramas and stories, each scene set into a single roundel. It is difficult for the contemporary viewer to know what to make of these jackets. J9, for example, presents us with a miscellany of figures containing no obvious organization in terms of chronology or theme: models of loyal friendship like “Su Wu bids farewell to Li Ling” (*Su Wu bie Li Ling*) (no.9) mingle with the female warrior Fan Lihua receiving the heavenly manual (*tian shu*) from her immortal tutor *Lishan laomu* (no.10). The medley of diverse and disparate characters exemplify “the interplay between ‘popular culture’ in print and ‘high art’ in painting” identified by McCauseland as a key characteristic of the nineteenth-century, attributable, in part, to the increasingly sophisticated technologies of image reproduction.² But how should we interpret this interplay: do the individual scenes function here to reference the plays to which they belong, or do the scenes take on new meaning when juxtaposed with other scenes? Is it possible to locate a meaningful context for the narrative medley jackets?

1 Hegel, *Reading Illustrated Fiction in late imperial China* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1998), p.320.

2 McCauseland, *Telling Images of China*, p.23.

For many scholars the answer to this question has been in the negative. For example, curator Robert Jacobson in describing a figural roundel jacket in the MIA collection claimed that the embroidered roundels contained simply “Figures in Garden”.³ I characterize this position as “Meaningless Decoration”: the belief that, by the nineteenth-century, decorative compositions had grown conventionalised, hackneyed, and essentially trivial. It is a stance rooted in art historical bias towards the works of earlier, more prestigious and historically exceptional dynasties - the dynastic transitional seventeenth-century or the High Qing eighteenth-century. The late Qing audience is seen as declining in parallel with their dynasty, in some way more ignorant and less educated in their grasp of historical and graphic decoration, hence the idea, particularly prevalent in porcelain studies, that narrative decoration had lost the specificity so vibrant in the late Ming, that late Qing audiences were no longer able to identify specific tales amidst a confused sea of generic narrative imagery.⁴

This position is curious because there has been little recourse to identifying any social or cultural mechanisms that might explain this historical chasm. Instead the fact that most research on narrative imagery in material culture has focused on Ming-Qing transition narrative porcelain has led many scholars to ignore the large corpus of extant narrative-adorned late Qing objects, even suggesting that narrative imagery was a short-lived fashion, confined mostly to the late Ming and early Qing. Thus, Clunas posits a major shift around the mid-Qing, in which woodblock print-originated theatrical designs no longer formed popular subject matter on porcelain, at least in domestic markets. This shift he explains by the rise of Suzhou popular prints of “stately beauties”: “elegance has displaced narrative completely”.⁵ Yet eighteenth-century *Gusu* prints preserved in Japanese collections demonstrate that dramatic narrative remained a vigorously popular theme in popular prints throughout the Qing period.⁶ The relationship

3 See Jacobsen, *Imperial Silks*, no.222, p.526, acc. RBL.51.424, labelled “figures in garden setting” but actually scenes from *Xixiang ji*.

4 For example, Julia Murray, “Didactic Illustrations in Printed Books”, in *Printing and Book Culture in Late Imperial China*, eds. Cynthia J. Brokaw and Kai-wing Chow (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), pp.417-450, 427.

5 Clunas, “The West Chamber: A Literary Theme in Chinese Porcelain Decoration”, *Transactions of the Oriental Ceramic Society*, vol.46 (1981-2), pp.69-85, 83-85.

6 See Hiroshi Higuchi, *Chūgoku hanga shūsei* (Tokyo: Mitō Shooku, 1967); Yamato Bunkakan, *Chūgoku no min-shin jidai no hanga* (Nara: Yamato Bunkakan, 1972), nos.36-38 for examples.

between print and theatre during the Qing, as has been seen, approached that of symbiosis. In the absence of any major cultural trends or censorship drive on such objects, it is difficult to explain why such a rupture would take place, and I would suggest that such an impression is more likely an artifact of which objects survive and which objects are studied.⁷

Of course, it is undeniable that many nineteenth-century publications of drama and novels contained perfunctory illustrations; when compared to late Ming luxury-commodity publications, many late Qing dramatic illustrations are irrefutably cursory. The pace of newly-compiled, finely illustrated publications had abated substantially by the mid-Qing and though this trend has been attributed to mid-Qing prejudices against luxuriant ornamentation, the regression in quality and quantity of newly produced book illustrations reflected the expanded markets of the mid-late Qing, catering to their customer's needs through lower prices, reprints in new formats and later lithographic reproduction, rather than high quality illustrations.⁸ Increasing numbers of producers and consumers involved in ever more competitive markets meant designers often settled for imitative structures and schematic illustrations. These simplified, compositions have been ascribed to dramatic influence - a reference to the spare imagery of the stage-set - but it is more usual for conventionalized image vocabulary to become fodder for art historical criticism. So James C.Y. Watt presents the widespread use of woodblock-printed pattern books as causing rigidity of design and standardization in line and form; the repeat of pictorial motifs throughout a single illustrated drama evidencing the "degeneration" of the artistic imagination, resulting from commercial pressures on "unskilled artisans" that created primitive and simplistic designs.⁹

7 The Qianlong period did see a censorship drive against the "obscene literature" (*yinci huishuo*), but this appears to have led to new formats rather than eliminate the popular narrative themes, see Wang Shucun, *Zhongguo nianhua shi*, pp.123-4.

8 Brokaw argues that printing spread geographically and socially from the seventeenth century, see "On the History of the Book", in *Printing and Book Culture in Late Imperial China*, pp.24, 28; Zhou Xinhui, *Zhongguo gu ban hua tong shi* (Beijing: xueyuan chubanshe, 2000), pp.300-310 for a critical assessment of mid-late Qing illustrated works. For good overviews of the development of illustrated fiction and pattern-books, Zhou Xinhui and Wang Zhi eds., *Huipai, Wulin, Suzhou ban hua ji* (Beijing: Xueyuan chubanshe, 2000); Hua Li, Zuo Boyang trans., *Chinese Woodcuts* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1995); Zhou Xinhui, *Zhongguo gu ban hua tong shi* (Beijing: Xueyuan chubanshe, 2000).

9 *The Sumptuous Basket: Chinese Lacquer with Basketry Panels* (New York: China House Gallery: China Institute in America, 1985).

Yet low-cost illustrations can be located in periods other than the late Qing, and there are alternative ways of explaining these illustration trends. From the carver's perspective, strategies like simple compositions and repeated designs saved time and money, enabling wider audiences for their work.¹⁰ It is also possible to see these simplified illustrations as enhancing the reading experience; through repeated, easily identified images, artisans fulfilled market demands, partly because audiences likely enjoyed the very familiarity of the material, liked knowing what was going to come next. Perfection through repetition is a key value of *zhezixi* performance: familiarity enables appreciation. Expanding in this vein, literary scholar Hegel offered an interpretation of some sensitivity, when he suggested that imagery served not only to visualize the narrative, but also represented, to the collective emotions of the readers, a generalized time and space.¹¹ Through this widely shared and highly repetitive vocabulary of pictorial conventions the reader was able to unleash "a flood of recollections acquired from other popular narratives and cultural forms".¹² These associations are central to comprehending late Qing narrative representations. For, even accepting wider consumption and lowered standards in the publishing of mid-late Qing illustrated narrative media, it is not apparent that this development necessarily impoverished either narrative knowledge or recognitive ability. Here I present the opposite case. Rather than nineteenth-century decline, I build on the findings of the previous chapter that narrative decoration became increasingly widespread in diverse material forms, to argue that the nineteenth-century saw increasingly novel and sophisticated means of presenting narrative. Specifically I suggest that the accumulation of illustrated narrative scenes in dramatic compilations and popular prints formed a critical mass of pattern inventory and audience recognition, which stimulated designers to play with narrative in a manner apparently unique to the nineteenth century.

A brief example will illustrate what I mean by these new forms. We have already seen the prevalence of *Xi xiang ji* in a variety of media, and we noted how the selection of scenes became increasingly

¹⁰ Jang, "Form, Content, and Audience", p.13.

¹¹ Hegel, *Reading Illustrated Fiction*, pp.318-320.

¹² Laikwan Pang, "The Pictorial Turn: Realism, Modernity, and China's Print Culture in the Late Nineteenth Century", *Visual Studies*, vol.20.1 (April 2005), pp.16-36, p.18.

standardized over the course of the Qing dynasty (Table 5.1). By the nineteenth-century, such was the audience knowledge of these scenes that craftsmen began to experiment with new ways of alluding to the *Xi xiang ji* narrative. Figure 6.1 shows a Tongzhi period (1862-74) teapot and cover from connoisseur Georg Weishaupt's collection of late Qing porcelain, decorated with seals containing *kaishu* script characters referencing *Xi xiang ji*. This decorative theme would have possessed little coherence in the export market, but for the domestic consumer, it would have been clever, entertaining, and meaningful - the characters all allude to the marriage intrigue between Scholar Zhang and Cui Yingying, so for example "Words of Farewell" (*bie ci*) reference the parting of the couple as Scholar Zhang leaves to take the exams (J1.4, J2.3, J3.8), "To become relatives" (*cheng qin shi*) to Cui Yingying's mother finally giving permission for the couple to be married (J3.1). It is not necessary to conjecture that the couplets' reference to the *Xi xiang ji* representation in the viewer's mind functioned via pictorial representation to accept that the sheer volume of illustrated *Xi xiang ji* porcelain meant pictorial porcelain was implicit in the calligraphic teapot. As such, the teapot can be understood as a kind of meta-reference, once removed from the narrative illustrations, and the viewer's narrative knowledge - the recollections evoked by the scene references - a requisite for full appreciation.

2. PLAYING WITH NARRATIVE IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY PRINT

In the last chapter we explored the influence of the *zhezixi* mode of performance upon the development of the figural roundel jacket, and the way in which this influence was mediated by print culture. I singled out the genre of dramatic anthology (*qu pu*) as playing a pivotal role in enabling the rise of *zhezixi* and facilitating its visualization in material culture. Over the course of the Qing period, as novel and drama illustration formats evolved, so did the imagery contained in these anthologies. Scholars have explored the relationship between these evolving formats and differing audience understandings and expectations of the text-illustration relationship in earlier periods. For example, Yao observes that the mid-Ming transition from hand scrolls to album leaves carried potential narrative loss given the latter format's lesser

ability to communicate time and space, but this transition occurred at the point in which audiences were so familiar with stories like *Xi xiang ji* that they no longer required or sought fully illustrated editions. Accordingly Yao presents this transition by invoking a conception of maturity: “like the shift from hand scrolls to albums in Chinese painting, the change from continuous narrative to selected scenes in book illustration signals the maturing of a tradition.”¹³ If this is so, it begs the question of what happened to an already mature tradition in the ensuing 200 years?

Though this question is often answered in terms of decline, there are alternative, more interesting ways of thinking about nineteenth-century narrative imagery. Late Qing illustration was regenerated by the printing industry’s post-Taiping shift to Shanghai and the involvement of painters and artists in photolithographic print production.¹⁴ Like the new porcelain market of the early Qing, this market was transformed by the demands of a new group of consumers, shifting tastes away from officials and literati-painters towards the Shanghai trend-setting courtesans, merchants, and professional artists.¹⁵ Popular subject matter dominated; frequently narrative tales from historical legends and popular novels circulating in *nianhua* print markets. Indeed, it is somewhat ironic that in a period where the mercantile taste-led market increasingly leant towards the figural themes of popular culture, historians have reached the conclusion that audiences were less knowledgeable about such subject matter.¹⁶

Rather than a deficit of knowledge, nineteenth-century narrative imagery possessed three interesting features. Firstly, in mid-late Qing dramatic compilations with illustrations, the image was increasingly decontextualized. Typical in this regard is the late eighteenth-century *Zhui bai qiu*, one of the earliest

13 Yao Dajun, “The Pleasures of Reading Drama”, p.437.

14 Hay has suggested the introduction of lithographic printing enabled a return to the text-image interaction characteristic of the late Ming, just as the market for fictional works was expanding (“Painters and Publishing in late Nineteenth-century Shanghai”, in *Art at the Close of China’s Empire*, Phoebus: Occasional Papers in Art History 8, ed. Ju-hsi Chou (Tempe, AZ: Arizona State University, 1998), pp.134–88, p.140, also pp.134-141, Hay also notes that many painters were also *Kunqu* practitioners, *ibid*, p.188, n.108; Chu-ting Li “Looking at Late Qing Painting with New Eyes”, pp.21-22; Hay notes that; V.M. Alekseev, *Kitaikaia Narodnaia kartina* (Chinese Folk Prints) (Moscow: Nauka, 1966), p.20.

15 On the development of popular culture in Shanghai, see Yue Zheng, *Jindai Shanghai ren shehui xintai (1860-1910)*, pp.132-148.

16 Clunas argues late Ming literati painters deliberately distanced themselves from narrative-associated material, and this aesthetic was later incorporated into art historical constructions of Chinese painting, creating an opposition between literati tastes and popular culture (*Pictures and Visuality*, p.167-171).

collections of *Kunqu* plays, edited first by the pseudonym Wan Hua zhuren, later continued by the drama critic Qian Decang (fl.1763-1774), published between 1763 and 1774; and the early Republican *Kunqu da quan* by Yi'anzhuren.¹⁷ Rather than position the illustration at the appropriate plot juncture, these anthologies grouped the illustrations together, usually at the beginning of each *juan* of extracts. Images and text were thus separated; a process creating single frames of narrative, often with little text and hence vulnerable to loss of meaning when recreated in other mediums. This vulnerability is less perceptible in printed illustrations or narrative *nianhua* with their textual supports, but certainly evident in predominantly visual forms like carved wood or embroidery. A late Qing pattern book from the collection of Don Cohn well illustrates the blend that resulted in decontextualized, mingled narrative scenes. The page illustrated (Fig. 4.9c) is divided into two parts: atop, the climbing the wall scene from *Xi xiang ji*, on bottom, a hundred boys pattern. Turning the page, the user finds other narrative scenes, some identifiable, others more obscure. The figural jumble is characteristic of the medley jackets and however difficult it is for us to sense of, it was presumably replete with meaning for a nineteenth-century woman leafing through it trying to decide which scene to copy to place on the jacket. Indeed, this type of pattern source reflects the mingling of narrative scenes in other media: for example, a set of historical figural pairs from the Alekseev collection (Fig. 6.2) provides a visual context rather similar to a “narrative medley” jacket like J9 or J16. Both print and jacket demonstrate the usage of the single narrative frame circulating in nineteenth-century material culture (echoing the *zhezixi* practice of combining disparate scenes), and both print and jacket use figural pairs to visualize the story (in contrast to the individual figure presentation common to more literati print works of similar themes). However, since the textual backing found in the print is absent in the jacket roundels, the roundels are accordingly harder to identify.

This difficulty is amplified by the spareness of the visual depiction, a second characteristic. Though given realistic furnishings and props, the *nianhua* figural pairs are scenically unmoored, isolated figures against the blank page; similarly despite the framing of auspicious riches, the jacket roundels also lack setting or

¹⁷ *Gailiang quantu Zhui bai qin quan zhuhan* (Baoren tang, 1781; Shanghai: Guang ya shu ju, 1908); Yi'anzhuren, *Hui tu jing xuan Kunqu da quan* (Shanghai shijie shu ji, 1925).

context. Visual brevity is characteristic of the roundels and clearly a certain amount of visual reductionism was necessary to effectively depict a complex narrative scene within a small, embroidered frame. But it was, evidently, possible to pare the narrative down even further to their most intrinsic elements. In the case of the *Zhenzhu ta* story depicted in an embroidered border (J4), it seems nonsensical to talk of scenes; rather we see characters in key poses with representative objects: Fang Qing bidding farewell to his mother, Cui'e giving Fang Qing the pearl pagoda, Lady Fang being rescued by the nunnery, Fang Qing singing Taoist sutras, and so on. This leads to the third feature of nineteenth-century narrative imagery and this is the power of the narrative synecdoche. That even this barest possible visual could still be identified by the viewer and associated with their concept of *Zhenzhu ta* demonstrates the power print and performance-mediated visualizations of narrative possessed over the minds of Qing society. The more familiar an audience was with a narrative, the more reduced the visual presentation could be. Qing audiences were likely sensitive to key visual cues - an easily identifiable characteristic like a companion figure, a notable setting, an associated object - that both enabled and restricted the identification process. Visual crutches like Xu Shilin next to a pagoda (*Bai she zhuan*, J6.3) or Scholar Zhang atop a wall (*Xi xiang ji*, J1.2) obviated the need for the textual support common to *nianhua* or dramatic illustration, but the increasingly close ties between narrative dramas and representative characters and objects had further implications: it meant the character came to synecdochically represent the entire drama and its associated meanings and values. In a manner somewhat analogous to the use of narrative characters for personification in literature, the single narrative frame could represent the entire narrative whole. Like the oral storytelling-styled references to the "handsomeness of Pan An" or the "incorruptibility of Boyi" we see in literature like Feng Menglong's *Stories to Awaken the World*, if the figure was very well-known, and there was no possibility of his audience confusing the referential attribute, the name by itself would suffice as reference: "They can hardly expect to have a Chen Ping or Pan An for a son-in-law!"¹⁸ By reducing entire plots to key character or scenic elements, the elements acquired their own autonomy and their own significance.

18 Feng Menglong, "Scholar Qian is blessed with a wife through a happy mistake", in *Stories to Awaken the World*, p.141; Both

The visual autonomy of the single, spare, decontextualized narrative scene, and its synecdochic reference to the dramatic whole offered nineteenth-century artists and designers considerable potential. The late Qing familiarity with narrative - the audience's ability to read narrative references from a single figure or scene - meant that designers could reconfigure these scenes and portraits to recreate new narrative presentations. Narrative plots and characters became something to be played with; synecdochic elements to be creatively deployed. This functioned at the level of entertainment in a Jiaqing period (1796-1820) printed dice-game (*shuanglin*) board, "created by Gui Zhengxing of Taohuawu" now preserved in Japan (Fig. 6.3). In this version of the game, the dramatic scenes and characters from *Bai she zhuan* constitute the markers, and the plot defines the progression of the game. The players begin (*qima*) with individual characters like Xu Xian or Madame White, who, as one progresses round the board, intersperse with scenes like "Borrowing the Umbrella" (*jie san*) until one reaches the end when Xu Shilin pays obscence to his mother, entombed in the pagoda.¹⁹

The process of awarding dramatic characters a life beyond their dramatic plots could reconstitute narrative elements even more creatively. In the following, we will examine examples of this playing with narrative from nineteenth-century prints, textiles, and ballads, each example demonstrating how single narrative frames or well-known narrative characters were reconstituted to create novel meanings and structures.

We have already observed instances of this process: the late Qing sleevebands in which dramatic characters were used to express the zodiac animals series (Fig. 5.6a,b), or the Taohuawu Ding studio print in which dramatic scenes were used to represent the months of the years (Fig. 5.4). This usage of dramatic characters to visualize temporal formats like the twelve months probably began around the mid-Qing under the influence of the vernacular "Twelve Month Flower Songs" (*Shi'er yue hua ge*), which

Chen Ping (d.178) and Pan An (247-300) were renowned for their good looks.

19 The Gui Zhengxing workshop (fl. Jiaqing, Daoguang period) was known for the production of "gu pai tu" print, see Zhou Xinyue, *Suzhou Taohuawu nianhua*, p.43, also pp.100-101 on the history of these board games (*boxi qitu*).

commonly integrated narrative texts, either from a single drama like *Bai she zhuan* or twelve scenes taken from different dramas.²⁰ A *Yangliuqing* print “Shixing shi’er yue dou huagu” (Popular songs on the Twelve months as Flower Drum Performances) (Fig. 6.4) provides an explicit reference to this tradition. Diverse characters - each pair apportioned to a month - stroll around an elegant pavilion, mingling across the print surface. No graphic device divides them, but the pairs are clearly delineated, each character faces inwards to their companions or to the side, none turn outwards to colleagues from other months: Xu Xian and Madame Bai from *Legend of White Snake*’s “Borrowing the Umbrella” (J6.2) flank Weaving Maiden and Cowherd Boy from *A Match in the Milky Way* (*Tian he pei*) (J16.4), but they do not interact. Each pair of actors is accompanied by a flag labelled with play or scene title, and the couplet besides them details their month, seasonally appropriate flower and plot section referenced. For example: the couplet for *Bai she zhuan* reads: “(In) the fifth month flower drum song performance, the pomegranate flower blooms, borrowing the umbrella is lovers’ destiny for the White Snake and Green Snake. Drinking the realgor liquor reveals (her) true form, their relationship cut off at the head of the bridge, Leifeng Pagoda produces an honourable son with golden flower inserted in his hat.” Or for the “Shili Pavilion” scene from *Xi xiang ji* (J1.4, J2.3, J3.8), “(In) the second month flower drum song performance, willow branches turn to green, Little Crimson delivers the letter to Master Jun Ruizhang. Playing in the Western Chamber, scaling the lattice wall unites the mandarin ducks, Miss Cui Yingying bids farewell (to her love) at the *Shili chang* pavilion.”²¹

Beyond these temporal structures, dramatic characters and scenes were also employed to visualize abstract social and cultural concepts. A print entitled “Five Human Relationships” (*Wu lun tu*) from the Hermitage collection, visually and textually describes the Confucian notion of the five human relationships that structured society: “What are the five human relationships? Between Sovereign and Subject, Father and Son, Elder and Younger Brothers, Husband and Wife, and between Friends.” (Fig.

20 See Wang Shucun, *Zhongguo nianhua shi*, p.123; for an example White Snake 12 Month Counting Song (*Baishhe shange*), see Fu Xihua, *Baishhe zhuanji* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1958), pp.139-140, based on a Guangxu (1875-1908) Hangzhou edition.

21 There are 12 couplets but 13 couples present, possibly because the extra couple is included to cover the leap month (*guinyue*).

6.5) Though the inscription provides brief explanation, it is the cast of dramatic personages that are used to visually elucidate these relationships and make them more concrete, more vivid, and one may suppose, more relevant to the audience. Presented in the wealthy household setting characteristic of the *nianhua* prints that idealize the elite celebration of seasonal festivals, at a glance, the cast of characters might be read as the aspirational harmony of the successful family.²² But at an individual level, the labelled characters explain how these relationships enable the fulfillment of this ambition; the close-up image shows Guo Ai and Princess Shengping used to personify the relationship between Husband and Wife. These characters starred in “Beating the Princess” (*Da jin zhi*), a spin-off drama from *Man chuang bu* that narrated the marriage trials of Guo Ziyi’s sixth son, Guo Ai (739-787) and Princess Shengping, daughter of the Daizong Emperor (727-779), whose discordant relationship was restored to marital harmony by the patient wisdom of the emperor and empress. This print could be understood at different levels: idealized elite household, Confucian moral philosophy, or set of dramatic narratives, and though the communication was perhaps richest when all three were integrated, this was not necessary for it to be a meaningful viewing. But evidently the viewer’s understanding and appreciation of the print would have been enhanced by their narrative competence and knowledge - as honed through popular dramatic and storytelling performance or other narrative prints.

These designs are ingenious but they are also strikingly artificial, forcing narratives into numbered and themed categories. Their artifice recalls a much earlier presentation of the *Xi xiang ji* narrative, published by Min Qiji (1580-after 1661) in 1640, which represented each of the play’s twenty-one scenes using subsidiary frames of paintings, screens, lanterns, which depict scenes of their own, “embedded scenes”.²³ This remarkable work has been read as a commentary on contemporary material culture and the rise of medium like porcelain and lacquer to illustrate famous dramas. An ode to the late Ming handicraft

22 Maria Rudover, *Chinese Popular Prints* (Leningrad: Aurora Art Publishers, 1988), no.101. The other character labels are illegible.

23 Min Qiji (1580-after 1661) a publisher and printer from Wucheng in Zhejiang province; designer unidentified; only surviving set in the Museum fur Ostasiatische Kunst in Cologne. For images of this album and a fascinating analysis, see Jennifer Purtle, “Scopic Frames: Devices for Seeing China in 1640”, *Art History*, vol.33 (2010), pp.54-73.

designer, it hails his flexibility of conception, his ability to adapt a pictorial scene to a given medium. Like the *Yanglingqing* print, it reflects on “layered framing and fictionality”, forming an extended study of the framing device in material culture.²⁴ The frame is obviously central to the jackets’ presentation of narrative, and there would have been many sources from which a pattern-drafter might find a decorative frame. The frame’s usefulness in integrating diverse pattern areas and shapes meant a vast variety of cartouches developed in many Chinese decorative arts, including architectural decoration, book illustration, and textiles.²⁵ In the jackets, the roundel frame functions to separate and divide areas within a large and complex visual mass, guiding the viewers’ eyes to different forms of decoration, and asserting a culturally established conception of where each decorative component should be placed. It also provided the pattern designer with a site for conventional decorative motifs like the wedding-themed dragon and phoenix (J17), or the Eight Taoist Immortal’s Attributes (J9), distinct from the narrative content placed inside the roundel, and thus another means of legitimizing this exotic content.

Still, for a narrative scene, the frame is an allusive entity; giving the viewer an illusion of entry into the fiction even as it prevents entry by asserting the viewer’s position on the outside in reality. Hay argues in *Sensuous Surfaces* that when we involve ourselves fully in the surface of decorative objects, we depart from a surface interaction with the object, and instead find ourselves into an imagescape: “the decorative object invites two modes of experience that interpenetrate and mediate each other.” In the jackets, the roundel frame mediates this shift from “representational viewing” to “a more complex and processual physicality”.²⁶ But Wu extends the argument to suggest that when the “pictorial representation transcends the physical object that bears it”, it also “links itself with other representations from different times and spaces; its meaning emerges from such associations.”²⁷ Thus the frame also enabled the pictorial

24 Clunas, “The West Chamber: A Literary Theme in Chinese Porcelain Decoration”, *Transactions of the Oriental Ceramic Society* 1981- (London, 1983), p.238, 255, 258, 259 n.288, 291.

25 Round frames also became popular in *nianhua*, where moon-shaped roundels were called *yue guang* or *yuan guang*, and printed illustrations roundel shaped illustrations, see *Zhongguo gudian wenxue ban hua xuanji, xia*, p.823.

26 Hay, *Sensuous Surfaces*, p.68, pp.173-4.

27 Wu Hung, *The Double Screen: Medium and Representation in Chinese Painting* (London: Reaktion, 1996), p.237.

representation to assert connections to the many other media that might convey this image, staging a meta-representation of allusions to other materials and other consumers.

3. NARRATIVE COMPETENCE, NARRATIVE CONVENTIONS AND THE FEMALE AUDIENCE

The narrative capacity required by these novel narrative presentations not only challenges traditional scholarship's denigration of the nineteenth-century audience, it also highlights the importance of the viewer in determining the meaning of a figural scene. For though I have suggested that the position of "meaningless decoration" cannot properly account for the sophistication of late Qing narrative-decorated objects, the opposite proposal - that all figural images reference a specific tale - is equally untenable. Some of the figural scenes found in the jackets do indeed display characteristics of standardization and may be more accurately described as the ubiquitous "Figures in Garden": gentle ladies and handsome scholars engaged in appropriately gendered cultural pursuits with no apparent narrative reference (for example the borders on J14). One way of reconciling the distinction between generic and narrative figures is by conceptualizing figural imagery as a spectrum that ranges from those figures whose depiction evokes reference to a specific text or tale (whether or not this reference is detectable to modern-day audiences), to figures whose identity in social, gender, or cultural terms supersedes any such specific reference (whether or not this had once been held): *shinü* beauty, humble fisherman, elite scholar; figures who function by virtue of general attributes, rather than a reference to a fictional tale, a text beyond the visual depiction. A figure's position upon this spectrum holds a certain instability. For audiences trained in the theatrical typology of *sheng* (young elite male scholar), *laosheng* (older elite male), *huadan* (young elite unmarried woman), and *laodan* (older elite woman), all figures could potentially be understood in terms of their basic components of class, gender, and status.²⁸ The figures at the narrative end of this spectrum, at one level, also lean towards the other direction, thus Xi Shi, famous beauty of the Spring and Autumn period, came to represent idealized female beauty, and equally, an image of a generic beauty could evoke a

28 Paola Zamperini notes the influence of semantically coded operatic costume upon late imperial fiction in 'Clothes that matter: Fashioning Modernity in Late Qing novels', *Fashion Theory*, vol.5, no.2, (2001), pp.195-214, p.196.

prototypical version like the Four Beauties (Xi Shi, Wang Zhaojun, Diao Chan, and Yang Guifei). Indeed, misidentifications of narrative are particularly likely to occur in the ‘beauty’ genre, for example, Fig. 6.6, labelled “Three Beauties” in the 1991 mainland publication *Suzhou Taohuawu mu ban nianhua*, is actually an illustration of “Wenji returns to the Han” and references the story of Cai Wenji, the Han dynasty poet captured and imprisoned by the Xiongnu, who later returned to her homeland.²⁹

The instability of the narrative reference suggests that the process of awarding a figural scene narrative meaning depends upon the narrative knowledge and visual capacities of the individual and collective viewer, and further upon the associated media or mechanisms that form understanding and recognition - publishing, performance, and scholarship - the appreciation of narrative. Accordingly historical conditions in which this appreciation of narrative is discouraged, obstructed, or even damaged (images and books burnt, scholarship prevented, plays banned or lose favour), may cause a once identifiable narrative to enter the murky zone of the narrative-generic spectrum, a grey area sometimes termed “allusion to narrative” or “semi-narrative”. For the narrative to re-emerge in the identifiable portion of the spectrum the audience must gain certain knowledge to re-establish the identification. The latter decades of the twentieth century saw this kind of work begin as historians reclaimed scenes that had been abandoned as generic. Richard Barnhardt provides a good example of this process in a discussion of a group of paintings, previously interpreted as non-specific “Winter Landscapes”, which he established were actually narrative images of “Yuan An sleeping through the snow”, produced by Dai Jin (1388-1462) or his workshop during the fifteenth-century. He demonstrated how the subject-matter, a rather eccentric take on the ideal of the humble official, fell out of favour during the sixteenth century and into a “historical limbo” “distorted by the succession of scholars who rewrote China’s past”.³⁰ Barnhardt’s identification relied on establishing a group of other images sharing this composition, and finally locating a museum example with an identifying title. The image group he assembled possessed a considerable range of interpretations, but they also shared certain prototypical content necessary to “belong” to the

²⁹ Jin Yulin et al, *Suzhou Taohuawu mu ban nianhua*, p.138, no.31.

³⁰ Barnhardt, “Rediscovering an Old Theme in Ming Painting”, p.53.

narrative, something reminiscent of the range of *Zhenzhu ta nianhua* visualizations we saw in the previous chapter. As this key content was reduced, the narrative became harder to identify, in one example, the narrative emphasis had become “as imprecise as setting out on a winter’s journey.” Barnhardt observes that even this impoverished composition still likely represented the original narrative to the original customer, but for ensuing viewers, the image occupied a shaky and shifting status, caught between the specifics of “Yuan An sleeping through the snow” and the generics of “A Winter’s Landscape”, and only stabilized by an audience - like its original customer - more practiced at making the identification.

The jackets offer a good perspective on the generic-specific continuum, partly because embroidered images - unmoored from anchoring textual elements like the scene titles and character labels common to *nianhua* narrative prints - were so susceptible to loss of meaning. This susceptibility was exacerbated by the Qing embroiderer’s practice of auspicious contextualization: placed in generic, gendered settings of the boudoir and the pavilion, surrounded by floral and religious motifs. Figures were easily lost within this mass of symbolism; reduced to their constituent identity of gender and status, and read as beautiful ladies, handsome scholars, and playful boys. Indeed the idea of decorative narrative almost demands that at some level this is how the images are read. And yet a jacket like *Chai chuan ji* (J10) tells us that there was simultaneously a concern to depict the most pivotal and auspiciously significant junctures of the plot. We have already considered how this concern could be accommodated from the perspective of design and production, but what were the implications for meaning? How might late Qing female audiences have viewed these decoratively framed narrative figures? I have argued that the lack of textual support means that for the embroidered imagery to function successfully - to communicate the richest message - wearers and viewers of these jackets necessarily possessed a highly developed degree of familiarity with both narratives and the narrative’s visual conventions. My understanding of figural imagery highlights the role of audience knowledge in identifying the narrative and the alternative interpretations that will arise in the absence of this narrative knowledge, but it further implies that narrative iconography does not necessarily possess fixed or absolute values of significance; instead narrative meaning is always somewhat in flux - a

socially and culturally conditioned confluence of audience, context, and knowledge. But if meaning is dependent on what the audience brings to the viewing, then it is incumbent upon us to attempt to understand how the nineteenth-century woman viewed the embroidered jackets, and to consider how the nineteenth-century engendered, through certain activities and practices, a certain way of seeing. Thus to understand the jackets, we must seek to understand the ways in which the knowledge, skills, and capacities possessed by late Qing women resulted in a visual experiencing that was inevitably and fundamentally different to ways in which the current owners of these objects - twenty-first century North American museums and their audiences - encounter the jackets.

Art historians have attempted various means of capturing how the viewer's identity and life experience affected his visual experience. For Gombrich, this process was "The Beholder's Share", the projection of the beholder's life and experience into a painting.³¹ Baxandall extended this idea in *Painting and Experience*, where he sought to access Quattrocento visual experiences through the relationship between visual culture and social experience. He theorized a semiotic connection between the "pictorial style" of a given visual object and the "cognitive style" of that society: a culturally variable blend of "stock of patterns, categories and methods of inference; training in a range of representational conventions; experience drawn from the environment" brought to the processing of visual objects.³² By examining both cognitive and pictorial style in Quattrocento painting, he showed how Quattrocento visuality was formed and amplified by those activities engaged in by a social group: from listening to the preacher's histrionics to mercantile gauging of geometric proportions. Clearly the question of what kind of period eye was possessed by, say, a late Qing Suzhou embroiderer, cannot be fully addressed here; gender was notably absent from Baxandall's account (later scholars have sought to "redress the apparent gender neutrality (and default masculinity) of the period eye") and the late Qing female period eye is more properly the

31 E.H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1961), part 3.

32 Baxandall, *Painting and Experience*, pp.31-2.

subject of another thesis.³³ But by considering how some aspects of his approach might apply to the jackets, I wish to draw attention both to the varying levels at which the jacket scenes may be read and the diverse skills a female viewer brought to the visual and cognitive processing of dress and textile presentations of narrative scenes. By accommodating this visual acuity and conceptual operations, I hope to shift attention away from the polarized positions like hackneyed compositions or coded messages, to suggest some of the jackets' significance from the perspective of nineteenth-century Chinese women. For connecting pictorial style to social experience through visual skills implies the possibility of accessing the one by means of the other. As anthropologist Clifford Geertz, (who found in Baxandall a genial approach to the challenge of accounting for visual culture within the "texture of a particular pattern of life") posited: if objects "materialize a way of experiencing, bring a particular cast of mind out into the world of objects, where men can look at it,"³⁴ then the jackets offer us a means of understanding both the particularity of the nineteenth-century Chinese woman's "cast of mind" and the ways in which objects materialized their experience.

Baxandall was somewhat ambiguous as to which modes of visual training were encompassed by the Period Eye. Overtly he distinguished "the general run of visual skills and a preferred class of skills specially relevant to the perception of works of art" by which he meant conscious skills acquired with effort, with "rules and categories, a terminology and stated standards ... the medium through which they are teachable."³⁵ But he later stated his concern was with "more generally accessible styles of discrimination," those acquired from business activities, visiting church and social encounters, which

33 The failure to address gender in the processing of visual signs relates to a further impediment to the theory, which is the difficulty of elucidating which portion of a given visuality might be attributed to specific and culturally relative circumstance, and which portion might be rather more universal (Baxandall, *Painting and Experience*, p.38). A.W. Randolph studied a set of Quattrocento female birth-trays, which "explicitly address ... a female spectatorship...function in a time-space marked by female companionship"; interestingly many contain narrative subjects drawn from the Bible, ancient mythology, and vernacular novella, characterised by images of lively male infants and gender relations, and particularly the fate of powerful women. See "Gendering the Period Eye: Desch da Parto and Renaissance Visual Culture", *Art History*, vol.27, no.4 (2004), pp.538-562.

34 Geertz, "Art as a Cultural System", *MLN*, vol.91, no.6 (Dec 1976), pp.1473-1499, p.1475, 1478.

35 Baxandall, *Painting and Experience*, p.37; these "conscious skills" are articulated in embroidery pedagogy formulated in early modern embroidery manuals, see Fong, "Female Hands".

presumably a greater sub-set of the population would experience.³⁶ And for many, this emphatic shift was pivotal: by moving away from specialist “aesthetic” training towards the set of cognitive and visual skills created through the general experience of living within a given society at a given time, his paradigm provided a conceptual frame to demonstrate how activities removed from the world of art were not removed from the world of visibility.³⁷ Certainly for our purposes this expanded view of the formation of Qing women’s visibility allows us to explore social practices often omitted when contemplating embroidered objects. It allows us to conjecture, for example, that one of the main skills a nineteenth-century female viewer brought to the viewing of the narrative jacket was a highly developed sense of the materiality of the embroidered textile: a richly nuanced and discriminating understanding of stitch, texture, and palette. From a production perspective, we know that women began training this sense at the young age of 11 or 12, and it was theoretically continually practiced by all but the poorest of Qing daughters, whether for their marital trousseau, market commodities, or gifts for relatives, lovers, and friends. Whilst the actual amount one produced was dependent on individual circumstances (how wealthy the family was, how morally prescriptive their parents were in creating a schedule of textile work, how talented they were at embroidery and so on), embroidery taste was also engendered by consumption. In plays and novels, we see this skill being honed in the boudoir setting, as women engaged in the connoisseurship of embroidered goods: evaluating, criticizing, comparing different objects, often in the company of other woman, sometimes of a different social standing. Often the process of creating and critiquing the embroidered object was a means of developing female relationships: “We’ll embroider flowers together upstairs, choose our colours, thread our needles, talk it over”.³⁸

This conception of how social practice shapes visibility also permits the consideration of the narrative skills a woman acquired from listening to narrative ballads like those of Suzhou’s *Wuge*, or viewing a

36 Baxandall, *Painting and Experience*, pp.27-30, 40.

37 Geertz, “Art as a Cultural System”, p.1481.

38 *Nüshu* poem cited in Cathy L. Silber, “From daughter to daughter-in-law in the women’s script of southern Hunan”, in *Engendering China: Women, culture and the State*, ed. Christina K. Gilmartin (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), p.65.

dramatic *nianhua* print, or watching a *tanci* performer; all become valid evidence in charting the range of skills that informed a woman's ability to interpret a visual narrative representation. Each member of Qing society possessed their own narrative treasury, a socially and locally variable selection of the vast number of historical, mythological, and dramatic characters who peopled the Qing fictional landscape. And beyond narrative knowledge, we can also consider the "narrative competence" possessed by late Qing women, and how this narrative competence enabled certain readings of the jackets.³⁹

Nineteenth-century female audiences potentially encountered narrative representations in a vast array of oral, visual, and performative forms: plays, shadow-puppets, *tanci* or *guci* performers, blind storytellers, *nianhua* prints, illustrated novels and plays, carved wood, painted lacquer and porcelain, pattern books and folders, temple wall paintings, or proverbs. Each form possessed their own conventions as to how narrative was structured, how characters were distinguished; each form accordingly required different skills of their audience. To take the example of *tanci* performance, audiences had to be able to track the storytellers voice as he or she shifted from narrator to character, sometimes merging the two, they had to discriminate the different registers of speaking (*shuobiao*) and singing (*chang*) which encoded different kinds of content. The usage of paralinguistic registers is of particular relevance to the jackets: the array of eye, hand, and body movements, gestures, expressions, and paralinguistic sounds that storytellers used to portray character and narrative. This is just one possible parameter of communication. Bender's study of Suzhou *tanci* performers lists stylized gestures for communicating yes and no; compass points or directions; up and down, size and shape, volume, distance, and speed; numbers of things; and actions like bowing or appraising things. Even the ability to track the storyteller's gaze or "eye spirit" (*yanshen*) enabled a further layer of narrative understanding: "eye movements aid in producing the whole range of human moods".⁴⁰ These movements and gestures were also encoded in visual presentations, forming a subtle layer of meaning in the jackets, that enabled the late Qing viewer to distinguish between the

39 Gerald Prince defines narrative competence as "the set of rules and intuitions...that allows readers to produce and process narratives, to expand, summarize and paraphrase them in like manner." ("Reading and Narrative Competence", *L'Esprit Createur*, vol.XXI, no.2, (Summer 1981), pp.81-88, p.85.

40 Bender, *Plum and Bamboo: China's Suzhou Chantefable Tradition* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), pp.52-60.

concealing raised hand that betrays the baddie Han Shizhong and the concealing raised hand that suggests modesty on the part of the heroine Bitao in the *Chaichuan ji* jacket (J10.1).

Narrative competence would have been critical in scene identification. We can hypothesize that scenes were chiefly identified through its constituent figures, each of which might be discriminated - through costume, gestures, and postures - according to the basic theatrical role types that enabled identification on stage and in visual representation. But narrative typologies worked at the level of both the individual and the group. Baxandall was particularly interested in painted depictions of figure patterns, showing how they were implicated within contemporary interest in religious drama and popular dances, and how these sharpened “the capacity to discern psychological interplay among static figures grouped in subtle patterns.”⁴¹ Nineteenth-century Chinese awareness of “postural orderings” owed more to theatrical performance and hierarchical conventions of distinguishing the gender and status of participants in a given social encounter, but it is equally true to observe that:

Behind this tendency to conceive of both dances and paintings as patterns of body arrangement carrying implicit meaning lies a wider tendency... to regard the way in which men grouped themselves with respect to one another, the postural orderings they fell into in one another’s company, as not accidental, but the result of the sorts of relationships they had to one another.⁴²

It is only by attention to these postures and gestures that we are able to distinguish the distinction in J3 between Cui Yingying and Scholar Zhang being wed (no.1) and being parted (no.8); in the absence of this knowledge they are simply scholar and beauty in a garden.

The close attention to gesture and stance observed within the roundel scenes could only emerge from a society deeply concerned with the correct choreography of a social interaction, yet probing these shared structures of figural groupings has not been the chief focus of scholars who have catalogued the figural imagery of textiles or wood-carvings. Instead they have tended to categorize according to the traditional

41 Geertz, “Art as a Cultural System”, pp.1484-85.

42 Baxandall, *Painting and Experience*, pp.71-81.

painting-typology divisions of *renwu* paintings, for example “Beauties” or “Deities”.⁴³ Of course, such listings function primarily to order figural imagery, rather than to illuminate on Qing cognitive understanding of this imagery, but it is worth considering what these figural typologies conceal. How else might we categorize the scenes to reveal the significance of the figural grouping to a Qing audience?

In the previous chapter we noted the unusual use of thematic genres as organizing categories found in the early Ming dramatic anthology *Yuefu hong shan* (Table 5.2). *Yuefu*’s categories suggest an alternative means of sorting the scenes, not according to individual figure or narrative type but rather the thematic values of the group’s interaction or ‘figural patterns’. For example, dramatic acts from the plays *Ti qiao ji*, *Xi xiang ji*, *Yu zan ji*, *Hong fo ji*, and *Tou xiang ji* are all subsumed under the heading of “Love” (*juan* 13, *Fengqing lei*), in which the lovers manage to meet despite many difficulties. Each of *Yuefu*’s thematic *juan* contained a single illustration, taken from the first act, which may be said to visually conceptualize the thematic category. For *Fengqing*, the representative image is a scene from the drama *Record of the Bridge* (*Ti qiao ji*), in which Zhuo Wenjun listens to her lover, Sima Xiangru playing the *qin* beneath the moon (Fig. 6.7).⁴⁴ For a modern-day observer, it is not obvious that the scene represents love, but it would have been blatant to the Qing observer, their conclusions honed from other *tingqin* examples like the *qin*-playing Scholar Zhang from *Xi xiang ji* (“Cui Yingying’s beautiful words convey (her) emotions” (J3.4, J1.1), or scholar Pan Bizheng from *Yu zan ji* “Chen Miaochang’s words shame her lover” (J5.4) (Fig. 6.8a,b,c). This explains the commonalities in figural structure between the embroidered renditions of these scenes with the *Yuefu* illustration: the fan or flywhisk held by the heroine in timid flirtation, the hands of the hero simulating the *qin*-playing, his eyes watch hers intently, hers turn modestly downwards - balancing the virtuous wish to be concealed with the romantic desire to be observed - slight smiles hover over both faces. It also explains why J5’s pattern drafter has mistakenly drawn Pan playing the *qin* when it should really be Chen (a slip perhaps suggestive of commercial pressures).

43 Gao Chunming categorises his examples according to gender or figural identity (*Zhongguo chuantong zhixiu wenyang* (Shanghai: Shanghai shuhua chubanshe, 2005), pp.354-426). See Murray, “What is Chinese Narrative Illustration”, p.602, on these traditional classifications.

44 see Hanan, “The nature and contents of the *Yuefu hong shan*”, pp.636-637.

The existence of *Yuefu* suggests that by the early Qing, viewers were able to categorize *zhezixi* scenes according to thematic structures - Parting, Marriage, Birth of a Son, and so on - but it also indicates that these shared visual arrangements with integral gestures and participants enabled a specific narrative reference to be read at what might be termed the prototypical level. To take the example of *Zhenzhu ta* (J11), though the jacket scenes function to narrate the specific story, many scenes can also be understood in terms of thematic figural patterns: young lovers in clandestine meeting in the garden, beauty gives scholar valuable object to hasten their wedding or finance him taking the exams, young lovers are married in glorious union. The conventionalization of visual narrative structures was obviously contingent on the conventionalization of genres like the *caizi jiaren* scholar-beauty romances, as *Hong lou meng*'s Grandmother Jia memorably critiques: "These stories are all the same - so tedious! Always the same ideally eligible young bachelors and the same ideally beautiful and accomplished young ladies..."⁴⁵

Of course, we cannot know whether the period viewer saw the embroidered scenes in terms of the thematic heading under which the narrative was subsumed - love and loyalty, pining and parting - or by identifying the narrative from which the scene originated. The narrative identification may not have been necessary to appreciate the jacket, these generic themes might have been understood instead of or in addition to the specific narrative reference; that a scene could be understood at the level of formalized content or structure did not mean that it was habitually or universally interpreted at this level. But the overarching figural themes suggested by a work like *Yuefu* suggest that the late Qing female viewer, through the continual reproduction of visual narrative conventions in varied sites of performance and material culture, was attuned to the identities of figural scenes to an extent that they were able to categorize a certain scene within a thematic group in a manner that obviously eluded the twentieth-century American collector, challenging any assumptions of generic meaning in nineteenth century visual culture.

45 Cao, Hawkes, trans. *The Story of the Stone*, vol.3, p.30

Furthermore, the visual conventions and choreographed structures common to a single category like Parting or Marriage implies a conceptual connection between the narratives of a single category. That is to say, each single instance of a given theme might be associated, at some level, with the other possible narrative references for that theme. So for example, the Qing audience connected, at some level, scenes on the theme of parting (*Fenli*) like “Chen Miaochang sees off her lover at the Qiu River” from *Yu zan ji* with “Cui Yingying sees off her lover at Chang Pavillion” from *Xi xiang ji* (Table 5.1). This hypothesis of what can be termed narrative commonality is borne out by numerous instances from late Qing literature, song, and imagery. For example a Chaozhou song connects Chen San from *Li jing ji* with her colleagues from similar tales: “The east side had the wife of Xu Mengjiang, the west side had Su Liuniang, the north side had Yingtai for Shanbo, the south side had Chen San for Wu Niang.”⁴⁶ In this case, the characters are all famous tragic love stories, but the link might be based on various features – similarity in narrative moral, character type, or even seasonal setting – and it was also presumably locally, temporally, and socially contingent, reflecting the popular narratives of a given social group in a given time and place. The aforementioned image of Yuan An sleeping through the snow was a commonly chosen winter theme in Ming literati seasonal scenery paintings (*siji shanshui tu*) and so, at some level, possessed a connection to alternate choices to ‘narrate’ winter, for example, Wang Huizhi (d. 388) going down the river to visit his friend Dai Kui on a snowy night.⁴⁷ In dress, we find it in a pair of sleevebands that pair the tragic heroines Cai Wenji and Zhao Wenjun, which utilise the dress format to make explicit their shared biographical structures - imperial beauty captured by or married to barbarian tribe (Fig. 6.9).⁴⁸ Narrative or character commonality was particularly common in *Wuge*, the Suzhou narrative ballads sung in the

46 See Zhang Geng and Guo Hancheng, *Zhongguo xiqu tong shi* (Beijing: Zhongguo xiju chubanshe, 1980), pp.259-260. The couples present an interesting combination of the local and the global: Xu Mengjiang was the original name of Meng Jiangnü whose tears for her dead husband bought down the Great Wall; Su Liuniang is a Chaozhou play which tells of how Su Yuanwai defies the dictates of her father and clan head to marry the cousin she loves, aided by her maid; Zhu Yingtai famously dressed as a male scholar but her love for fellow scholar Liang Shanbo ended in tragedy; Chen San and Wu Niang are from the *Record of the Lychee Mirror* (*Li jing ji*) also written in Chaozhou dialect. See also Chen Xiang, *Chen San Wu Niang yanjin* (Taipei: Taiwan Shang wuyin shuguan, 1985).

47 Barnhardt, “Rediscovering an Old Theme”, p.60; for example, the “Siji shanshui tu” by Xu Lin (1462-1568).

48 Wang Zhaojun was sent by the Han emperor Wang in 33BCE to the Xiongnu, after being misled by a portrait that concealed her beauty. Her story was told in the drama *Han gong qiu* (Autumn in the Han Palace), a *zaju* by Ma Zhiyuan (c.1260-1325). Cai Wenji was captured by the Xiongnu, but when later ransomed by Cao Cao in the name of her father, she returned to China leaving behind her two children. Her story was famously depicted in the Song Emperor Gaozong commissioned illustrated handscroll *Eighteen Songs on a Nomad Flute*.

region around Lake Tai. The ballad *Xue Sixth Son (Xue Liuliang)* contains a segment describing the boat that Xue is to use to bring back the younger sister, which is carved with scenes of famous couples: “Faithless lover Cai Bojie from The Lute; the glamorous playboy Tang Bohu; the doomed pair Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai; and the famed lascivious couple Pan Jinlian and Ximen Qing.”⁴⁹ McLaren comments that “the intention of the boat description is to summon up one romantic story after another, in an attempt to heighten the reader’s anticipation of the action to come” and this is certainly one function. But the description of these fictional characters also serves to contextualize and dimensionalize the fictional couple being sung of; the verse ends by describing those carvings that detail Xue’s anticipated lovemaking with the younger sister. In this way, fictional characters were employed to illuminate on other fictional characters, but equally shared narrative structures and connections allowed for fictional characters to illuminate upon real life, for an interaction between fiction and reality.

The intersection between fiction and reality is particularly fascinating to consider in regard to the jacket narratives, given the picture-within-a-picture or meta-representation involved in a young woman with presumed aspirations towards beauty, love, and fortune, donning a textile surface that depicted young beauties and their narratives of finding love and fortune. Indeed, as an object of dress, that most personal of textile mediums, an ambiguous distinction hovers between the pictorial medium of the jacket and the pictorial representation of the embroidered narrative.⁵⁰ As we have already seen, the embroidered image communicated its fullest meaning through an interaction between the embroidered scene and the jacket format, but one’s position as wearer or viewer garnered different perspectives on this representation. Perhaps by donning the narrative-decorated dress, the wearer expressed a statement of ownership or connection with that narrative. After all, though the mannered gestures we have examined were by fictional beings, they also evoked the performative motions made by the other “embroidered figures”

49 Anne E. McLaren, "Folk Epics from the Lower Yangzi Delta Region: Oral and Written Traditions", in *The Interplay of the Oral and the Written in Chinese Popular Literature*, eds. Vibeke Bordahl and Margaret Wan (Copenhagen: NIAS, 2010), p.178. This segment is found in the 1854 *changben* or “song text” manuscript.

50 See Jane Schneider, “Cloth and Clothing”, p.2004, for the role of the textiles in the most intimate and transitional occasions.

referenced in my thesis title: the women who wore these jackets. Particularly upon the ceremonial and celebratory occasions when these highly decorative jackets would have been worn, their movements would have been just as tightly governed by convention as to how and with whom they moved. “The liturgies laid down by Zhu Xi and other authorities describe performances that resemble dances, where senior man and woman match movement for movement and gesture for gesture, repeated by all the married couples in the family in order of birth and generation.”⁵¹

4. PLAYING WITH NARRATIVE IN REALITY: THE THREAT AND FEAR OF FEMALE AUDIENCES

They liaise with their sisters-in-laws, arrange to meet their sisters, bring the children, invite the neighbours. They gather in throngs to watch plays, goading each other on to watch plays, day after day, night after night.⁵²

The puppets performing before the curtains are already an illusion; a painting of puppets has moved still further from reality. But just consider that the sky is also a vast curtain: then which of us is not an actor upon the stage?⁵³

Thus far, I have presented the jacket’s narrative imagery in terms of decorative narrative and auspicious connotations, and shown how the evolution of narrative illustrations in print led nineteenth-century understanding of narrative towards increasingly referential presentations; narrative characters and narrative scenes reconstituted. But for all the importance of print or performance in influencing the jackets’ presentation of narrative, the embroidered dress rendition of narrative did something rather different; and the jackets present more than a simple reflection or continuation of the narrative tales that circulated in song and on stage. By reproducing these images upon their bodies, the wearer of the jackets linked a fictional narrative to their own narrative of significance and celebration, taking the meaning beyond the general social and cultural associations of the narrative to assume a more personal cast.

51 Bray, “The Inner Quarters”, p.263.

52 From *De yi lu*, a moral instruction book compiled by the Wuxi philanthropist and playwright Yu Zhi (1809-1874) in 1869, *juan* 11.2, vol.8; cited in Zhao Shanlin, *Zhongguo xiqu guanzhong xue* (Shanghai: Huadong shifan daxue chubanshe, 1990), p.106, n.25.

53 Xu Wei (1521-93), “Inscribed on Paintings for the People of Hangzhou” (*wei Hangren tibua er shou*), in *Xu Wenchang san ji* in *Mingdai yishu jia ji huikan* (Taipei: Guoli zhongyang tushuguan, 1968), pp.867-68. Translation after Jonathan Chaves in *The Columbia Book of Later Chinese Poetry: Yüan, Ming, and Ch’ing Dynasties (1279-1911)* (Columbia University Press, New York, 1986, p.316). The inscription is from a painting of marionettes that Xu Wei produced to satirize the “performing officials” that he detested.

Through the wearing or viewing, the purchasing or commissioning of these jackets, nineteenth-century women produced a gendered and cultured artefact that had the potential to express both actual and aspirational aspects of their identity. Accordingly, in the remainder of this chapter I supplement the decorative narrative reading with more intimate dimensions. Drawing evidence from a diverse range of sources relating to different functions of narrative in nineteenth-century China, I argue that dramatic fiction and characters provided a means by which women might explore and comprehend their own realities and that the appearance of narrative scenes upon dress reflects this understanding of fictional realms. This may seem far-fetched, but if we return to the sources explored in Chapter 2 in regard to the discourse of women's dress, we find that male responses to the phenomena of female audiences are haunted by precisely this fear. The continual public and private bans against women watching theatrical performance not only detail the sizeable obstacles faced by female audiences, they also demonstrate the recurring themes employed in justifying these barriers: the ornately-dressed fashionable young woman as a trope for the dangers of female audiences, and the unease about the emotional power drama wielded over women - the anxiety about dramatic fiction being played out in reality.⁵⁴

In the mid-Qing, Li Zhonglin (fl.1764) described the effects of *tanci* narrative upon women:

But there are storytellers who roam the streets and tell stories in song and prose to the beat of a drum.... women love to listen to them because they are crude, easy to understand, and furthermore cost very little. Families both great and small sit casually in groups to listen to them. At first the storytellers perform beneath the steps but after a while they perform in the inner chambers. At first they tell stories of worthy, filial, chaste and pious people, but then they gradually lead in to ballads of indecent elopements and illicit love affairs. Women listen to the point where they feel intense pity for the characters; they all heave sighs and shed tears. *When they hear of passionate entanglements and secret unions, how can we guarantee that they will not become mentally excited and emotionally roused?* In my opinion, women should not be allowed to read books nor to read plays or listen to song-prose narratives. Homes with strictly regulated inner chambers should closely follow this model.⁵⁵

Even more terrifying than mental excitement and emotional rousing were the ways in which fictional narratives might influence reality, and the possibility of women imitating the very dramatic narratives that so moved them. Or as Zhejiang local proverb succinctly phrased it: “Suzhou opera stages ten

⁵⁴ See the discussion in Chapter 2 and Zhao, *Zhongguo xiqu guanzhong xue*, chap.7.

⁵⁵ My italics. (Zeng ding) *Yuan ti ji* (n.d), 1:20b, cited in McClaren, *Ming Chantefables and Popular Culture*, p.72.

performances of small plays, and nine out of ten widows will remarry.”⁵⁶ In this school of thought, women were inspired by fiction to partake in inappropriate behaviour and sexual misdemeanours. The authorities’ fears were perhaps not entirely baseless. The Ming *chuanqi*, *Tale of the Lychee Mirror* (*Li jing ji*) tells of Chen San and Huang Wuniang who fall instantly in love when they first meet at a lantern show celebrating *Yuanxiao* (fifteenth day of the first lunar month). But Huang’s father is rich and power-hungry, he wishes his daughter to marry into a wealthy literati family, much to her resentment. When Chen San returns to Chaozhou, Huang and her maid Yi Chun are on the balcony enjoying summer lychees. Overjoyed to see her love, she embroiders “lovers destined from a former existence” (*su shi yinyuan*) onto a hanky and wraps it in a bright red lychee branch. Chen disguises himself as a mirror-maker to enter the Huang mansion, and when her father forces her to marry, the couple elope to Quanzhou with the help of her maid. In defying the status quo of parental choice and matchmaker’s interventions as the route to marriage, *Li jing ji*, like many of the most popular mid-Qing plays, endorsed the individual couple’s choice to pursue their romantic bond and make their own decisions about marriage.⁵⁷ The play was extremely popular in eighteenth-century Fujian and the subject of frequent bans that made a clear correlation between dramatic performance and real-life transgression. The Tongzhi period (1861-1875) *Xiamen zhi* recounted the reasons for one such ban: “The play ‘Tale of the Lychee Mirror’ used to be performed in Xiamen. It narrates in vivid detail how Chen San of Quan enticed Wang (Huang) Fifth Maid of Chao to elope and engage in obscene behaviour. Women watched this play in great numbers, and many proceeded to also defy decency and elope. (Therefore) in the Tongzhi period Xue Ninggu forbade this.”⁵⁸ The concept of life imitating art was certainly foremost in the mind of Fujian writer Liang Gongchen (1814-?), who told of Zhexi, a Zhejiang village that set up a small stage in 1845. Within a month, six of the local women had remarried, including a widow of more than ten years previously obstructed from marrying,

56 Zhao, *Zhongguo xiqu guanzhong xue*, p.105.

57 Also called *Chen San Wu Niang*, see Cai Youben, dictated by Xu Zhiren, *Chen San Wuniang - li yuan xi* (Fuzhou: Fujian chushu, 1950); also Zhang and Guo, *Zhongguo xiqu tong shi*, p.262.

58 *Quanzhou Tong'an Xiamen*, cited in Zhang, *Zhongguo xiqu tong shi*, p.262, *juan* 15.

and a 23 year-old woman from an official family, not yet betrothed, who escaped to a travelling drama troupe!⁵⁹

We catch a glimpse of the kind of drama-loving woman these conservatives targeted through one of the characters in the late Qing didactic novel *Qi lu deng*.⁶⁰ Wushi (Wu Cuijie), the second and rather vulgar wife of “hero” Tan Shaowen, adores drama - she makes analogies to plays and act titles throughout the novel, especially when arguing with Tan. In one scene she rebukes her husband: “You are no Orphan Zhao (*Zhaoshi gu’er*), so why do you leave Wang Zhong (the family’s male servant) ‘on the tower singing the aria of “Cheng Ying rescues the Infant” (*Cheng Ying bao gu*)?’”⁶¹ Such theatrically tinged comments irritate her husband, who retorts: “Curse you watching so many plays!” When she asks “What’s so wrong with watching a lot of plays?” his reply toes the Confucian party line: “Someone like you from a humble family, it only causes you to talk irresponsibly.” Wushi replies with yet another dramatic reference “Well, you are from a great family, but even if you knew the play “Breaking the loom to teach the son” (*Duan ji jiao* 断机教), you still couldn’t reach that level”⁶² and the two bicker back and forth until Tan loses patience: “A girl from a humble family, feeble body and no face, all you do is watch plays in the temple, and you learn nothing but a mouth full of nonsense!”⁶³ Wushi is fairly caricatured and the authorial position obvious; orgies of play watching are early presented as prescient of coming downfall and ultimately Wushi encounters an illustrated volume of stories of filial conduct, which she praises as even better than watching plays.⁶⁴ But what her character hints at is the way in which women themselves reconstituted narrative. By integrating dramatic narratives into their everyday experience, characters and plots provided

59 Liang Gongchen, *Quan jie li wu pian*, juan 6, cited in Zhao, *Zhongguo xiqu guanzhong xue*, p.105, n.23. Liang was appointed prefect of Wenzhou, Zhejiang.

60 Li Lüyuan, *Qi lu deng* (Zhengzhou: Zhongzhou shuhuashe, 1980).

61 *Qi lu deng*, chap.82, p.788. *Zhao Shi gu’er* is a Yuan drama set in the Spring and Autumn period, in which wicked official Tu Angu frames loyal official Zhao Dun and murders his entire extended family. Only his son Zhao Wu is saved by doctor Cheng Ying at the entreaty of his mother Zhao Shuo and eventually grows up to take revenge on Tu. Wushi implies that nobody will save Tan from his self-inflicted poverty.

62 The locus classicus of this is Mengzi’s mother but the trope of the virtuous mother admonishing her son through her only productive outlet of weaving is reproduced in the mid-Ming play *Shang san San yuan ji*.

63 *Qi lu deng*, chap.82, p.788.

64 *Qi lu deng*, chap.91, pp.854-5, also David Royston, “Oral Performing Literature in Traditional Chinese Fiction: Non-realistic Usages in Jin ping mei cihua and their influence”, *CHINOPERL Papers* no.17 (1994), pp.1-110.

a set of models and references that allowed them to contemplate and explore the concerns most central to their lives.

Temple oracle slips provide one example of the ways in which women utilized dramatic characters as personal guide. In a 1960s study, Wolfram Eberhard demonstrated the use of five or seven character titles and scenes of popular dramas to form oracle series. For example in number 35, “Wang Zhaojun makes peace with the barbarians”, Eberhard glosses as “things may look good but may lead to catastrophe due to intrigue”, the intrigue being the court painter misleadingly representing Zhaojun’s beauty, and the catastrophe being Wang’s suicide to avoid living with the Xiongnu, as told in the Yuan drama *Autumn in the Han Palace* (*Han gong qin*). As he argued, the theatrical references were in themselves fairly non-informative, rather it was the supplicant’s knowledge of the play that allowed them to expand upon and clarify the rather obscure quatrains: “The supplicant before the oracle was presumably well acquainted with this extensive stock of dramatized lore and legend; the oracular allusion will bring the story to her mind, illumine her own situation, and thereby make her choice of action clear.” Thus he saw it possible to conclude that the use of drama in the oracle slip suggests that dramatic anthologies were viewed “as guides to right conduct”.⁶⁵ Eberhard’s findings speak to the relevance of heroes and heroines of the past to contemporary Qing existence and the complex ways in which fictional figures were bound up in everyday reality. They demonstrate the kind of messages that might potentially be read from the Wang Zhaojun embroidered sleeveband (Fig. 6.9) and they bolster the hypothesis that the jacket’s dramatic scenes were not selected merely or arbitrarily for aesthetic value, but because they possessed some significance, some connection to the wearer of the jackets or the occasion upon which they were worn. This claim of personal dimensions is not easily confirmed in the absence of provenance information or autobiographical writing by woman on such themes, but other sources provide further

65 Eberhard, “Oracle and Theater in China”, in *Studies in Chinese Folklore and Related Essays* (Bloomington, Indiana University Research Center, 1970), pp.191-199, p.198. He notes that in addition to the high level of familiarity with the corpus of dramatic narratives, the ability to make the connection to personal concerns depended on a general consensus and acceptance of the play values; hence the morals tended to extol widely conventional virtues such as filial piety, loyalty and patriotism.

hints of the relevance of theatrical characters beyond their narratives and the ways in which fictional identities and storylines could potentially illuminate real-life issues and relationships.

Hong lou meng provides another good example of the way in which late Qing audiences mingled fiction and reality, making a personal connection between self and theatrical characters. For the fashionable Shanghai courtesan, *Hong lou meng* was a fantasy world of cultured ladies and true emotions allowing escape and illumination through a wide choice of female characters - the Twelve Golden Hairpins of Jinling - each with a unique combination of brains and beauty, and an individual, often tragic, narrative of true love, which spoke so intimately to the near-inevitably tragic existence of a young Shanghai beauty. For these courtesans, dressing-up merged with daily dress; their costumed role-play was in a very real sense a daily performance, and it was only by the most provocative costumes like a jacket detailed with *Hong lou meng* scenic roundels (J12) or an actual *Hong lou meng* costume that they could be assured the gossip and publicity that ensured their continued relevance and desirability.⁶⁶ Surviving photographs demonstrate how in addition to courtesans, fashionable literati and actors also engaged in the urban leisure activity of *huazhuang zhuo* (costume photography). This practice of dressing up in the costumes of fictional, historical and dramatic characters was apparently unique to late Qing urban locales like Shanghai or Tianjin. There photographic studios opened under the influence of Western studio photographers like William Saunders (1832-1892) and Milton M Miller (act.1856-64), as well as Hong Kong and Shanghai photographers, not to mention the new lithographic media which circulated imagery of domestic and exotic clothes in a detailed presentation unsurpassed, for example Wu Youru's 1890 *Haishang bai yan tu* (Fig. 2.2).⁶⁷

66 Catherine Yeh's work on the Shanghai courtesans highlighted their use of fictional identities and costumes to create and promote their image, and sense of performance and audience expressed by their images (*Shanghai Love*, esp.chapter 3, pp.136-143)

67 Wu Youru, *Wu Youru huabao*; On photographers see Hu Zhichuan and Ma Zengyuan, *Zhongguo she ying shi*, 1840-1937 (Beijing: Zhongguo she ying chubanshe, 1987); Leslie Laufer, "Providential Provenance: Early Collectors and the Peabody Essex Museum's Collection of 19th Century East Asian Photographs", *Orientalism*, vol.34, no.6 (June 2003), pp.55-62; on the uses and limitations of late nineteenth-century photos as dress historical source, see Thiriez, "Photography and Portraiture".

It is likely that urban courtesans were unique in taking advantage of these new forms of entertainment and adornment: there is no evidence to suggest that they spread beyond the fashionable cities like Shanghai or Beijing. Still dressing up as a practice may have been more widespread, one thinks here of the festival costume parade featured in *Yong tuan yuan*, the late Ming play by Li Yu (1591?-1671?), or the marketing-oriented illustration of publisher-author Yu Xiangdou (ca. 1560-ca. 1637) dressed as a scholar-magistrate to promote sales of his household almanac.⁶⁸ Eberhard's temple oracle strips points to a more widespread integration of dramatic narrative into everyday life, as does David Johnson's account of the blurring of representation and reality in Mulian operas: he describes a Hunan performance in which a character playing a monk leaves the stage and progresses through the surrounding villages collecting alms; or a Sichuan performance of Mulian in which key life-cycle events of the main female character are performed as if in real time – marriage, childbirth, domestic work: “The whole opera took about a month to complete... the audience took part in much of the action, such as the feasts for the births of babies, wedding parties, and the service at her death. In these scenes the audience mixed with the actors and could not be distinguished from them.”⁶⁹

Still, what is striking about the Shanghai courtesans' use of photography is how it effectively widened the consumption of fantasy.⁷⁰ A later advertisement for the Weixin Photographic Studio, which specialized in costume photography, sought to satisfy their customers beyond mere costumes, offering training in how to perform and which gestures and expressions to use for different characters and storylines.⁷¹ Thus we observe the increasing accessibility of costumed role-play through new technologies and commercial practices.⁷² Imperial members also embraced these possibilities, most prominently Empress Dowager Cixi

68 Issei, “Social and Historical context”, p.147; for Yu, see Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chamber*, pp.40-3.

69 David Johnson, “Actions speak louder than words: the Cultural Significance of Chinese Ritual Opera”, in *Ritual opera; operatic ritual: “Mu-lien rescues his mother” in Chinese popular culture*, ed. David Johnson (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 1989), p.28.

70 See ref in Chap.3, n. 74.

71 *Xi Zazhi*, play magazine, Dec 1923, the advertisement “highlighted the many costumes and colourful sets of popular Peking Opera performances available for customers to choose. Its manager Mr Lu, an opera specialist taught clients how to perform with the right gestures and expressions for specific characters and storylines.” Cited in Pang, “Photography”, p.67, n.42.

72 Surviving souvenir postcards and *cartes de visite* allow us to detect some of the marvel Qing audiences experienced at the magic of photography. Examples like “The Double Self Riding a Car” and “Four Images of the Same Person” reveal a

(1835-1908), an early adopter of the power of photography to record her relationship with the character of Guanyin:

I want to have one (photograph) taken as 'Kuan yin' (Goddess of Mercy)... The necessary gowns were made some time ago, and I occasionally put them on. Whenever I have been angry, or worried over anything, by dressing up as the Goddess of Mercy it helps me to calm myself and so play the part I represent. I can assure you that it does help me a great deal, as it makes me remember that I am looked upon as being all-merciful. By having a photograph taken of myself dressed in this costume, I shall be able to see myself as I ought to be at all times.⁷³

Scholars also participated in this kind of performance. Late Qing scholar Shen Taimou (d.1926) wrote in *Donghua suo lu* of how his literati acquaintances liked to have their photos taken wearing different costumes as a leisure activity, and through these dressing-up games, used costume to toy with other theatrical, religious, and gender identities.⁷⁴ A variety of motivations are involved in these different case studies of dressing-up. Qing emperors, Shanghai courtesans, and Jiangnan literati experienced diverse attitudes towards their own identity and different rationales for wishing to experiment with the dress of the other. For the literati, dressing up in theatrical or religious costume served other functions, sometimes sociable activity, sometimes recording an image for *cartes des visite* (*huazhuang zhaopian mingpian*).⁷⁵ Fictional recreations found in turn of the century novels like *Haishang chentian ying* (Shadows of the Mundane World of Shanghai) suggest that, like Empress Cixi, Shanghai courtesans also donned Guanyin's costume, but each inflected the religious attire differently and each were motivated by a variable combination of commercial concerns, existential contemplation, and the desire to be of the moment.⁷⁶

querying contemplation of the stability of self and the evolving relationship between reality and the recorded image. For these examples see Chia-Ling Yang, "The Crisis of the Real: Portraiture and Photography in Late Nineteenth-Century Shanghai", in *Looking Modern*, pp.20-37, p.28.

73 Princess Der Ling, *Two Years in the Forbidden City* (New York: Moffat, Yard and Company, 1912), p.225. Li Yuhang discussed the phenomena of Cixi as Guanyin in "Oneself as a Female Deity: Representations of Empress Cixi as Guanyin", talk given at Harvard University, October 14th 2011.

74 First compiled by Zhu Diqu after Shen's death, reprinted in He Gangde and Shen Taimou, *Hua meng ji, Chun ming meng lu, Donghua suo lu* (1928; Beijing: Beijing guji chubanshe, 1995), pp.190-1.

75 The Chinese collector Tong Bingxue has some good examples on his website:

<http://tongbingxue.blshe.com/post/6673/186968>, accessed 24th March 2012.

76 Zou Tao (1850-1931), *Haishang chentian ying* (Beijing: Minzu chubanshe, 1994). In chap.44, the courtesans don elaborate religious costumes for a party: "Lian Yin was dressed as a nun, on her head a Guanyin bonnet. Cui Yunyao wore a sparkly gem-encrusted *Shuitianyi*, and the best quality Buddha's Light trousers (*Foguang ku*)."

5. CONCLUSION

Despite the long tradition of figural imagery as decoration for material culture, much of the jackets decorative presentation of narrative was culturally specific to the late Qing: the presentation of dramatic scenes associated with celebratory occasions and auspicious values; the mingling of characters from elite and popular culture; the meta-referential combinatory presentations of narrative. The range of examples discussed - *Yangliuqing* dramatic character couples print, *Xi xiang ji* teapot, *Bai she zhuang* game, dramatic scene paired with zodiac animals sleevebands - evidence the new ways in which fictional characters were being reconstituted in late Qing print culture, and the visual context in which I suggest the narrative medley jackets should be positioned and interpreted. Scholars have long recognized the role of punning motifs and rebuses, so pervasive in the vocabulary of Qing dress decoration, but in these jackets and prints, we see the importance of a less-considered image set, the cast of dramatic characters. The relationship between performance and print contributed to the formation of an extraordinarily rich repertoire of narrative imagery that was manipulated by late Qing craftsmen and women with such fluency that we might speak of a vocabulary of dramatic characters and scenes. Certainly the visual reductionism that often characterizes the portrayal of dramatic characters and scenes enabled them to function as near-linguistic elements of metaphor, synecdoche, and allusion. In nineteenth-century China, narrative plots and characters were understood as familiar elements that might be reconfigured to create new and increasingly meta-referential expressions, to constitute temporal structures and embody cultural conceptions.

Sometimes these reconfigurations appear to have taken narrative beyond the “fourth wall” and into the existences of their audience.⁷⁷ By investigating some of the ways in which dramatic representation was integrated into late Qing reality, from dice games to narrative ballads, oracle slips to costume

⁷⁷ The fourth wall is a term generated by Western drama, which possesses a very different concern with truth and fiction to Chinese drama, as illustrated by the fact that the Chinese actor indicates the presence of a wall on stage by movement rather than architectural prop. Here I use the term simply to denote the hypothetical barrier between the actors and the audience. I thank Professor Xu Yongming for his comments on the relevance of this term to Chinese drama.

photography, I have sought to demonstrate that exploration of the late Qing self was bounded by models taken from fictional and historical narrative; that for nineteenth-century women in the towns and suburbs of Suzhou or Shanghai, fiction provided a means of exploring and constituting identity. Given the emotional power drama possessed for women, this usage of fictional characters and narratives raises the question of whether the jackets' narrative selection was one that possessed particular resonance for female audiences; whether it is possible to locate in the jackets not only auspicious and decorative presentation but also a more personal meaning for the woman who wore and viewed these jackets. The theory of the Period Eye allowed the interpretation of the embroidered scenes to be nuanced, permitting shades of significance arising from the varying levels at which narrative imagery might have been understood by diverse audiences. This model accommodates the framing of embroidered Chinese dress in the museum, for it acknowledges that each different context possesses a socially and culturally distinct set of viewers, each with a variety of narrative competence and knowledge of social behaviour, visual responses and conceptual operations that determine how they constitute object and image. In the next chapter we extend this idea to consider how personal aspirations and fictional characters might have interacted in the act of embroidery.

FEMALE EMBROIDERERS AND FIGURAL IMAGERY

Embroiderers employed the needle, not the pen – they left no records of their attitudes towards their subject matter. We cannot claim them as proto-feminists who stitched their heroines in conscious opposition to their ordained role, in rebellion against the inactivity, immobility, and passivity enforced by embroidery itself. But their work was undoubtedly a declaration in favour of their sex.¹

1. INTRODUCTION: CONCEALED MEANING?

In her influential 1980s publication, *The Subversive Stitch*, Roszika Parker (1945-2010) re-evaluated the seventeenth-century English pictorial stump work embroidery long denigrated as “quaint”. She demonstrated the use of needlework to explore girls’ relationship with their parents (whose hands wielded powerfully over their lives); to express new ideas on marriage and love; and to reference the feminization of floral gardening in contemporary horticulture. For Parker, embroidery became a means of women giving “their own interpretations and particular emphasis to the feminine ideal”.² Later scholars of these objects went further, to recover female relationships and suggest that women’s choice of “courageous female figures” from biblical narratives formed an “imaginative alliance”: “These women used needlework, the supposed instrument of their immobility and silence, to place themselves in narratives that they associated with their own time as well as to connect with other women across time.”³

Like the biblical heroines of English stumpwork, many of the embroidered scenes studied in this thesis present strong women bent on challenging their fates and finding romantic happiness. How should we interpret the strength of characters like Madame Shi (J8), Madame White (J6), or Cui’e (J11)? Should we

1 Roszika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch*, p.102.

2 Parker, *ibid*, pp.89-91, 96.

3 Susan Frye, “Sewing Connections: Elizabeth Tudor, Mary Stuart, Elizabeth Stuart, and Seventeenth-Century Anonymous Needleworkers”, in Peter McNeil, ed. *Fashion: Critical and Primary Sources* (Oxford; New York: Berg, 2009), vol.1. *Late Medieval to Renaissance*, pp.263-278, p.274.

read the very embroidered presence of these heroines as evidence of embroidery providing a tool and dress a vehicle for woman to express the miseries and challenge the injustices of an existence dominated by a patriarchal hegemony?

Here our enquiry is not merely whether, at a superficial level, the jackets present a feminine choice of narrative. It is an obvious truth that the jackets' selection of *caizi jiaren* plays and novels like *Zhenzhu ta*, *Chai chuan ji*, and *Xi xiang ji*, spoke to the concerns likely held by the nineteenth-century young woman: how to find companionate, romantic love; how to produce filial, successful sons, how to negotiate parental dictates in a filial manner, and so forth. There is a notable lack of bloody battle scenes or the overtly macho heroes characteristic of narrative-adorned objects that catered to male consumers, as seen in a description from the late Qing novel *Feng yue meng* of a male participant in a dragon-boat festival, strikingly conscious of the performance of dress:

On his left thumb he wore an archery ring of imitation emerald, and on his left wrist a green porcelain armlet. In his right hand he held a black oilpaper fan with a black bamboo spine on which were depicted the one hundred and eight warriors of Outlaws of the Marshes. This young man stood in the prow of the dragon boat, fanning himself constantly, watching the people in the passing boats, and throwing out challenges to a contest.⁴

The jackets undoubtedly speak to a feminine sensibility, but can we go beyond generalities to identify a more individualized take on narrative? Is it possible to locate in the embroidered jackets a more precise communication of the embroiderer's agency, a localized or gendered expression in the choice of characters or scenes, the style or structure of the embroidered roundel? Indeed, how can we understand the process of investing agency in the object through iconography, as told through the material surface of the embroidered jacket?

Dress history contains two prominent currents or approaches towards the process of interpreting meaning in textile iconography. I have already questioned the first approach, "Meaningless Decoration", in which figural scenery is essentially dismissed as generic, empty of significance to the audience. A

⁴ Hanshangmengren, Hanan, trans., *Courtesans and Opium*, chap.13, p.125.

second approach, one I term “Concealed Meaning”, occupies another extreme. Here the iconographical identification is seen as key to both object and meaning, and the meaning is concealed until the iconographical message can be deciphered, hence books on Chinese textiles commonly feature titles like *Hidden Meaning in Chinese Children’s Clothing and Accessories*, or *Writing with Thread*.⁵ By implication, the producer or consumer attempted to obscure this meaning through their choice of iconography, carefully constructing a symbolically coded message to speak to a specific audience, similar in locale and socio-economic position. Given the undisputable restrictions that women of this period often experienced through the patriarchal system, it is common to direct the interpretation of these coded communications towards hegemonic challenge. For example, in an examination of narrative themes in folk embroidery, Kuang Yanghua concluded, “Such figures (Mu Guiying, Hua Mulan, Fan Lihua), indicate women’s desire to improve their social position, their aspirations to be able to equal men in society’s work, and can perhaps be seen as a latent awareness of women’s rights.”⁶ These military heroines also appear in the jackets, for example the figural medley jackets (J13, J14), where they gracefully cavort, spear and dagger in hand. This thematic choice reflects the boom in military romance texts that began in the late Qianlong (r.1735-96) and Jiaqing periods (r. 1796-1820) and continued into the nineteenth-century, and the presence of these armour-adorned beauties is certainly remarkable for valorising more ordinary women; presenting fictional characters perhaps of more significance to the late Qing consumer than the Confucian exemplars and noble scholars associated with narrative scenes of previous dynasties.⁷ But should we understand the presence of these female characters as expressing a feminist consciousness?

5 Li Suimei and Sally Yu Leung, *Hidden Meanings in Chinese Children’s Clothing and Accessories* (Guangzhou: Guangzhou chubanshe, 2011); Angela Sheng, ed. *Writing with Thread: Traditional Textiles of Southwest Chinese Minorities* (Hawaii, University of Hawaii Art Gallery, 2009).

6 Kuang Yanghua, “Cong minjian cixiu xiqu tici jian chuantong yu nüxing de guanxi”, *Yuanxiao fengcai*, no.191 (2009), pp.135-6, p.136.

7 Cynthia Brokaw, *Commerce in Culture: the Sibao book trade in the Qing and Republican periods* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Asia Center, 2007), p.486. On military romances see J13.

There are a number of reasons for rejecting this finding. Firstly, as a group, the jackets are characterized by heroines from that select group of fictional women who defied social conventions and parental pressures to pursue their marital happiness: women like Bitao from *Chai chuan Ji* who gave her poverty-stricken scholar fiancée her jewelry so as to hasten the date they could marry (J10), or Cui'e from *Zhenzhu ta* (J11) who gave her poverty-stricken scholar cousin a pearl pagoda to aid his route to scholarly success. These heroines tend to exhibit proactive behaviour only in regard to ensuring their marriage; once this is achieved, they happily fall into the ever after of married life with the *zhuangyuan*. In all other areas of their life, they display high Qing normative values in terms of filial piety and virginal virtue. Thus, in their choice of heroines, the jackets don't appear to seriously challenge Susan Mann's assertion that the way of the wife (*fudao*), the "world of signs and symbols" that "surrounded a young girl from birth and conveyed more powerfully than any text" limiting her roles and potential, was "encoded in signs representing reproduction, not production".⁸

More fundamentally however, I would suggest it is a misconception that meaning can be read directly from iconography. This approach is practiced by Kuang, who implicitly suggests that the social and cultural ideas manifested in vernacular textile representations of dramatic themes can be accessed directly through iconographical description; in Panofskian terms, as if it were possible to leap from "natural and conventional subject matter" of iconography to the "intrinsic meaning or content" of iconology.⁹ So she proceeds from iconographically describing the objects, to summarizing the significance of narrative and characters, and then concluding, in dichotomized terms, whether the characters confirm or defy Confucian patriarchy.¹⁰ Yet her analysis is undermined by the lack of evidence for the asserted audience subjectivity; the assumption that character typologies overlap with narrative typologies, and in particular, the notion of transparency in regard to the way intent and agency are channelled between maker and

8 Mann, "The Education of Daughters", pp.27, 34.

9 Erwin Panofsky, "Iconography and Iconology: An Introduction to the Study of Renaissance Art" in *Meaning in the Visual Arts: Papers in and on Art History* (1939; reprinted NY: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1955), pp.22-54, p.5.

10 Kuang, "Cong minjian cixiu xiqu tici jian chuantong yu nüxing de guanxi".

object. Kuang's approach derives from her understanding of the object's embroidered iconography as constituting a coded message. But if we wish to understand this coded message, then the process by which it was constructed is more fully considered as an interaction between different stages: the reasons why a woman embroidered (to earn money, to make a gift for a loved one, to produce an object for her wardrobe, etc.); the localized codes and constraints that bounded her choice of iconography and how the iconography was framed (in terms of composition, stitch, palette and style); and finally the women's understanding of that embroidered figural imagery, which of course should not be conflated with that of the viewer.

We have already explored evidence for the second of these stages: the ways in which a nineteenth-century Suzhou embroiderer was restricted in their choice of narrative and the visual conception of that narrative. We have observed the pressure towards the auspicious and decorative interpretation of narrative that apparently led the embroiderer of *Zhenzhu ta* to reject negative content (J11), and the designer of the Twenty-Four Filial Classics jacket (J4) to gloss the scenes: labouring children become handsome scholars, aged women become graceful beauties. We have also seen the way in which locally and generationally specific conventions governed the creative space of embroidery, conditioning the choice of stitch or colour with which the two *Bai she zhuang* jackets were executed (J6, J7), for example. Given my hypothesis of the jackets' commercial production by professional embroiderers, these boundaries were likely particularly rigid, with the choice of design possibly controlled by male bosses and limited by market dictates. Still even away from commercial pressures, any given socio-economic group of embroiderers would have evolved their own stylistic and conceptual boundaries for how and which narratives were embroidered, demarcating the possibilities of embroidered expression.

Here, there is an interesting analogy to be made to the Hunanese women's writing system *nüshu*, a cultural production that shared many commonalities with embroidery.¹¹ Both forms possessed a structure and aesthetic created by women in environments and occasions dominated by woman, both served to constitute female community and foreground female interests, and in both, narrative was a central theme; forms in which "female models of ingenuity and endurance" were celebrated.¹² Therefore, like embroidery, *nüshu* offers some potential in allowing historians a relatively unmediated access to past female subjectivities, and has been utilized by those who seek to construct Qing women as seeking to challenge and overturn patriarchal oppression, and thus need to locate a medium for such rebellion.¹³ Yet in actuality, most *nüshu* texts appears to have involved lamenting the considerable volume of misery involved in the average Hunanese woman's existence: forced exogamous marriage, which separated girls from their childhood environment and companions, or associated topics like unsatisfactory dowry, new mother-in-laws, the end of girlhood. But, more pertinently to the present discussion, the codes by which *nüshu* was expressed - the stereotypical formulae and ritualized expressions - constrained it as a communicative system making individualized expression rather unlikely, a finding that should lead us to question similar searches in embroidered narrative objects. This is not to suggest that all the embroidered narratives were conventionalized and empty of meaning, but rather to observe how simple iconographic analysis cannot fully account for the communication of narrative embroidery because it omits consideration of the embroiderer's identity and her rationale for embroidering. In the next section we turn to vernacular literature as a means of exploring different modes of embroidering.

11 *Nüshu* was spoken and written in the Shangjiangxu region of Hunan's northern Jiangyong county, it was often worked into textile articles – fans, belts, clothing, and cloth-bound wedding "third day books", see Liu Shouhua, "Hunan Jiangyong 'nushu' zhong de minjian xushi wenxue", *Minjian wenxue luntan*, vol.1 (1992), pp.13-17.

12 McLaren, "Women's Voices and Textuality", p.400.

13 Silber, "From daughter to daughter-in-law", p.45.

2. NARRATIVE EMBROIDERY AS ACT AND OBJECT IN VERNACULAR LITERATURE

The Suzhou narrative ballads, *Wuge*, were sung at much the same time as the jackets were being made, in the Lake Tai area region where I have argued much late Qing commercial embroidery originated (see the map in fig. 4.6b). They originated in rural illiterate farming communities and spread through performers and song-books to urban locations in the lower Yangzi delta.¹⁴ These lengthy ballads often relate failed love matches in a genre known as “secret love” (*si qing*) about unmarried young woman who fall in love with someone outside orthodox betrothal arrangements and they typically end tragically. Typically told in hepta-syllabic verse in a style known as song text (*chang ben*) (the lines are of variable length with many “padding” syllables), each song is divided into titled segments (*tao shi*), which may be mixed up and combined (*tiao shan ge*) with segments from other regional songs as the performer sees fit. Here I wish to focus on a common segment theme, which is devoted to the description of a narrative-decorated object, often an embroidered textile and typically a token of love created by a woman for her lover - an embroidered handkerchief or pair of shoes.¹⁵

14 They have only been recognised and studied in recent decades, but numerous late Qing manuscripts survive and the key works date back at least to the mid-late Qing. On *Wuge* see McLaren, “Folk Epics from the Lower Yangzi Delta Region: Oral and Written Traditions”, pp.157-186; Zheng Tuyou, *Wuyu quanshi shan ge yan chang chuantong yanjiu* (Shanghai cishu chubanshe, 2005).

15 There is some dispute as to whether the segments belong together as “epic narratives” in the Western sense, or are rather compositions of various disparate songs. See McLaren for some discussion of differing viewpoints, “Folk Epics”, p.164. Though primary an oral genre, the popularity of these segments caused them circulate as urban print and manuscript booklets in the lower Yangzi region. Dr McLaren informed me of late Qing, early Republic embroidered handkerchief songbook examples in the Fu Sinian library, titled “shi tiao shoujin” or “shi tiao hanjin” (personal communication, 1st May 2012). I am grateful to Dr McLaren for sharing her expertise on *Wuge*. For other examples of segments that describe an object embroidered with dramatic themes, see Gao Fumin and Jin Xu, *Wuge yichan jicui*, pp.212-3, “xiu huaxie” from *Wu Guniang*, pp.213-7, “xiu hanshan” from *Wu Guniang*, pp.218-9, “shitiao shoujin” from *Wu Guniang*, pp.232-4, “Qingsha luozhang liang youyou” from *Wu Guniang*, p.405, “xiu changfu” from *Zhao Shengguang*, pp.641-5, “Liu jie xiu tiao da shoujin” from *Bao Linjie*.

A good example comes from the ballad *Wu Guniang*, the story of Fifth Maid, a girl from a rich landowner's family and her tragic affair with a hired labourer Xu Atian.¹⁶ In the segment entitled "The embroidered undershirt" (*xiu hua shan*), she asks her lover to purchase thread and needles, and when he brings back the bundle:

(She) opens it up, spreads it out, takes the thread and shirt for embroidering.
On the east side she will embroider the moon-edged earth,
On the west side she will embroider the star-edged moon,
On the top she will embroider the two immortal children Golden Boy and Jade Girl,¹⁷
On the bottom she will embroider the pair of immortals He He,¹⁸
On the front she will embroider the black dragon drinking the water,
On the back she will embroider Confucius' seventy-two disciples,
(and so) the shirt's embroidery materializes.¹⁹

Wuge's ekphrastic segments illuminate at any number of levels. Firstly, the commonality of the segments indicates the practice of embroidering cloth with theatrical themes was reasonably widespread (for it to be plausible subject matter for fictional record). The segments also provide evidence, though of a fictional nature, of the way in which a woman's embroidery skill garnered respect and reputation in her community and likely beyond.²⁰ For example, when another *Wuge* heroine, Zhao Shengguan (whose embroidering act we shall turn to shortly), finishes an embroidered hanging, her in-laws, uncles and all the adults come to view it, "They praise me for being clever and skilful".²¹ And after Xu Atian puts on his embroidered shirt and goes to Hangzhou and Suzhou, the passersby all ask who embroidered that shirt?²² The *Wuge* segments also demonstrate how

16 The version compiled in *Wuge yichan jicui* is based on that sung by Lu A'mei, opinions differ as to its origins, see "Cong Wu Guniang tan changpian xushi Wuge zhengli de ji ge wenti", in Qian Shunjuan, *Jiangnan minjian xunshi shi ji gushi* (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1997), pp.14-38.

17 The pair served the Daoist deities in heaven. They emerged from Song-Yuan period plays and became important characters in immortal plays.

18 The immortals of Harmony and Union associated with a happy marriage.

19 Gao Fumin and Jin Xu, *Wuge yichan jicui*, p.213, "Xiu huashan, no.1" based on the version sung by Lu Amei, recorded by Ye Xianglin.

20 These object descriptions bear comparison to the ancient Chinese literary tradition of ekrephatic poems describing objects, the Han dynasty poem "Lu Lingguang dian fu" by Wang Yanshou cited in chap.5 is a good example.

21 Gao Fumin and Jin Xu, *Wuge yichan jicui*, p.405.

22 Gao Fumin and Jin Xu, *Wuge yichan jicui*, p.213.

domestically made and commercially purchased objects mingled in relationships: Wu Guniang makes her lover an embroidered shirt, he purchases for her four embroidered handkerchiefs: “Xu Atian goes to buy her presents.... Four handkerchiefs each straight and proper, four handkerchiefs in the latest style. Each one embroidered with patterns, the patterns express his love”.²³

Of course, an oral story-telling genre like *Wuge* requires a cautious reading with consideration to its conventions and transmission. Particularly relevant here are the values of *xi* (intricate description), and the closely linked *li* (credibility or believability), which enable the audience to accept and be emotionally drawn into the narrative. As Mark Bender, a scholar who has done extensive research into Suzhou oral literature, describes: “characters, places, times and events must be related in knowing, if not loving, detail, and it is of particular use in revealing the intricate workings of the character’s mind, to increase credibility, heighten artistic tension, or create “feeling” (*qing*)”.²⁴ In “xiu hanshan”, the object description segments allow the ballad singer to communicate the emotional interplay between the couple. Wuniang’s choice of embroidery subjects displays her talent and feeling in selecting auspicious figures to relate their love: He He, the immortals of Harmony and Union associated with a happy marriage; Golden Boy and Jade Girl representing a perfect match; wisdom from the Confucian sages.²⁵ Yet there are other examples of embroidered object descriptions, where the scenes chosen seem more haphazard or stereotypical; to be sure, still expressive of their time and place, but not necessarily explicable in referential terms, in which the figural scenes serving to communicate an aspect of the ballad’s plot or characters. An example of this usage also comes from *Wu Guniang*, in “The Embroidered Shoes” (*Xiu hua xie*):²⁶

23 Gao Fumin and Jin Xu, *Wuge yichan jicui*, p.214.

24 See Bender, *Plum and Bamboo*, p.51, who cites the five secrets of storytelling proposed by Lu Ruiting (Jiaqing- Daoguang period), one of the great Qing *pingtan* performers: *li* (credibility), *wei* (flavor), *qu* (interest), *xi* (intricate description), and *ji* (technique) (see Chen Ruheng, *Shuoshu shihua* (Beijing: Zuoqia chubanshe, 1958), p.170).

25 Interestingly, a *kesi* robe in the Field Museum collection (2855.235024) combines scenes of *Zhengzhu ta* with *Hehe erxian* and *jintong yunü* (Golden Boy and Jade Girl), apparently to strengthen the narrative’s romantic expression.

26 Sung by Lu Amei, in Gao Fumin and Jin Xu, *Wu ge yi chan ji cui*, pp.212-3.

One is most devoted when one finds love, so Fifth Maid made a pair of embroidered shoes to give to her gentleman. With a pair of butterflies fluttering on the front, and the five bats coiled on the back. In jade-white satin a pair of notches, on the shoe upper she embroidered eight good scenes. For the first act, she embroidered Guo Ziyi and his nine sons and thirteen grandsons,²⁷ for the second act, Nanyang scholar Wen Bizheng.²⁸ For the third act, she embroidered Lü Chunyang thrice playing with the white peony.²⁹ For the fourth act, the flooding of Golden Mountain and the spirit of the White Snake.³⁰ For the fifth act, she embroidered Wu Guang killing the defeated Wu Gongming,³¹ for the sixth act, Shandong's Mu Guiying,³² For the seventh act she embroidered the seven red-bearded foreign Tartars,³³ and for the eighth act, the Eight Immortals creating a noisy raucus.³⁴

Here it is more obscure how the medley of military Mu Guiying (J13/14), the flooding of Golden Mountain (J6), and Guo Ziyi and his numerous offspring (J8) permits the singer to elaborate the lovers' feelings or manifest emotional depth. Clearly much depended on the individual performer, their balladic heritage and knowledge of other balladic narrative representations.³⁵ But the fact that in some segment examples, the selection of iconography appears deliberate, meaningful, and expressive, and in other examples, haphazard, random, and conventionalized, suggests an analogy for understanding how the rationale for embroidering influenced the choice of narrative iconography.

Again, vernacular literature offers a range of examples through which we can consider different modes of embroidering. In *Wu Guniang*, Fifth Maid uses embroidery to express her love. But a representation of embroidery from *Chen San Wu Niang* - the Chaozhou love story between Chen San, the son of a poor official, and Wuniang, the fifth daughter of the wealthy Huang family - offers a different perspective. In

27 The Story of Tang General Guo Ziyi (697-781) told in the play The Insignia-laden Bed (*Manchuang hu*).

28 Story of poor scholar Wen Bizheng and his love, the talented woman Huo Dingjin is told in the 1863 novel A Pair of Pearl Phoenixes *Shuang zhu feng*, but is also found in *chuanqi*, *baojuan*, *guci*, and numerous regional dramas. In the Kunqu repertoire it was performed as A Pair of Devoted Lovers (*Bing dilian*).

29 *San xi Bai mudan* is one of many plays featuring the Eight Immortals.

30 From the *Legend of the White Snake*.

31 Wu Guang was the leader of a peasant uprising during the Qin Dynasty (209 BCE), Wu Gongming has not been identified.

32 One of the heroine female generals of the Yang family story-cycle.

33 Possibly a reference to British invaders.

34 A much performed Kunqu act, see *Kunju zhezixi chutan*, p.282.

35 The narratives themselves were performed as *shan'ge*, so there was presumably interaction between the characterization of the narrative as sole subject in a *shange* format, and how it was referenced in other ballads.

the eighth act, “embroidering the oriole” (*xin ying*), which takes place in Wuniang’s embroidery chamber (*xinting*), we encounter Wuniang grief-stricken because her father intends to marry her to the wealthy Lin Da and she sees no way to unite with her true love:

She sings (to the tune of Wang Wubang): “Yesterday San Ge wanted to leave without saying goodbye to me, just imagine - if Yi Chun had not come to tell me, my entire life’s desire would go unfulfilled. Hearing him express his heartfelt emotions, each sentence pierces my heart. Oh San Ge! I have hurt you so bitterly! How can you know that my heart is still more bitter than yours! And even now, how can I tell him of this! Oh, I’m so confused – I’d better do some embroidery to distract me! (She sits down on the embroidery bed and embroiders):
Embroider a lonely oriole facing a peony, a parrot also comes to climb,
The peony and the parrot are not companions, just like I towards that, the same as I towards Lin Da!
Our destinies are incompatible, I am filled with grief, how can it be resolved?
Again embroider a bamboo thicket, for the phoenix coiled on the branch, the phoenix coiled on the branch,
It is better to find some gold leaf as foil for this scene (she takes the embroidery basket).³⁶

Here embroidery is used as diversion, the motifs of parrot and peony contemplative metaphors by which she explores resolutions to her position. Later embroidery becomes a means of communication: she embroiders the phrase “lovers from a former existence” onto a handkerchief, and wrapping it around a lychee branch, throws it down to Chen San to tell him of her feelings. And another *Wuge* ballad, *Zhao Shengguan*, provides an example of embroidery as still more serious mode of expression. The story takes place between the Qianlong and Jiaqing period, and it tells of the love story between Lin Erjie of Linping, Zhejiang and Zhao Shengguan, the son of a wealthy family in the Suzhou suburbs.³⁷ In the section “Sewing the hanging” (*Xin chang fu*), Zhao Shengguan has fallen critically ill due to his parents’ strict denial of his love for Lin. Lin first goes to the Zhao household to bring him medicine, but to no avail. Since neither medicine nor doctors can save him, she turns to the Boddhisatva, and visits all the temples large and small in the Suzhou area. Eventually she decides to go to the temple on Mount Wu to beseech *laoye* for Zhao to be given a further twenty years of life. In order to manifest her devotion to Zhao Shengguan and her hopes of the Boddhisatva, she vows to stay up all night sewing a hanging. In the Guangxu manuscript (1898), the singer describes the

36 Cai Youben, *Chen San Wuniang*, act 8, p.77.

37 I used the 1898 manuscript text in Gao, *Wuge yichan jicui*, p.405, see *juan* 6 for the history of Zhao Shengguan.

detailed iconography of the *changfu* over the course of 136 lines, and it is through the attention to these figures that Lin's determination to rescue her lover is constituted:

Eight lengths of yellow gauze to make an embroidered picture, above a canopy below gold and blue;
I wish to embroider the Jade Emperor sitting in the middle, his two shoulders a sky full of stars.
Eight lengths of yellow gauze to make an embroidered picture, above a canopy below gold and blue;
Three Pure Bodhisattva (*San qing pusa*) sitting in the middle, *Taibo and Gold Star*³⁸ descending.
Eight lengths of yellow gauze to make an embroidered picture, above a canopy below gold and blue;
Guanyin Bodhisattva sitting in the middle, Sudhana and Dragon Girl on either side.³⁹

Here Lin uses the act of embroidery to create her own temple setting, collecting together a vast array of figures: Buddhist and popular religion ("the Kitchen God of the Eastern Kitchen sits on the East side"), factual "our emperor sitting in his hall, the civil and military officials on each side", and biographical ("I've carefully embroidered the long piece now the short piece, the short fabric canopy is made of purple velvet; above I wish to embroider my humble self Lin Axi, and below my husband Zhao Shengguan.") whom she hopes will delay her lover's death. Embroidering the hanging is an attempt to control the whims of fate that could so cruelly take away her lover, and it provides a vivid example of how women used the practice of embroidering figures on textiles to create a world in which they possessed a degree of control absent in their reality.

These fictional accounts represent the embroidering acts of countless Chinese women, who, through the objects they produced and the figures they embroidered, sought to do a great many things: protect children, manifest filiality, assert style, communicate love, express culture. To restrict the act of embroidery towards proto-feminist conclusions is to restrict our conception of Chinese women as historical agents, and to over-simplify the variety of emotions and motives women invested into the creative act of embroidery. Thus, however suggestively the military heroines dance over the embroidered

38 *Taibai Jinxing*, a mythological Daoist immortal, son of Bai Di, the White Emperor, and an aide in the entourage of the Jade Emperor in *Fengshen yanyi*.

39 The two companions of Guanyin, Shancai (Celestial Youth of the Treasure of Merit) and Dragon Girl (Longnü).

surface, I would argue that it is actually not just difficult but also undesirable to motivate scenic choice primarily in terms of a proto-feminist mind. This is so not just because of the range of rationales with which women embarked on embroidering an object, or the constraints with which they engaged in iconographic decisions, but also the iconographic content itself, which possessed a range of possible interpretations and contested meanings. The evolution of *The Legend of the White Snake* (J6, J7) is here exemplary. Whilst earlier versions emphasized Xu Xian as central male hero fighting the dangers of the demonic snake-spirit Madame White, by the nineteenth-century she occupied centre stage as a gentlewoman and mother who virtuously stood by her man, and for twentieth century readers, a model of how the new woman might challenge the patriarchal system.⁴⁰ The malleability of narrative means that in order to move beyond content to how contemporary women produced and interpreted the complexity of references evoked by objects of visual narrative such as the jackets, extreme positions like “Concealed Meaning” and “Meaningless Decoration” have a limited ability to capture the variety of ways in which narrative representations were utilised in the lived experience of the Qing. Dorothy Ko is one of few scholars who has more sensibly cautioned towards the middle path: “In using this shared set of visual vocabulary, the shoe-maker expressed and conveyed deeply felt sentiments such as the wish for children and wealth. There is a danger, however, in over-reading the symbols or in assuming that every sign on the vamp must have profound meaning.” As she reminds us, “Often the meaning of a shoe and the story it bespeaks do not lie in its design motif but in its social life – how it was given away, sold, worn, repaired, and how it was viewed at the time.”⁴¹ This thesis has aimed at studying the “social life” of the jackets: by considering the ways in which fashionable dress objects were designed and discussed, produced and consumed, I have sought to deepen our understanding of the significance and expression of women’s dress. But to understand the meaning of embroidered narrative in dress, we must turn to the social life of the narratives. In order to explore the kinds of contested meanings that might have been offered through the medium of the embroidered jacket, the following section offers a close reading of another of the

40 See notes on J6.

41 Ko, *Every Step a Lotus: Shoes for Bound Feet* (University of California Press, 2001), p.109.

jacket's narratives, *The Insignia-laden Bed* (J8). Dwelling on the idea that different interpretations were dependent not just on the image itself, but also on the experience, knowledge, and skills that the audience brought to the viewing, I demonstrate the diverse ways in which a nineteenth-century female viewer might have found significance in this jacket's embroidered narrative scenes.

3. LAYERING *MAN CHUANG HU*

“Huyuan”, the scene of Guo Ziyi's sixtieth birthday celebration from *Man chuang hu*, is found on a wide range of Qing objects. Its message of longevity, success, and family harmony appears to have been popular across social and geographical divides, from Kangxi period porcelain to Taohuawu *nianhua* prints (Fig. 7.1a.b).⁴² The maintenance of this message throughout varied formats and representations partly derived from dramatic performance, as late Qing Zhejiang scholar Yu Yue (1821-1906) wrote in his *Chunzai tang sui bi* (Casual Words from Hall of Springtime): “Whenever people have some happy event to celebrate, they call in the “Pear Garden” theatrical troupes, and usually they will complete the performance with *Huyuan*.”⁴³ The scene was compiled in mid and late Qing drama anthologies like *Zhui bai qiu* and influence from these performance traditions can be seen within the jackets: Guo's birthday scene, along with the scene where he is honoured by the Emperor (*Xiejia*) – the only two scenes included in *Zhui bai qiu* – appear as larger size roundels, placed in the most prominent positions of the centre chest and centre back, which would have claimed the viewer's eye first (Fig. 7.2a,b,c,d).⁴⁴ It is not hard to explain this highlighting strategy; these two scenes were widely performed during the nineteenth-century, they were the most culturally prestigious acts emphasizing imperial recognition and patriarchal respect. Yet there was more to the *Man chuang hu* drama than its happy ending; anthologies and diaries also detail that during the late Qing Suzhou *Kunqu* troops would sequence the well-known Guo Ziyi acts alongside acts which related a sub-narrative of rather more domestic concerns: the marital trials of one of Guo's mentors, the

⁴² For further examples see Appendix, J8.

⁴³ Cited in Wang Ning, *Kunju zhexixi quankao*, pp.243-5.

⁴⁴ *Zhuibaiqiu*, ji 7, juan 2, “xiejia”; ji 3, juan 2, “huyuan”.

purely fictional character, provincial governor Gong Jing. It is Gong and his wife Madame Shi, who are seated on chairs in an inconspicuously placed roundel on the lower back of the jacket, and it is in this roundel that we find an alternative tangent to the imagery of male aspirations thus far presented (Fig. 7.3a).

Madame Shi is educated, cultured, and worldly, as renowned for her erudition as her control over her husband, teased by his friends as being the “Henpecked Marshall”.⁴⁵ But for all her power, she is married to a forty-year old man, and their marriage has not produced children; a pointed comparison to hero Guo Ziyi and his seven sons and eight sons-in-law. Gong Jing wishes to take a concubine in order to continue his family line, but Madame Shi refuses. So fearful is Gong of his wife and her domestic power that he secretly purchases a girl from a poor but respectable family, Miss Xiao, and hides her away in his chambers. Unfortunately Madame Shi discovers the beauty, and Gong returns home to discover Madame Shi has sent Miss Xiao back to her family with 300 *liang* of silver, and is waiting angrily in her chambers. In one of the most popular scenes from the play, *Gui men* “Kneeling at the door”, Gong is forced to kneel outside his wife’s chamber to beg forgiveness. After being thoroughly lectured and shamed, Gong is let in and he consoles himself self-deprecatingly: “A wife’s orders really are as strict as those of the army!”⁴⁶

Perhaps, but in this society dominated by Confucian filial piety, in which to not leave descendants is to commit a grave sin, even the unyielding Madame Shi is forced to acquiesce. It is she who brings Miss Xiao back to become her husband’s concubine and Miss Xiao gives birth to a son. It is the aftermath of that decision which we see here. In the embroidered scene, the seating indicates the participant’s differing

45 Jenna Wu, who has written on the trope of the jealous wife in Ming-Qing fiction, argues that this largely sympathetic portrayal should be placed in the context of a more tolerant perception of female jealousy that begins in the seventeenth century (*The Chinese Virago*, p.9).

46 See *Shicu ji* in Wang Jilie, *Jicheng qupu* (A Collection of Kunqu opera scores) (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1931), vol. *zhengji*, juan 8, act 5. “guimen”, p.6.

social ranks – Gong Jing and his wife on chairs, Miss Xiao and the son on the ground. Their clothing is embroidered quite simply and the decorative detail focuses the eye towards the son, his playthings set out one by one upon the patterned rug, highlighted in net stitch. Gong Jing gestures fondly to his wife; his body is positioned away from the concubine, who has assured him of a continued hereditary line. Indeed all the figures in the scene are turned towards the powerful Madame Shi, even the child turns away from his natural mother and reaches out towards her.

Strikingly, the harmony of this scene reveals little of the emotional angst that preceded it. We see neither the scene “Pleading for a son” (*Qiu zi*) where Gong Jing scorns his wife who beseechs gods like Immortal Zhang for a child, nor the scene where Madame Shi finally accepts that she cannot refuse her husband’s wishes (*Hou na*). In a long spoken section, Madame Shi deliberates on the advantages that she will derive from this matter:

Rather than in the future he marry a woman that matched my strength, who I could not control, it would be better to willingly accept the humiliation of being passed over. So I might as well commit the magnanimous act of bringing in Miss Xiao. Firstly, his Excellency, the Minister of State will be grateful; secondly, a good act like this will award me a virtuous reputation; thirdly, Miss Xiao and her father will be grateful for my kindness ... Moreover in days to come, if we disagree on some matter, he (Gong Jing) will find it hard to escape the responsibility of being grateful for former favours.... I await the return of his Excellency ... Doubtless this will be a very happy occasion....⁴⁷

As she realizes that this second marriage will be “a very happy occasion”, the smug security she has gained by logically working through her options fades. Future pay-offs notwithstanding, as a virtuous wife, she is forced to take the initiative in arranging this matter: the scene ends with her pushing her husband into the bridal chamber. The performer of Madame Shi must communicate the subtle psychological tumult of a woman caught between her knowledge that she must commit an act and her

47 *Shicu ji*, in *Li Yu quanji* (Hangzhou: Zhejiang Guji Chubanshe, 1991), juan 6, *Li Weng yueding chuanqi bazhong, shang*, act.17, “Cu shou” (*Hou na*), pp.127-8.

emotional pain at actually doing so, but temper this turmoil within the restrained guise of an intelligent woman all too aware of how her society expects an elite woman to perform (Fig. 7.3b).⁴⁸

That the embroidered presentation of these characters reveals little of this anguish is hardly surprising. We have already discussed the jackets' drive towards the auspicious and the decorative. Post-structural narrative theory emphasizes how "the form and features of any "version" of a narrative is a function of, among other things, the particular motives that elicited it and the particular interests and functions it was designed to serve."⁴⁹ The rendition we observe may be explained by the material space and format of the dress object, the technical properties of embroidery, and the conventions of popular prints as the most likely pattern influences, but it also derived from the semiotic system of late Qing woman's dress - the mandate of positive, auspicious wishes. Yet a late Qing woman viewing this embroidered jacket would surely have been able to draw out the associations drawn out above, and others. Some audiences may have looked back to the famous Qinhuai beauty, Gu Mei (1619-64) (Fig. 2.11), for it was said that Fan Xizhe (fl. 1673) wrote the play to gently mock the relationship between Gu and her husband, official Gong Dingzi (1615-1673), perhaps for their lack of decorum in respecting the status of Gong's first wife, but also their childlessness and Gu's known longing for a son (gossip of the day held that she persuaded her husband to build a private Buddhist temple *Miao guang ge* where they could make offerings, and commissioned a sculptor to build a mechanical model of a boy in precious wood).⁵⁰ By the early Republic, audiences would have likely made the connection to *Beating the Princess* (*Da jin zhi*), a sequel to *Man chuang*

48 The Hong Kong critic Zhang Lizhen has written perceptively about her experience of watching the famous Kunqu actress Liu Jiyan (b.1935) perform the part of Madame Shi in two performances in Suzhou in 2002. The performances were based on a version of the play arranged by Professor Ni Chuanyue of the *Suzhou Kunqu yuan*, which combined those acts relating the marital trials of Gong Jing (*Na qie*, *Gui men*, *Gong shou*, *Qiu zi*, *Hou na*) to form an independent short drama omitting the content relating to Guo Ziyi. See "Tan Man chuang hu de yipian wenzhang: Kunju yanyuan de zisheng yu fansi", reprinted online: <http://www.douban.com/group/topic/19737889/> (accessed, September 15th 2012).

49 Barbara Hernstein-Smith, "Narrative Versions, Narrative Theories", *Critical Inquiry*, vol.7, no.1, On Narrative (Autumn 1980), p.221.

50 Yu Huai (1616-1696), *Ban qiao zaji*, *Shuangmeijing an congshu* (Changsha, 1907), pp.4b-6a; *Biographical Dictionary of Chinese Women: The Qing Period, 1644-1911*, pp.50-52.

hu, which told of snobbish Princess Shengping being beaten by her husband, who was angered by her failure to attend her father-in-law's birthday celebrations.⁵¹ By then *Da jin zhi* had superseded *Man chuang hu* in popularity, especially in Shanxi drama (*Jin ju*), and numerous examples of early twentieth century Shanxi embroidered accessories depicting *Da jin zhi* (Beating the Princess); here a mat cloth showing the Tang Emperor and Empress trying to bring the couple back together, and a purse which shows the Guo Ai and Shengping either side of the imperial lantern (Fig. 7.4a,b). This couple, it may be remembered, were used to personify the relationship between Husband and Wife in the *Wu lun tu* print (Fig. 6.5); perhaps audiences contrasted Guo Ai and Shengping's marital problems with those of Gong Jing and Madame Shi.

These different shades of meaning or “flows of signification” are not incompatible.⁵² Rather what the *Man chuang hu* embroidery and its possible interpretants illustrate is the way in which the “story” is itself an ever-changing entity. As literary scholar Barbara Herrnstein-Smith argues, rather than some Platonic core underlying all the manifestations of narrative, there are only versions, each constructed in relation to other versions for specific cultural purposes and within specific social contexts. The features of each re-telling depends on the interests, functions, and circumstances for which it was created, and these in turn depend on the backgrounds, expectations and motivations of narrative and audience.⁵³ And if this line of argument is followed to its logical end, as Bal does, then it becomes impossible to specify the narrative interpretation: “a sign is not a thing, but an event that takes place in a historically and socially-specific situation.”⁵⁴

51 The once popular *Man chuang hu* lost some appeal during the late Qing when the *yabu* “refined section” dramatic style was supplanted by the *Huabu* “flowery or popular section”. The origins of the *Dajin zhi* story is found in Tang Zhaolin, *Yin hua lu*, juan 1, *gong bu*, and Si Maguang, *Zi zhi tong jian*, juan 223. See *Zhongguo dabaike quanshu, xiqu quyue* (Beijing: Zhongguo dabaike quanshu chubanshe, 1983), p.50.

52 Bal and Bryson, “Semiotics and Art History”, p.193.

53 “Narrative Versions”, p.221.

54 Bal and Bryson, “Semiotics and Art History”, p.207.

If we accept this argument, the goal shifts from affixing meaning to tracing meanings in historically specific situations: “the issue being not to delimit and isolate the one sign from other signs, but to trace the possible emergence of the sign in a concrete situation, as an event in the world.”⁵⁵ The polysemy tolerated by this approach clearly creates problems for the Coded Meaning style of iconographical analysis. Though Kuang suggests the narrative scene “Su Wu mu yang” is a clear-cut example of those images that guided people on how to be loyal to their country (*zhongjun bao guo*), if we wish to account for how narrative interpretations interacted with viewer, time, and place, then we must also accommodate the many potential interpretations contained within a single narrative scene.⁵⁶ And as we saw in the comparison between the *Guxin* and the jacket rendition of the Su Wu scene, (Fig. 4.12a,b.), there are other possible interpretations, the parting of intimate friends, for example, a notion that would presumably have possessed more emotional resonance for women, who were often forced to part from their natal families and childhood friends at a young vulnerable age.

Given this polysemy, the range of rationales involved in the practice of embroidering and the selection of iconography, and the demonstrated confines within which the possibilities of embroidered expression operated, I would dissent from Kuang that it is possible to account for how the embroidered narrative encodes a specifically feminine interpretation of the Confucian orthodoxy that typically prevails even in superficially rebellious narrative plays. Objects like the *Man chuang hu* jacket or the *Beating the Princess* accessories suggest that embroidery enabled women a space to explore heroines like Madame Shi and Princess Shengping even amidst the dominant presence of a hero like Guo Ziyi, and they affirm the potential embroidered dress offered the late Qing woman’s performative body, but in the end we returned to the matrix of cultural norms within which an elite woman like Madame Shi conducted this body.

⁵⁵ Bal and Bryson, *ibid*, p.194.

⁵⁶ Kuang, “Cong minjian cixiu”, p.135.

4. THE EMBROIDERED FIGURE AS CULTURAL PRODUCTION

This finding - embroidered textiles constituted a means of cultural production, a way for nineteenth-century women to record and interpret influences of contemporary culture - may lack the drama of proto-feminist embroidery, but this “embroidered space” should not be undervalued. It is partly because of the lack of scholarly attention to embroidery as a tool for cultural production that respected writers like David Johnson finds it possible to omit women, along with objects, from his taxonomy of the social structures of communication and dominance in Qing China. As McLaren critiqued, Johnson was obviously aware of continuing the neo-Confucian orthodoxy that also ignored women as “carriers of culture”, still, he was unable to accommodate women’s position as a separate and subordinate sub-group lacking a dominant position in non-domestic life.⁵⁷ Objects, on the other hand, were rejected outright; conceptually his model could not allow for the reconstruction or explanation of values without words: “Values can be embodied in nonverbal symbols, and exemplified in behaviour, but to be communicated with any precision, or to be explained, they must find expression in words.”⁵⁸

Obviously this thesis denies both of these conclusions. Retrieving historical agency or intent from objects possesses an undeniable insecurity: the lack of precise communication and clear explicability is what allows the polysemy of interpretation we have just examined. But this multivalence is also what makes clothing and textiles inherently pliable to “the construction of social identities”.⁵⁹ It is what allowed the cloud collar to be one generation’s entertainer costume, another’s bodyguard uniform, and the next generation’s marital splendour. And it is what allowed the figural roundel jacket to be the latest fashion in nineteenth-century China, and an object of art in the twentieth-century American museum. More

57 Hence numerous defensive comments on women’s cultural contributions, their proximity to the “main currents of non-elite culture”, their importance as audience for popular written literature, and their contribution as mothers and wives to the steady infusion of non-elite values and beliefs into the consciousness of gentry men. See Johnson, “Communication, Class, and Consciousness in Late Imperial China” p.62; McLaren, *Chinese Popular Culture and Ming Chantefables*, p.18.

58 Johnson, “Communication, Class, and Consciousness”, pp.34.

59 Cheang, “Chinese Robes in Western Interiors”, p.128.

pertinently, to reject objects on these grounds is to reject the primary means women had open to them for internalizing and reinterpreting the cultural themes that enriched their existence. It omits the very objects that allowed women an opportunity to generate cultural meaning (and perhaps some freedom to do so). Can we justify a position whereby a man who writes down his conception of *Xi xiang ji* is lauded - “That a person wrote down his ideas had a profound effect upon their complexity and abstraction”⁶⁰ - but a woman who embroiders her conception of *Xi xiang ji* is dismissed? Both sought to express an interpretation of narrative, both were influenced by contemporary peers, both were subject to established conventions and models. Embroidered narrative shows how needle and thread enabled women a means of expressing their response to contemporary culture, and whilst this evidence is fractured and evasive, it also holds the potential of illuminating upon an area of historical study where any written evidence is limited and incomplete.⁶¹

Throughout this thesis we have witnessed instances of embroidery being used by women to express and reflect contemporary influences. The roundel scenes of the *Guo qin wang* tomb “Water Garden” robe (Fig. 7.5.a,b,c,d) evoke the style and subject matter of palace beauty albums produced by contemporaneous court artists like Yao Wenhan (ac. 1739-52) or Ding Guanpeng (act. 1726-70) (Fig. 7.6);⁶² but another possible identification is the Yuan drama *Golden Thread Pond* (*Jin xian chi*) by Guan Hanqing (ca. 1240-ca.1320), which told the tragic tale of courtesan Du Ruiniang who dreams of escaping the brothel to wed student Han Fuchen. One embroidered scene likely relates how Du Ruiniang goes to Golden Thread Pond with her friends to lift her mood, popular in performance, prints (Fig. 7.7) and porcelain of the

⁶⁰ Johnson, “Class and Dominance”, p.44.

⁶¹ Thomas J. Schlereth argued that material evidence is of primary use in historical study where the written evidence is either absent or flawed (*Material Culture Studies in America* (Nashville, Tenn: American Association for State and Local History, 1982), p.74.

⁶² On these artists, see Yu Hui, “Shiba shiji fuwu yu jingcheng Wangfu huandi de renwu huajia”, *Gugong bowuyuan yuankan*, no.6 (2002), pp.63-70; also Cahill, *Pictures for Use*, p.78, who discusses albums of imperial consorts by Jiao Bingzhen (active ca. 1680-1726) and Chen Mei (active 1700s-40s). The twelve month format was particularly popular: for a 1743 album of palace lady twelve month paintings “shi’er yue guan cishi yice” by Yao Wenhan, see *Christie’s New York, June 29th, 1984*, no.829.

early Qing (Fig. 7.8.a,b).⁶³ Alternatively consider the numerous examples of jackets that portrayed figural imagery known for local or temporally specific circulation, popular dramas from the *Kunqu* repertoire like *The Insignia-Laden Bed* (J8), *The Legend of the White Snake* (J6), *The Bracelet and the Hairpin* (J10), reflecting their likely production origins in the wider Suzhou region, and preserving scenes that correlated to contemporary performance and anthology trends from that region.

We have also observed how embroidery's expressive potential operated at numerous social levels. Zhu Qiqian's *Brief Biographies of Weavers, Embroiderers, and Needleworkers* provides many instances of elite woman utilizing embroidery for creative self-expression and figural subject matter is frequently mentioned; for example, Yu Zunzhu from Yangzhou, who produced Song embroidery style figures or the wife of Lian Ying, who imitated models from Chen Hongshou's paintings.⁶⁴ But their embroidered Buddhist figures or Nymph of the Luo River recollect Zhang Shuying's canon of suitable figural subject matter and reiterate how the elite discourse of embroidery as art confined just as much as market pressures. Perhaps more revealing was embroidery produced at a vernacular level, for example the *Beating the Princess* accessories (Fig. 7.4), or the "Li Yangui sells water" Shanxi drama roundel (Fig. 1.3). And if the figural roundel jackets preserve the use of textiles to record the influence of contemporary narrative culture upon Chinese women, then it is in the vibrant and localized tradition of narrative imagery in folk embroidery where this influence continues today in narrative shoe-patterns and printed quilts.⁶⁵ Further research into the representation of embroidery in vernacular literature or comparative study of themes

63 See Dale R. Johnson, "Courtesans, Lovers, and 'Gold Thread Pond' in Guan Hanqing's Music Dramas", *Journal of Sung-Yuan Studies*, no.33, (2003), pp.111-123.

64 Zhu Qiqian, *Nühong zhuan zheng lue*: the profound insights evoked by Yu Yunzhu's immortal and Buddhist figures was widely praised (p.17); Lian Ying's wife was able to reproduce landscape, figures, plants, flowers and beasts; her image of a Buddhist priest received widespread praise for its realistic and ingenious execution (p.24).

65 Pan Lusheng investigates the influence of dramatic culture on the shoe and embroidery patterns kept by Shandong women in the so-called "blessing books", see *Fu benzi* (Shijiazhuang Shi: Hebei meishu chubanshe, 2003). On the cotton marriage quilts produced in the Lake Tai region and featuring Kunqu classics like *The Legend of the White Rabbit* (*Bai tu ji*) see Zhang Qin, *Lanbua bu shang de Kunqu* (Beijing: Sheng huo, du shu, xinzhi san lian shudian, 2008).

like literate expression (captions, character labels, proverbs or poems) in elite and vernacular embroidery, offers considerable potential in re-assessing women's contributions to local cultural traditions.

Thus, rather than reject objects, this thesis has sought to assert their value in historical research: the new questions they stimulate, the novel themes they highlight. Studying the presentation of narrative imagery in the jackets has established a relationship between embroidery and contemporary evolutions of narrative, and - in marked contrast to the ahistorical picture created by studies of auspicious symbolism - the ways in which women's work, from the *Man chuang hu* jacket to the *Da jin zhi* accessories, took influence and inspiration from audience tastes and print trends. The jackets have allowed an exploration of more personal connections with narrative, showing how fictional tales allowed women to find a means of understanding their own reality and articulating issues that preoccupied nineteenth-century women. Thirdly, and again diverging from the simple semantics of auspicious symbols, the analysis of the embroidered *Man chuang hu* jacket demonstrated that, far from communicating an uncomplicated message of longevity and success, this object actually presented mid-late Qing audiences with a complexity of messages that related different relationships, not only between ruler and ruled, father and son, but also husband and wife. Beyond the surface associations of the *Man chuang hu* scenes with ideas of fecundity and achievement, the embroidered narrative complicated these concepts, allowing for the possibilities of nuance and irresolution, of something rather more characteristic of a woman's life in late Qing China.

5. CONCLUSION

After 1875 the Chinese silk and embroidery industry underwent rapid decline: damaged by Taiping destruction, and embattled on all sides from global market forces, internal corruption, and a clothing style re-set in the new Republic dress system. Rank badges, capes and dragon robes were no longer appropriate, women's dress no longer trimmed with cloud collars or colourful embroidered borders, but

thick, plain black borders made fashionable by cut-out designs.⁶⁶ By the early twentieth century, the *batuan* style no longer held much attraction in the market. Official Chen Hengqing (1840-1920) told of one merchant Mr Meng who owned four shops in Beijing. He recovered from the damage of the Boxer Rebellion within a few years, but after the Republic was established, his eight roundel patterned robe fabric had to be sold at twenty percent reduction. It reminded Chen of the fate of black hats and red gowns after the fall of the Ming.⁶⁷

For many wealthy Chinese families, these now obsolete silken styles were a form of savings that they needed to liquidate. For the many foreign visitors to Beijing and Shanghai, these same silk robes and accessories were a souvenir, an exotic emblem of the crumbling Qing empire. Agents working for European and American dealers and museums combed the countryside for rank badges and dragon robes, antiques shops sold the wardrobe contents of the once wealthy to tourists, and in Beijing, local merchants opened shops along Embroidery Street, deconstructing robes into collars, borders, and sleevebands to eke out their inventories.⁶⁸ As a Shanghai bamboo ballad described:

All the estates are stocked with old jackets and robes, these are gathered like a mountain and hastily sold. Furs, cottons, linings fine and thick, they are valued and separated by price.

Lining the street they set up market counters and shop fronts, clothing for the four seasons hangs on both sides.

Vendors sing out the price in loud voice, passers-by stop to hear their refrain.⁶⁹

And in this way, the eighteen figural roundel jackets I have studied in this thesis transferred from one cultural context to another.

66 Peng Zeyi, *Zhongguo gongshang hanghui shiliao ji*, p.49, *Guxiu bang, Foshan zhongyi xiangzhi* (1926) on the effect of new styles on women's dress.

67 Chen Hengqing, *Jianshu xi'an biji* (Taipei: Wenhai chubanshe, 1969), pp.179-80, "wealthy families" (*dabu*).

68 Wang Shucun, *Zhongguo minjian yishu*, p.45.

69 Gu Bingquan, ed. *Shanghai yangchang zhuzhici* (Shanghai: Shanghai shudian chubanshe, 1996), p.126. Note that the global exchange of dress was not one-way. Another ballad describes, "Shops selling old clothing from foreign countries" (*waigo jinyi dian*) purchased by factory workers wanting to look more modern (p.167).

When these fashionable styles entered the American museum, they were reframed as art, a process at once as obvious as sewing up pairs of embroidered sleevebands and placing them behind a glass frame; and as subtle as positioning a narrative hanging so high on the wall that all that could be appreciated were its silken textures and bright shades. This thesis has sought to remove this framing of dragon robes and auspicious symbols, the gentlewoman sitting in her courtyard quietly and passively embroidering her robes, and place the jackets in an alternative context, a nineteenth-century China in which women employed embroidered dress to express a cultured and fashionable self. Rather than the attributes awarded them in the museum setting - artistic, genteel, static - I have argued these jackets would have been viewed as contemporary, commercial, and fashionable; that these embroidered jackets that now lie cold and catalogued in the museum drawer were once, somewhere, and in somebody's moment, "of the moment".

This thesis offers three main findings. Firstly by reconstructing the process by which Chinese women's dress entered Western museum collections, I have suggested that the jackets' interpretation was conditioned by nascent understandings of Chinese art that continue to restrict our understanding of late Qing dress, confining research to themes of imperial power and auspicious symbolism, rather than commercialization or popular culture. By questioning the narrative of Chinese dress as art, and addressing the jackets instead as fashion, I have sought to complicate our assumptions about the way in which women consumed dress in mid-late Qing China, and challenge our understanding of women as cultural producers and consumers. By reconstructing a single style of fashionable dress in late Qing China, this thesis makes a contribution to Chinese fashion history, as well as histories of women and material culture, and it affirms the centrality of object-focused scholarship to these endeavours.

Secondly, by outlining the commercial production networks that evolved in the late Qing Jiangnan embroidery industry, I have positioned the jackets not as artistic embroidery created by the elite gentlewoman, but professional dress objects produced by commercial workshops and worn by the

fashion-conscious. Against the conventional production model in which Chinese women embroidered all their dress objects by themselves, I have argued that by placing women's wardrobes deep in the inner chambers, immune to the commercialization and specialization that characterizes Qing handicrafts, this model obstructs our understanding of the impact of fashion upon women's lives. The moral couching of commercially embroidered objects shaped the way female consumers engaged with material culture; bounding their choices with polarized concepts of frugality and *fuyao*. Women had to negotiate these norms of dress consumption in order to participate in the enticing markets of commercially produced dress. Yet the historical development of the figural roundel jacket also demonstrated the steady commercialization of women's clothing during the mid-late Qing, refuting the oft-assumed narrative of nineteenth-century decline and suggesting instead that women's fashions flourished due to the expansion of commercial producers that effectively democratized certain objects of dress. By illustrating the vitality of professional embroidery for celebration and relationships in mid-late Qing China, and the ways in which processes of dress design and production were linked to other visual and performative media, I have offered a re-appraisal of the genre of commercial embroidery, showing how commercial embroiderers took influence from popular culture.

Perhaps the most historically valuable feature of these jackets, and other examples of narrative embroidery, is the way they reveal the influence of popular culture upon the dress of late Qing women. The narratives that surrounded nineteenth century women - told by travelling *tanci* tellers, carved into stone doorways, coloured into lacquer trays and porcelain bowls - were also incorporated into one of the few modes of cultural production accessible to women. The expanding possibilities of needle and thread enabled it to serve as a tool to reflect and record contemporary popular culture. Drama's cast of fictional personages formed a key component in this communicative process, allowing nineteenth-century women new possibilities for participating in fashionable consumption and cultural expression. Print and performance formed "cultural mediators", disseminating motifs and designs to a wide set of producers and consumers, but also adding layers of performative and celebratory significance to the narratives.

Taking advantage of the vast pattern repertoire offered by woodblock-printed illustrated dramas, theatrical compendiums, and popular prints, embroiderers employed vivid palettes and decorative stitches to re-interpret figural imagery; producing a vibrant, richly textured effect that allowed embroidery to become a medium for recording women's relationship with popular culture in the changing world of nineteenth-century China.

REFERENCE MATTER

GLOSSARY

The glossary provides characters for Chinese words used in the main text (where only pinyin is provided). For Chinese words used in the Bibliography, Figures, Jacket and Table appendices, both pinyin and characters are provided.

PEOPLE, PLACES, AND TITLES

Bai Juyi 白居易 (772-846)

Bangu 班固 (32-92 bce)

Bu bu jing xin 步步驚心

Startling with each step

Changshu zhaowen he zhi 常熟昭文合志

Cheng ying bao gu 程嬰保孤

Chun zai tang sui bi 春在堂隨筆

“Cheng Ying rescues the Infant”

Casual Words from Hall of Springtime

Da Ming hui dian 大明會典

Da Ming shi lu 大明實錄

Dai Jin 戴進 (1388-1462)

De yi lu 得一錄

Ding Pei 丁佩 (fl. 1800-1850)

Dong Qichang 董其昌 (1555-1636)

Collected Statutes of the Great Ming

Veritable Records of the Ming

The Record of Getting One

Duan ji jiao zhi 斷機教子

Duke Guoyi (果毅公, also Aling'a 阿靈阿)

“Breaking the loom to teach the son”

Fengliu dajie 風流大姐

葑溪 Fengxi

Feng shen yan yi 封神演義

Fu yi 服疑

Miss Charming

Creation of the Gods

“Discourse on Dress”

Gai Qi 改琦 (1773-?)

Gaozong Renzong chuiyi fushi

高宗仁宗垂意服飾

Gong Dingzi 龔鼎孳 (1615-1673)

Gu Jiyi 顧箕英 (Gu Huihai 顧匯海)

Gu Ji 顧姬

Gu Mingshi 顧名世

Gu Shi 顧氏

Gu Shouqian 顧壽潛

Gu Yulan 顧蘭玉

“The Gaozong and Renzong Emperors (Qianlong and Jiaqing) concern with costume”

Guan Dase 官達色

Guan Hanqing 關漢卿 (ca. 1240-ca.1320)

Guangxu dumen jilue, fushi men 光緒都門紀略, 服飾門

Guo Ai 郭曖 (739-787)

Han gong qiu 漢宮秋

Han Ximeng 韓希孟

Hou gong Zhenbuan zhuàn 後宮甄嬪傳

Huang Wuniang 黃五娘

Hui-niang 慧娘

Autumn in the Han Palace

An account of Zhenbuan in the Palace

Jia Yi 賈誼 (200-169 BCE)

Jiao cixiu zhi bian 教刺繡之變

Jiao hua 叫畫

Jie zi yuan hua zhuan 芥子園畫傳

Jinchang 金閶

Jin Tingbiao 金廷標 (act. c.1750-d.1768)

Jin hua difang fengsu zhi 金華地方風俗志

Jin wen gongsuo 錦文公所

“Changes in the teaching of needlework”

“Calling the picture”

The Mustard Seed Garden Manual

The Golden Chang gate area of Suzhou

Lady Meng (孟氏)

Lady Niuhuru (鈕祜祿氏)

Li Ciming 李慈銘 (1830-1894)

Li Zhonglin 李仲麟 (fl.1764)

Li Zicheng 李自成 (1606-1644)

Liang Gongchen 梁恭辰 (1814-?)

Li fu zhi 禮服志

Li ji 禮記, *nei ze* 內則

Li jing ji 荔鏡記

Liu Jiyan 柳繼雁 (b.1935)

Lu Amei 陸阿妹

Lu Jiashun 陸嘉順

Lü Mengzheng 呂蒙正

Lu Ruiting 陸瑞廷 (Jiaqing / Daoguang period)

Lu shu 露書, *Fengbian zhong* 風篇中

Records of Ceremonial Dress

Book of Rites, Pattern of the Family

Tale of the Lychee Mirror

Compilation of Customs

Ma Shouzhen 馬守真 (1548-1604)

Miao Ruiyun 繆瑞雲

Mudan ting 牡丹亭

Mulian 木蓮

The Peony Pavilion

Nian Gengyao 年羹堯 (1679-1726)

Prince Teng or Li Yuanying 李元嬰 (?-684)

Prince Yunli 國親王允禮 (1697-1738)

Qianlong xingle tu 乾隆行樂圖

Qiu Liuqiao 邱六橋

“Qianlong Enjoying Pleasures”

Qiu Ying 仇英 (1494-1552)
Quan jie lu wu pian 勸戒錄五偏

Five collections of records of admonitions

Ren Heduan 人和端
Ren Hezhen 人和震
Ren shi zhuan 任氏傳

Tale of Miss Ren

Shang Gongzhou 上官周 (b. 1665)
Shen Taimou 沈太侔 (d.1926)
shi tiao maojin 十條毛巾
Shi hua 拾畫
Su Liuniang 蘇六娘
Sun Wenya 孫文雅

“ten handkerchiefs”
“Finding the picture”

Tan Shaowen 譚紹聞
Tao Youting 陶幼亭
Tu Angu 屠岸賈

Wang Daozhao 王道昭
Wang Huizhi 王徽之(d. 388)
Wang Jian 王建 (r. 907-918)
wei Hangren ti hua liang shou 為杭人題畫兩首

“Inscribed on Paintings for the People of Hangzhou”

Wu Guniang 五姑娘
Wu xing zhi 五行志

The Fifth Maid
Records of the Five Elements

Xi Shi 西施
Xiamen zhi 廈門志
Xiangdeng nongkou 香橙弄口
Xiatang jie 下塘街
Xitang wenji 西堂文集
xiu changfu 繡長幅
xiu hanshan 繡汗衫
xiu ying 繡鶯
Xu Mengjiang 許孟姜
Xu Nüda 許女大
Xuannü juitian 玄女九天
Xue Liuliang 薛六郎
Xue Rengui 薛仁貴
Xunsu tiaoyue 訓俗條約

Xiamen gazetteer

“Sewing the hanging”
“The Embroidered Undershirt”
“embroidering the oriole”

Yan tie lun 鹽鐵輪
Yao Wenhan 姚文瀚(ac.1739-52)
Ye Xianglin 葉祥苓
Ye you 冶遊

Primal Woman of the Nine Heavens
Xue Sixth Son

Discourses on Salt and Iron

“Visiting Courtesans”

Yi chun jin 怡春錦
Yin hua lu 因話錄
Yong tuan yuan 永團圓
Yufu zhi 輿服志
Yu jia nü lang 魚家女郎

Records of Carriage and Dress

Zhan Yang 瞻印
Zhao Dun 趙盾
Zhao Lin 趙磷(act. 836-846)
Zhao Shuo 趙朔
Zhao shi gu'er ji 趙氏孤兒記
Zheng xi shuo Tang san zhuan 徵西說唐三傳

The Story of Orphan Zhao
Three Tales of the Tang Quelling the West

OTHER TERMS

<i>ao</i> 襖	jacket style
<i>Bai mei tu</i> 百美圖	Hundred Beauty Images
<i>Bai na seng yi</i> 百衲僧衣	Buddhist patchwork robes
<i>Bai qi bian</i> 白旗邊	White Banner Border
<i>Bai zhe qun</i> 百褶裙	Hundred-pleats skirt
<i>Bao kou</i> 包口	representatives
<i>Bao tou</i> 包頭	intermediary agent
<i>Ba tuan long gua</i> 八團龍褂	eight dragon roundel overcoat
<i>Ba tuan long pao</i> 八團龍袍	eight dragon roundel robe
<i>Bei lu zhi shang</i> 北虜之賞	gifts given to the northern Lu tribes
<i>Bei mian</i> 被面	quilts
<i>Bei zi</i> 背子	knee-length jacket, also known as <i>pifeng</i> 披風
<i>bei</i> 卑	humble
<i>biaoji</i> 標記	commercial brand
<i>bijia</i> 比甲	sleeveless jacket
<i>biji</i> 筆記	“brush notes”
<i>Bo xi qi tu</i> 博戏棋圖	board games
<i>bugua</i> 補褂	rank badge surcoat
<i>buyi</i> 布衣	commoner
<i>Cai yi jie</i> 採衣街	Coloured Clothing Lane
<i>caizi jiaren</i> 才子佳人	“scholar and beauty”
<i>Ceng yi pu</i> 僧衣鋪	Buddhist clothing shops
<i>Chang ben</i> 唱本	“song text”
<i>Changmen</i> 閭門	Chang Gate
<i>changpao</i> 長袍	robe
<i>changyi</i> 氅衣	informal, unregulated Manchu women’s robe
<i>Changzhou xian jin zhi wu ye yimin zai chengyi gongsuo</i> <i>xunzin zirao bei</i> 長洲縣禁止無業游民在成衣公	“Stele forbidding those job-less vagrants from making trouble in Changzhou county’s Clothing- makers Guild”

所尋釁滋擾碑

Chen Miaochang cibou si qing 陈妙常詞詬私情

Chengyi dian tiaogui 成衣店條規

chengyi pu 成衣鋪

chenyi 襯衣

chouyi 綢衣

chui yishang gai quzhu qiankun er tianxia zhi

垂衣裳蓋取諸乾坤而天下治

chunyi xiangdai 春意香袋

“Cixiu ye chuangli Jin wen gongsuo yuanqi bei”

刺繡業創立錦文公所緣起碑

Cui Yingying mian zi chuan qing 崔鶯鶯錦字傳情

“Chen Miaochang’s words shame her lover”

Clothing Shop Regulations

commercial dress-making enterprises

under-jacket

satin clothing shops

“allowed the upper and lower garments to hang down and the world was in order”

erotic purse

“The founding guild stele of the embroidery trade’s Jinwen gongsuo”

“Cui Yingying’s gorgeous words convey (her) emotions”

Da jin you ren 大襟右衽

“overlapping to the right”

dan 彈

dan 誕

Da yang 打烩

Dian zhu 點綴

Difang faling 地方法令

Dijing renwu wen tuan 地景人物紋團

duijin 對襟

Duo xian 多線

pellet

“to be born”

preparing the garment pattern on the fabric

embellishing

provincial regulations

Fictional scenes of men and women

front centre split

“selecting colours”

Fengren 縫人

Fu dao 婦道

fufu 黼黻

Fu gong 婦功/工

Fuguo gong 輔國公

Fu gu 復古

fujin pu 福金鋪

Furong ji 芙蓉髻

Fu yao 服妖

tailors

the way of the wife

embroidered pattern of axes

women’s work

Dukes who Assist the Nation

“Return to antiquity”

The Shop of Fortune and Gold

hairstyle

outrageous dress

Ge bin 閣髻

Gonghuo xiu 宮貨繡

Gongting yang, Suzhou jiang 宮廷樣，蘇州匠

Gongzhuang 宮裝

Gou liao 購料

Gou ya’r 狗牙兒

Gu ci 鼓詞

Guba 賈哈

Guige shi 閨閣事

Guige xiu 閨閣繡

Style of cloud collar

palace embroidery

“Palace design, Suzhou craftsmanship”

“palace style”

purchasing the material

“Dog-tooth piping”

“drum ballads”

Scarf accessory

female-themed content

boudoir embroidery

<i>Gui xiu</i> 閨秀	“cultivated women of the inner chambers”
<i>gui</i> 貴	elite
<i>gun</i> 滾	“binding”
<i>Gu pai tu</i> 骨牌圖	“dominoes game” print
<i>Gusu</i> 姑蘇	mid-Qing Suzhou prints
<i>Gu yi</i> 估衣	used-clothing sellers
<i>hao</i> 號	shopname
<i>hua bai fen</i> 畫白粉	“white chalk pattern drawers”
<i>huabian</i> 花邊	borders
<i>Hua dan</i> 花旦	young elite unmarried woman
<i>Hua gong</i> 花工	professional design drawers
<i>Hua hua zuo</i> 畫花作	professional pattern drawer
<i>Huan bin gao ji</i> 緩鬢高髻	<i>hairstyle</i>
<i>huanxiu</i> 換袖	folded sleeveband style
<i>Hua taozi</i> 花綵子	ribbons
<i>Hua xin</i> 畫繡	pictorial embroidery
<i>Huazhuang zhao</i> 化妝照	costume photography
<i>huazhuang zhaopian mingpian</i> 化裝照片名片	cartes des visite
<i>hua</i> 華	Chinese
<i>hufu</i> 胡服	“barbarian clothing”
<i>Hui hua</i> 繪畫	drawing the embroidery design
<i>Jia guan</i> 加官	“Dance of Official Promotion”
<i>Jian sheng</i> 監生	low-level degrees
<i>jianyue</i> 僭越	“overstepped” themselves
<i>Jia xun</i> 家訓	family regulations
<i>Jia yi pu</i> 嘉衣鋪	celebratory clothing shops
<i>jie</i> 介	acting gestures
<i>Jie se</i> 借色	integrating brush and needle
<i>jin</i> 襟	overlapping front of robe
<i>Jin bai guizi langan</i> 金白鬼子欄桿	gold and white devil borders
<i>Jing xiu</i> 京繡	Beijing embroidery
<i>Jin tong</i> 金童	Golden Boy
<i>Ji nü</i> 妓女	courtesans
<i>jin</i> 錦	polychrome compound weave silk
<i>Ji xiang hao yi dian</i> 吉祥號衣店	Auspicious clothing shop
<i>Kai xi</i> 開襖	<i>ruyi tou</i> -headed slits on each side to the armpit
<i>ke</i> 科	acting gestures
<i>kesi</i> 刻絲	silk tapestry
<i>Kunqu</i> 昆曲	Suzhou style opera
<i>langan</i> 欄桿	borders
<i>lanhua</i> 蘭花	orchid

<i>Lao dan</i> 老旦	older elite woman
<i>Lao sheng</i> 老生	older elite male
<i>Lian huan tu hua</i> 連環圖畫	multiple-frame narrative illustration
<i>Lianzhu tuanke</i> 聯珠團窠	pearl roundel
<i>Liao ling</i> 繚綾	“Liao damask”
<i>lingjian guxiu ye</i> 零剪顧繡業	The “scissors” embroidery trade
<i>lingkou</i> 領口	collar
<i>Lingshe ji</i> 靈蛇髻	hairstyle
<i>Ling xiu</i> 領袖	collars and cuffs
<i>Li shui</i> 立水	“standing waves”
<i>Liu yi</i> 六藝	The six skills of the scholar
<i>meiren</i> 美人	beauty
<i>Ming fu</i> 命婦	titled ladies
<i>Min gong</i> 民公	Han Commoner Dukes
<i>minjian xiu</i> 民間繡	folk embroidery
<i>mudan dai</i> 牡丹帶	peony border
<i>Mudan tou</i> 牡丹頭	“peony-style coiffure”
<i>Nanbei Gu xiu xinyi pu xiu dian juan xiang hua ming</i> Bei 南北顧綉新衣鋪修殿捐項花名碑	“Stele listing donations for repairing the guild hall of the Southern and Northern Gu Embroidery and New Clothes Shops”
<i>Nan gong</i> 男工	men’s work
<i>Nan nü hunza</i> 男女混雜／相混	Men and women mingling
<i>Nan xun tu</i> 南巡圖	“Southern Inspection Tour scrolls”
<i>Nei zao</i> 內造	Made in the imperial palace
<i>Ni shang gongsuo</i> 霓裳公所	theatrical dress producers’ <i>xiji</i> guild
<i>niukou</i> 鈕扣	gilt buttons
<i>Niu tui</i> 牛腿	decorative brackets
<i>Nü hong / gong</i> 女紅／工	women’s work
<i>Nü shizhuang</i> 女時裝	“Women’s Fashions”
<i>Nü shu</i> 女書	Hunanese women’s writing
<i>Ou xiu</i> 甌繡	Wenzhou 温州 embroidery
<i>pankou</i> 盤扣	fabric knot-and-loop buttons
<i>Pan men</i> 盤門	Pan Gate
<i>Pao gua pu zi</i> 袍褂鋪子	robes and badges
<i>pifeng</i> 披風	cape
<i>pijian</i> 披肩	collar
<i>Ping ergu</i> 平二股	“Two flat sections” hairstyle
<i>ping san tao</i> 平三套	“Three flat set” hairstyle
<i>Ping tan</i> 評彈	Suzhou oral storytelling
<i>pishi</i> 披飾	draping adornment
<i>Pu hu</i> 鋪戶	embroidery workshops

Pu su 樸素

qian qiu wan sui yi zi sun 千秋萬歲一子孫

qian 賤

Qin chai 欽差

Qinglon 青樓

Qin qiang 秦腔

Qin wang fu jin 親王福晉

Quan ben xi 全本戲

qugei yu shi 取給於市

Qun ban 裙板

Qu pu 曲譜

renwu kaixiang 人物開相

ru'ao 襦襖

ruqun 儒裙

Sai yan sishi tu 塞宴四事圖

San chu tou 三出頭

San qing pusa 三清菩薩

san xiang san ya 三鑲三牙

San gu liu po 三姑六婆

San lan xiu 三藍繡

San pan tou 三盤頭

San xiang wu gun 三鑲五滾

San yuan wu gun 三圓五滾

Seng zhuang 僧裝, *dao zhuang* 道裝

Shan ge 山歌

shangpin jingji 商品經濟

Shangping xiu 商品繡

Shang tu xia wen 上圖下文

Shang yong 上用

Shang zhuang 上裝

Shanren qiao 善人橋

Shanshui renwu 山水人物

shan 衫

sheng 生

Shen pao 神袍

Shenxian 神仙

Shi'er yue hua ge 十二月花歌

shiba xiang gun 十八鑲滾

Shi ji 時妓

shimai buo 市買貨

simple and plain

“a thousand autumns, myriad years, may you have sons and grandsons”

commoner

imperial envoy

brothel

Shaanxi play repertoire

Wife of a first degree prince

Complete performance of a play

“Taken over by the market” / “given over to the market”

apron panels

dramatic anthology

figures and portraits

short jacket

short jacket and over-tied empire-line skirt

Four Dinner Scenes beyond the Great Wall

“Three raised heads”

Three Pure (Guanyin?) Bodhisattva

“Three Borders and Three Trims”

“illegitimate or disreputable women”

“three blues embroidery”

thrice-coiled coiffures

“Three Borders and Three Trimmings”

“Three circles and Five Borders”

religious costume

Mountain songs

commodity economy

commercial embroidery

Illustration above, text below

For imperial use

upper garment

Virtuous Ones Bridge

figural and landscape imagery

jacket

young elite male scholar

deity robe

immortals

“Flowers of the Twelve Month Songs”

“Eighteen Borders and Trimmings”

fashionable courtesans

Market goods

<i>Shi mao</i> 時髦	fashion
<i>Shi nü</i> 仕女	beauty
<i>Shi shang xin tan</i> 時尚新談	“New Words on the Fashions”
<i>Shi shang</i> 時尚	Fashions of the time
<i>Shi shi zhuang/ zhuang</i> 時世妝/裝	Fashionable make-up/attire
<i>Shi xing</i> 時行	fashionable
<i>Shi xin</i> 時新	lit. new time
<i>Shi yang</i> 時樣	lit. look of the moment
<i>Shi zhuang meiren</i> 時裝美人	“fashionable lady”
<i>Shi zhuang xi</i> 時裝戲	“new style plays”
<i>Shi zhuang</i> 時裝	mode of the moment
<i>Shou yi shou bei</i> 壽衣壽被	longevity (burial) dress and quilts
<i>Shou yi</i> 壽衣	burial garments
<i>Shuang fei bin</i> 雙飛鬢	hairstyle
<i>Shui ke yin dang huo</i> 水客印當貨	itinerant traders
<i>Shui m oxiu</i> 水墨繡	“Ink painting” palette embroidery
<i>Shuitian yi</i> 水田衣	patchwork robe
<i>Shu xiu</i> 蜀繡	Sichuan embroidery
<i>Si ji shanshui tu</i> 四季山水圖	seasonal paintings
<i>Si qi ji</i> 四起髻	hairstyle
<i>Si qing</i> 私情	“secret love”
<i>Si tuan long bu gua</i> 四團龍補褂	four dragon roundel style <i>bugua</i> surcoat
<i>Song bin bian ji</i> 松鬢扁髻	softly curved bun
<i>Sou tou</i> 擻頭	hairstyle
<i>Su</i> 俗	vulgar, common
<i>Su xiu</i> 蘇繡	Suzhou embroidery
<i>Suzhou jue</i> 蘇州掇	Suzhou bun
<i>Suzhou tou</i> 蘇州頭	Suzhou style coiffure
<i>Suzhou yang, Guangzhou jiang</i> 蘇州樣，廣州匠	“Suzhou styles, Guangzhou craftsmanship”
<i>Tai bai Jin xing</i> 太白金星	a mythological Daoist immortal
<i>tanci</i> 彈詞	“plucking rhymes”
<i>tanghuixi</i> 堂會戲	family household troops
<i>Taohuawu nianhua</i> 桃花塢年畫	Taohuawu New Year's Prints
<i>Tao shi</i> 套式	Ballad segments
<i>Te chan</i> 特產	local speciality
<i>Tian yuan di fang</i> 天圓地方	“heaven is round, earth is square”
<i>tiao shange</i> 條山歌	Mixing <i>shange</i> (segments)
<i>Ti zhuang</i> 提莊	brocade shops
<i>tu</i> 圖	patterns
<i>Waihu xiu</i> 外護袖	sleevebands
<i>Wai tou gu gong fang zhuo nei gong xiu</i> 外頭雇工仿著 內工繡	poor commercial imitation of “Palace” embroidery
<i>wen</i> 紋	pattern

Wo duan 倭緞
Wu Guang shabai Wu Gongming 吳廣殺敗吳公明
wuchan bu 物產
“Wu Chang Qianjiang huiguan paiji”
吳閶錢江會館牌記
Wuqiang 武強
Wu xiang wu gun 五鑲五滾

xi, ping, qi, bo 細平齊薄
Xiang jian 響肩
xiangse beshun 鑲色和順
Xiang xiu 湘繡
Xiang 鑲
xiaochu zhenpi 消除針批
Xihu zhousha 西湖縐紗
Xin li hao 新利號
Xing lin chun yan 杏林春燕
Xing tou 行頭
Xin qi fushi 新奇服飾
Xin qi 新奇
Xin shi shi 新時式
Xin yang 新樣
Xi shang 習尚
Xiu bu 繡戶
Xiu hua 繡畫
Xiu jiang 繡匠
Xiu kou 袖口
Xiu nü 秀女
Xiu pu 繡鋪
Xiu ren fen tou 繡人分頭
Xiu shi 綉市
Xiu tou 繡頭
Xiu zhuang ye 繡莊業
Xi yi hangtou ye 戲衣行頭業
Xi yi 戲衣
xuan yan wei 旋燕尾
Xuanyang 選樣
Xuanyuan huiguan beiji 重修軒轅會館碑記

Xue 學

Yan shen 眼神
yao huan ban 腰環板
ya 雅
yi cun kao yanglan chuan bian 一寸闊洋藍川邊

“Japanese satin”
“Wu Guang killing the defeated Wu Gongming”
local product
“Wu county Chang gate area Qianjiang guild stele”
nianhua print school
“Five Appliques and Five Pipings”
“fine, flat, neat, spare”
“sound collar”
harmonized colouring
Hunan embroidery
“appliqued borders”
Erasing the mark of the needle
“West Lake Crepe”
“New Profit”
Spring Apricot Flowers and Swallows
intermediary agent
New and Curious Clothing
“New and Curious”
lit. new time style
lit. new style
customs, fashions
embroidery workshops
“embroidered paintings”
embroiderers
sleeveband or cuff
women selected for the imperial harem lit. elegant ladies
embroidery workshops
embroiderer agent
“Embroidery market”
embroidery manager
embroidery workshops
ceremonial costumers
theatrical costumers
“Swallow-tail hairstyle”
Choosing the pattern
Stele to commemorate the rebuilding of the
Xuanyuan Guild temple
“to imitate or learn from”

eye spirit
waist panels
elegant
“Foreign blue Sichuan ribbon, one inch wide”

Yifu zhi zhi 衣服之制
Yigong 衣工
Yi jian zhong qing 一見鐘情
Yi jin 衣襟
Yin ci hui shuo 淫詞穢說
Yin yang wu xing xue 陰陽五行學
Yi shang 衣裳
Yi wei fu se 儀衛服色
yi 夷
you jian ru she 由儉入奢
youjian 油肩
yuan bao tou 元寶頭
Yuan ling 圓領
Yue xiu 粵繡
yunjian lanxiu long pao 雲肩欄袖龍袍
Yun jian 雲肩

zaiyi zhi shuo 災異之說
zang qing 藏青
Zhangzhou 漳州
zhe lao shen'zi 這勞什子
zhen cao li zhuan 真草隸篆
Zheng ben xi 正本戲
zhengmian jin long 正面金龍
Zhenguo gong 鎮國公
zhentao 枕套
Zhen zhi 針黹
zhezixi 折子戲
Zhizao ju 織造居
Zhong jie xiu 中接袖
zhu zhici 竹枝詞
Zi ding nian pu 自定年譜

“The Dress System”
 tailors
 “to fall instantly in love”
 overlapping front
 “obscene literature”
 Yin Yang and the Five Elements
 tops and skirts
 The imperial guards’ dress colour
 non-Chinese
 “from simplicity to luxury”
 “Hair-oil Collar”
 “Ingot hairstyle”
 round collar
 Guangdong embroidery
 cloud collar and sleeve patterned dragon robe
 cloud collar

 disaster theory
 “Tibetan blue”

 “trashy thing like this”
 “standard, cursive, clerical, seal” calligraphy styles
 Complete performance of a play
 forward-facing golden dragons
 Dukes who Guard the Nation
 pillows
 women’s work
 scenic highlights
 imperial workshops
Part of the sleeve on imperial robes
 “bamboo ballads”
 self-edited chronological biography

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