

# Ancestors and Tomb Robes

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CHINESE funerary customs have preserved for us much of the long history of China. As in all civilized countries, these customs are closely bound up with religion. To present a vast and complicated subject in very simple terms, the Chinese believe that one part of the spirit of the dead watches over the body in the grave and from there, if appropriately treated by his descendants, distributes benedictions and blessings over the living offspring. The family tomb, therefore, is the center to which all family members ultimately return, and is in itself the principal altar dedicated to the worship of the family ancestors. A tablet identifying each spirit whose body is interred in the tomb rests on an altar in the temple in the tomb complex, and a corresponding tablet is on the altar in the hall of the ancestors in the family home. Treasured possessions and things of good omen, such as the *ju-i* scepter (a symbol of a wish for everything "as one wills"), paper money, and models of animals, servants, dancers, jugglers, and musicians are placed in each tomb chamber in accordance with the wealth and position of the deceased, and not only furnish the benefits they symbolize to the spirits therein but also spread correspondingly beneficent influences on the living descendants.

The sites for such tombs are oriented according to the principles of geomancy (*fêng-shui*) to take advantage of favorable natural forces. They face the south, with mountains or horseshoe-shaped walls behind, to induce "good influences." A stream or moat is desirable, and trees, especially cypresses, attract the basic masculine (*yang*) and feminine (*yin*) essences to preserve the inmates against dissolution and attack. Each family grave is usually in the shape of a mound or hill, and each member lies in his appointed place. Only those who have "left the home," such as eunuchs, priests, courtesans, and those accepting foreign religions, are not buried in this manner. Even among the plainer people of China, each family, as a rule, has always had its private burial ground outside the city walls, often in farm country with its own attached land whose crops provide a living for caretakers and funds for repairs. In the crowded southern provinces public burial grounds exist, with each family plot marked by a single large stone tablet.

The tombs become more and more elaborate with the increasing rank and importance of their owners. Filling two vast burial valleys some miles east and west of Peking are the Ch'ing imperial tombs, known as the Eastern and Western Tombs (Figure 1). The tombs of the emperors are the largest and grandest of these; next are those of princes of the first rank, and so on. These tombs, dating from the last quarter of the seventeenth

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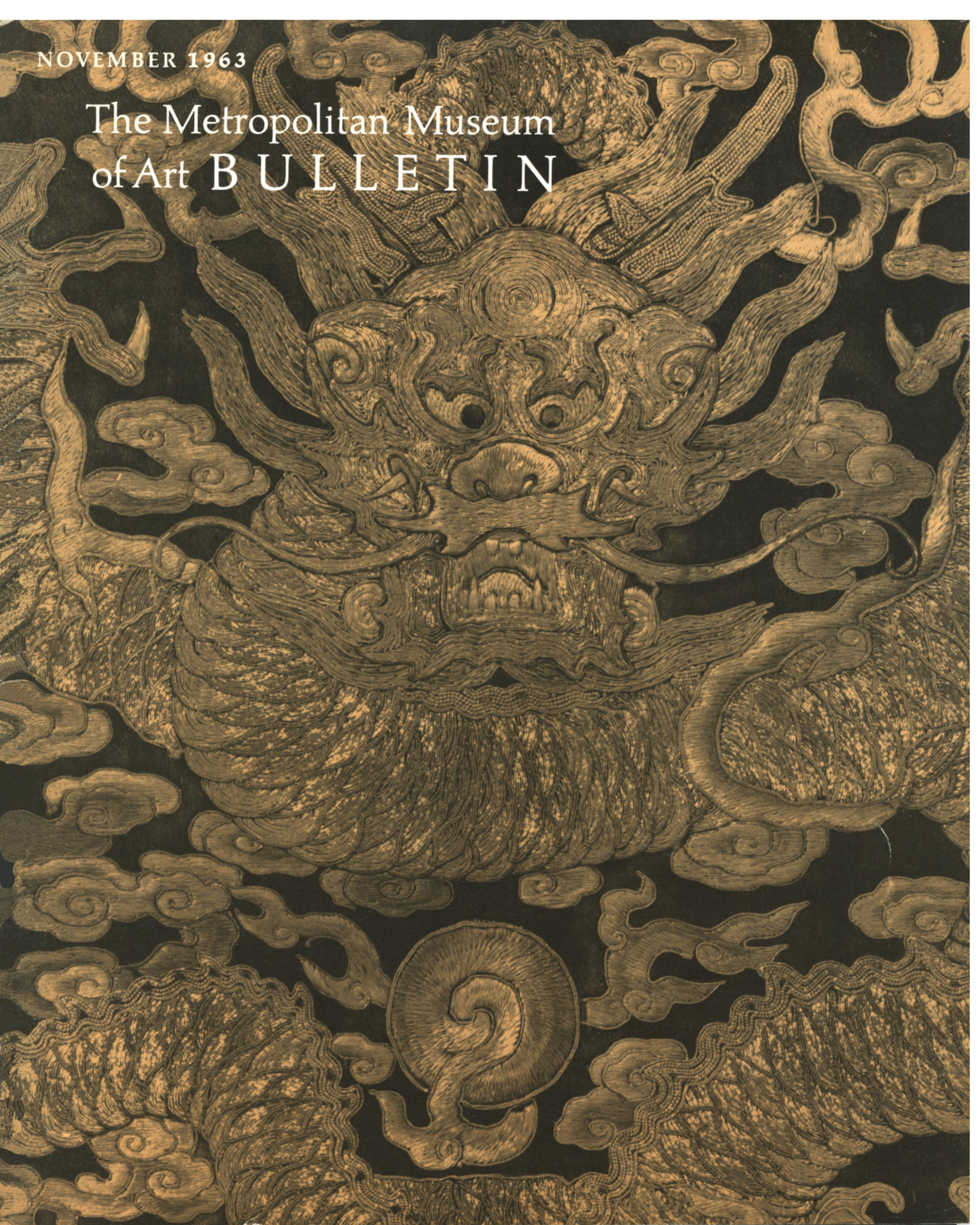
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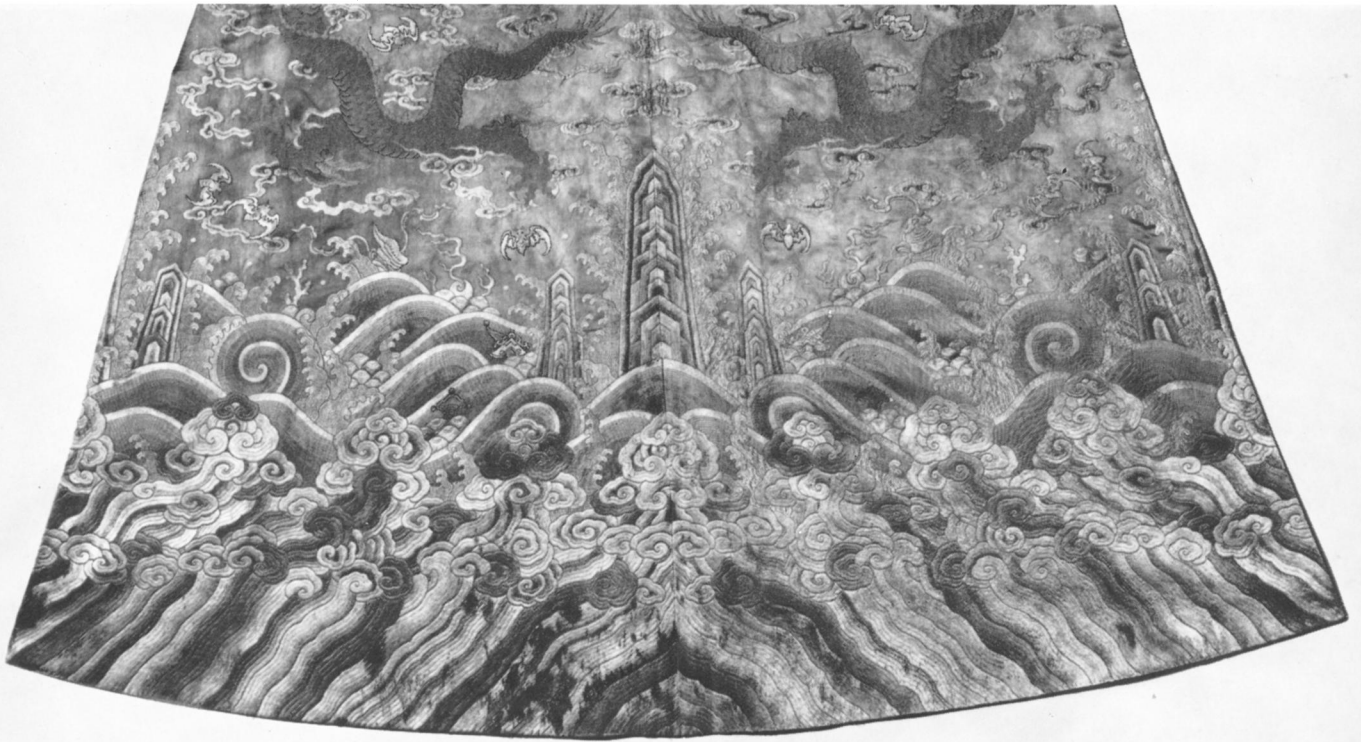
ON THE COVER: *Detail of the dragon roundel shown on p. 111*

FRONTISPIECE: *Above, detail of woman's imperial court robe (lung-p'ao), of satin couched with wrapped gold and silk twist and embroidered with floss silk; below, detail of woman's imperial court robe of silk and metal tapestry (k'o-ssu). Seymour Fund, 60.48, 62.162*

NOVEMBER 1963

The Metropolitan Museum  
of Art BULLETIN





1. Portal of the Ch'ing tombs, from *Picturesque China (New York)*, by Ernst Boerschmann. Rogers Fund, Library



century through the nineteenth, cover many acres, and their structures and equipment were usually the work of the most distinguished contemporary craftsmen. The plan of these tombs resembles, in general, that of a traditional temple. It is composed of a rectangular plot of two or more acres, surrounded by a big gray brick wall with a roof of glazed tiles—yellow for emperors, green for princes—and in the center of the south wall is a broad-roofed gate with a triple opening. From this gate a road of marble slabs leads across a courtyard, which has a water tank and pine trees on each side, to a sacrificial hall. The hall has an altar toward the back bearing the spirit tables of the dead interred there; the gravestones are affixed to the back wall, behind which is the brick or granite vault sheltering the coffin of the ancestor and his wives and concubines, enclosed in an enormous tumulus, or mound.

A sacrificial furnace, a tablet pavilion, a spirit tower, a spirit road for the spirit to travel on, leading to the tomb and flanked by columns or animal sculpture, and one-storied buildings in which visiting kinsfolk may dine or take tea may all be part of such a complex. The food, beverages, and other sacrificial materials for the tomb's occupants are grown or made within the precincts of the tomb grounds.

Of all Chinese funerary art, perhaps the best-known form to Westerners are "ancestor portraits," which are part of the funeral rites and return to the family home afterward. These are usually painted by an artist called in after the death of the subject and show him seated, full-face, in official or ceremonial robes. Such paintings are mounted on a vertical scroll several feet high and serve the same purpose as the spirit tablet: in a more easily visualized form they provide a site for the spirit of the ancestor.

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The bodies of the deceased are dressed in the best clothes that the living descendants can afford or that the deceased has been able to acquire during his days of life. Court robes with badges of official rank and ceremonial robes used by family chiefs when offering ancestral sacrifices are widely used for grave dress. Wives and consorts are interred with their husbands, wearing their corresponding feminine dress of rank or their wedding dress (which may be the same). Large wardrobes of additional garments are also included, as part of a supply for the hereafter prepared by their owner before his death or ritually offered by relatives and friends.

For centuries, especially in periods of stress and disturbance such as the first part of this century, grave robbers have broken into famous tombs seeking the riches within. This happened in the 1930s to the tomb of Kuo Ch'in Wang, a first-degree prince of the early eighteenth century. The finds from this tomb represent, according to Alan Priest, "a landmark in the dating of the Ch'ing dynasty court robes" and "the paraphernalia of a great Chinese prince . . . a set of robes that are pure poetry."

The Ch'ing dynasty was established by the Manchus, a vigorous, horse-riding people from the Manchurian steppes, when their strongest tribal leader gained admittance, through treachery, into Peking in 1644, whereupon the reigning Ming emperor (of the last purely Chinese dynasty) committed suicide. The greatest Manchu rulers – the K'ang-hsi (reigned 1662-1722), Yung-chêng (1723-1735), and Ch'ien-lung (1736-1795) emperors – were contemporaries, in the sense of the complete time span, of Louis XIV, XV, and XVI in France. There was much interplay between the great courts of East and West in this period, sometimes friendly, sometimes not.

Official records show that Prince Kuo was born in 1697, the seventeenth son of the K'ang-hsi emperor, and that he died in 1738 in the third year of the reign of his nephew the Ch'ien-lung emperor, thus living through the short reign of his half brother the Yung-chêng emperor. He was noted as an artist, calligrapher, and collector. His portrait of Confucius was later engraved on stone and set up in the Pei-lin, a templelike building in Hsianfu in Shensi province, and numerous rubbings of it have been made. His handwriting is engraved on several stelae also in the Pei-lin. This, and a portrait of him made in 1728 (Figure 2), the year the Yung-chêng emperor, his half brother, made him a prince of the first degree, suggests a scholarly gentleman of sensitive taste and a retiring nature. Ch'ing dynasty records intimate other aspects of what seems to have been a complex personality. He did not contest, as did some of his half brothers, the accession of the Yung-chêng emperor to the throne under rather ambiguous circumstances. (Many believed that the new emperor had poisoned his father; he almost certainly altered the terms of succession.) The other half brothers were severely punished; Kuo was made a prince of the second degree in 1723 and, as noted above, was again elevated five years later. From 1723 to 1732 he held a series of important government posts. In 1734 he escorted the Dalai Lama from Peking to Tibet and returned to Peking just before the emperor's death. His nephew, the Ch'ien-lung emperor, who succeeded to the throne in 1736, did not give him office. He died without heirs in 1738 at the age of forty-one. He must have been a cultivated gentleman, with a gift for worldly affairs

2. *Portrait of Prince Kuo Ch'in Wang, 1728. William Rockhill Nelson Gallery and Atkins Museum*



that was recognized by his half brother the emperor. Yet, more than two hundred years later, the most important legacy we have of him are his burial robes, of exquisite and original taste.

The most famous group of them appeared on the Peking market in the 1930s. Laurence Sickman, on the staff (and now director) of the William Rockhill Nelson Gallery in Kansas City, was then in Peking. He was excited by the bizarre and imaginative style of these robes and textiles and questioned the scouts who brought them as to their source. The scouts confirmed the fact that the finds came

from the tomb of Prince Kuo by bringing him the spirit tablets of the prince and two of his consorts.

These robes were, at that time, the only ones associated with a known imperial tomb, and were therefore important not only for their beauty but because they could be dated before or about 1738, the date of Prince Kuo's death. Their manufacture must have taken place largely during the reign of the Yung-chêng emperor or during the latter part of the K'ang-hsi reign. This dating was confirmed by four painted fans included with the robes and textiles. Three of the fans were decorated

3. *The Cloud and Wave robe, man's imperial court robe (lung-p'ao), of satin couched with wrapped gold and embroidered with floss silk. Height 54 inches. Rogers Fund, 43.91*



on one side by Ch'ien Tsai, who was born in 1708, and on the reverse by Kuan-pao, a noted poet and a contemporary of Ch'ien Tsai; the fourth was painted by Li Shih-cho (working 1705-1740), who illustrated a poem by the K'ang-hsi emperor.

The large number of surviving Ch'ing costumes and textiles had hitherto been datable only by stylistic comparison with porcelains, lacquers, and figural paintings, themselves often of uncertain date. These comparisons included similarities of color combinations, which show a relationship in all Chinese decorative arts in a given period. Various interpretations of clouds, *ju-i* shapes (based on the magic fungus eaten by the Immortals and therefore an auspicious symbol of immortality), and wave borders with dragons in the cloud-filled heavens above are often used in Chinese decorative arts, and comparisons in style may be made. However, it is far more accurate to compare two pieces in the same medium, since the slight technical differences in their manufacture, or the subtle differences in the working of a certain motif, become much more apparent.

The fixed date of the Kuo Ch'in Wang textiles, therefore, was of the greatest importance to students and connoisseurs of Chinese decorative arts. It is from this dazzling group that the documentation and characteristic style of Ch'ing textiles have been established. Though they represent only a part of the surviving costumes and textiles now attributable to the reign of the Yung-ch'eng emperor, they are the part that made it possible to relate a whole group of robes and textiles in this particular style to this particular time span. Working backward and forward from this milestone, Orientalists have been able to work out tentative chronologies for Ch'ing robes and textiles in general.

Actually, the material from Kuo Ch'in Wang's tomb includes not only the robes and hangings associated with his burial in 1738 but also those of consorts and concubines, some of them possibly buried much later than their master. This means a probable range in date from late K'ang-hsi (about 1700) through Yung-ch'eng and the first part, at least, of the Ch'ien-lung reign (mid-eighteenth century).

Court robes and overcoats are an important part of the costumes in such a distinguished burial as that of Prince Kuo, and easy to compare in stylistic details, since pattern and color for each rank were scrupulously regulated by imperial sumptuary laws (Figure 4). The "dragon robes" (*lung-p'ao*) were adapted by the Manchus from earlier Chinese court robes and symbolize the universe in their depiction of waves, mountains, and heavens. Dragons (the cosmic force) – either eight or nine – designate the wearer's rank by their position and the number of their claws (five for an emperor or first-degree prince, lesser numbers for lesser dignitaries) in a heaven of auspicious clouds (of five colors) over a border of waves (sea) and mountains (land). The hands are covered by horseshoe-shaped cuffs at the ends of dark unpatterned sleeve mid-sections. Men's dragon robes are slit part way up the front and back. Women's robes correspond in most details with those of their husbands or fathers, but are slit at the sides, have, in the higher ranks, profile dragon bands sewed on above the dark mid-sleeve section, and might differ in color. Concubines' robes were the same as consorts,' except that they seem always to have differed in color from those of the men.

A dynamic and elegant treatment of these various prescribed elements is characteristic of the group of court robes associated with Kuo Ch'in Wang's burial. The wave border is about one fifth of the height of the robe. The lowest area of bold, wavy, diagonal stripes of "upright water" (*li-shui*) rises from shallow ripples, in the earlier examples, to half the height of the entire border, in the later ones. The waves of the mid-section, capping the stripes of upright water and supporting the billows above, are large symmetrical lobed forms of the *ju-i*, or funguslike, shape so often suggested by the Chinese in clouds, waves, and plant forms. These mid-waves are spaced evenly across the border on the tops of the stripes of upright water, which often curl into half *ju-i* shapes in supporting them. The mid-waves, in turn, support a dynamic but symmetrically balanced turbulence of billows, often turning into huge decorative rollers, balancing on each side of the border. The mountain convention, in center front, back,



4. Diagram of a Ch'ing imperial court robe, from *Ta Ch'ing Hui Tien Tu* (1899). Woodcut. East Asian Library, Columbia University



5. *Catfish, detail from the Museum's K'o-ssu dragon robe*

and sides, is most often a single towering slim shaft flanked by two much shorter ones, but it may be an imposing group of five clustering shafts graduating regularly on each side from the tall center one. Or it may be a huge rock, one of the famous blue, holed rocks from Lake T'ai-hu in southern China, or, occasionally, a bizarre slab-sided rock. Lacy fingers of spray accent this whole upper area, breaking out on either side of the mountain, clutching the rollers, rising from the billows. Musical stones, swastikas, coral branches, jewels, and other auspicious objects symbolizing longevity, worldly riches, and the like often emerge from the billows in symmetrically ordered richness on either side of the central mountain. The whole border, in the best examples, gives an effect of great decorative beauty and almost sculptural power.

The clouds of the Kuo Ch'in Wang style are "cloud bands." Some, presumably earlier,

have curling heads based on an elaboration of the *ju-i* form and are in baroque groups linked by curly bands and ending in curly pointed tails; in the later ones the cloud bands become more horizontal and attenuated, their heads a series of little double-eyed *ju-i* forms linked in angular formations by thin wavy stems and ending in thin streaming pointed tails. The latest examples of the style, in the Ch'ien-lung period, show plump bunches of scalloped clouds. These cloud bands are symmetrically arranged over the body of the robe in relation to the central front and back axis but usually give a random effect.

The third important element of court robes, the dragon, is more consistent throughout these Kuo Ch'in Wang robes than are the wave border or the clouds. All eight or nine dragons are in the same medium scale, and many robes show the same versions of the dragons' required poses and their required

6. *Dragon, detail of the K'o-ssu robe*







7. Woman's imperial court overcoat (*lung-kua*), of silk and metal tapestry (*k'o-ssu*). Height 56 inches. Seymour Fund, 62.161

placement: on the upper center and to the right and left above the wave border on the front and back, and on the two shoulders. The distinctive combination of power and elegant sinuosity of the Kuo Ch'in Wang dragons seems in its element in those cloud-filled heavens over those powerful wave borders.

The dragon coats (*lung-kua*), worn over the dragon robes on formal occasions, may or may not have wave borders, according to the Ch'ing regulations, but when they do the border corresponds in style to that of the robe. The same dragons as those on the court robes are used, but here are always confined in eight roundels filled with clouds over a billowing sea. The formal border is sometimes signified only by waves in these roundels, and the mountains omitted.

A beautiful group of robes and robe fragments in the Metropolitan Museum enlarges

and illuminates further the known group of material in the Kuo Ch'in Wang style. These include the man's court robe known as the Cloud and Wave, the ceremonial robe known as the Bat Medallion, and a handsome dark blue satin dragon coat, all of which were acquired in 1943. To these have been added by recent purchase four women's costumes of imperial rank: two court robes, one of them with matching dragon coat, and an embroidered damask informal robe. Along with them were acquired four embroidered dragon roundels from a dragon coat and a *k'o-ssu* court-robe sleeve.

The Cloud and Wave robe (Figure 3) is a man's dragon court robe (*lung-p'ao*) of highest rank, with nine five-clawed dragons (including one on the underflap). Originally of colored silk flosses and wrapped gold, embroidered perhaps on golden satin, its colors

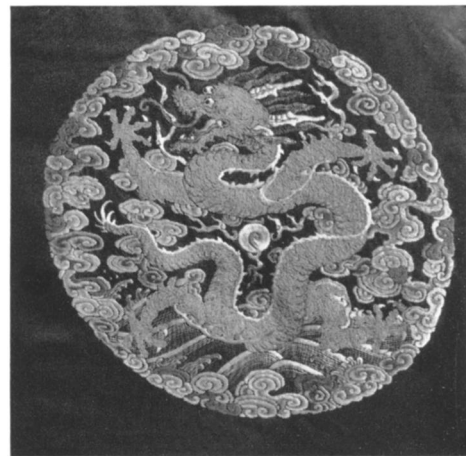
8. Sky-blue damask lining of the robes shown in Frontispiece and Figure 7





9. Imperial court robe with twelve symbols (*lung-p'ao*), of silk twill couched with wrapped gold and embroidered with silk. Height 27½ inches. Royal Ontario Museum of Archaeology

11. Roundel, detail of Figure 12



10. Imperial court robe with twelve symbols (*lung-p'ao*), of silk and metal tapestry (*k'o-ssu*). Height 56¾ inches. Bequest of William Christian Paul, 30.75.7



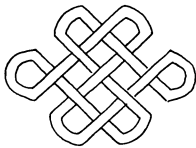
12. Woman's imperial court overcoat (*lung-kua*), of satin couched with wrapped gold and embroidered with floss silk. Height 56½ inches. Rogers Fund, 43.137



13, and 15 (opposite). Dragon roundels from an imperial court overcoat, of satin couched with wrapped gold and embroidered with plied and floss silk. Diameter 11 $\frac{1}{8}$  inches. Gift of Edna Bahr, 62.97.36-39a, b



THE LOTUS

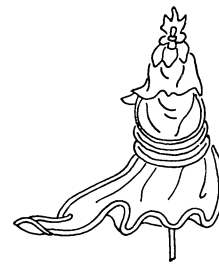


THE MYSTIC DIAGRAM

have now been transmuted by burial to soft silvery shades of brown. It is well named, for its clouds and waves are indeed memorable. Thin cloud streamers rise vertically or move across its heavens, while those resting on the rich wave border settle into close clusters of plumper clouds. The plumper clouds may indicate, according to the chronology suggested by Alan Priest, a late date among the objects from Prince Kuo's burial, perhaps early Ch'ien-lung. Even though the layout of the robe is basically symmetrical, there is a good deal of variation within the cloud details. The magnificent billows of the wave border surge from a broad band of clustering plump wave caps topping the stripes of upright water. The mountain convention is a triple shaft. Spaced on either side are fantastic rock mountains with auspicious fungi growing from them—surely the Immortals' Mountains of the West, which sometimes signify happy wishes in these turbulent seas.

One of the dragon robes (*lung-p'ao*) (Frontispiece) from the recently purchased group, of embroidered golden yellow satin, has the eight Buddhist symbols (Figure 14) symmetrically arranged front and back and small bats frolicking vivaciously through its clouds, all in a symmetrical layout. Such is the attenuation and vivacity of the clouds, however, that their characteristic effect is one of streaming at random across a limitless sky. The robe retains hints of the original shades of blue, green, ochre, and yellow in the clouds and waves. The nine dragons (one on the underflap), once brilliant in gold, are now the cinnabar color of the adhesive agent on the silk around which the gold was wrapped. Although the robe is basically symmetrical, its arrangement of clouds is disturbed slightly by the required poses of the frontal dragons on front and back, and occasionally one of the bats is poised without a mate on the other side, or the two in a pair are switched in position on opposite sides. The predominant effect of the decoration is one of motion. The symmetry of the beautiful wave border in no way affects its inherent power, down to the last baroque elaboration. The embroidery is less delicate than skillful and effective, the long floss surface stitches being laid to present areas of contrasting texture and light, so that the decoration of this robe has the quality of glowing relief sculpture.

Another dragon robe (Frontispiece) and a dragon coat (*lung-kua*) (Figure 7) are of special interest because they appear to form a set meant to be worn together, and because they are woven in silk and metal tapestry (*k'o-ssu*), a favorite weave of the Ming and Ch'ing dynasties for pictorial scrolls, cos-



THE PARASOL

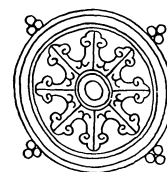


THE VASE

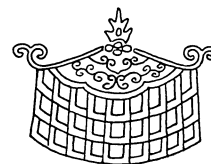
tumes, and fabrics for furnishings, but found hitherto in only one or two fragments in the Kuo Ch'in Wang group. Since the outstanding aspect of this weave is its flatness and surface consistency, this robe, although of the same design and style, presents a very different appearance from that of the shimmering embroidered one shown above it. The same colors, used here, are less shining and more mellow. The once golden dragons and accenting outlines are now a reddish brown. The symmetrical composition gives a tranquil, composed impression, and the wave border is less tumultuous. Among the auspicious objects on its billowing surface are pairs of what may be spotted catfish (Figure 5), which could be an amusing rebus for continuing the good wishes symbolized by other objects on the robe "year after year" (according to the way it is pronounced, *nien* in Chinese means either "year" or "catfish"). The clouds, with occasional minor deviations from their allover symmetrical layout, are more fully formed than those in the embroidered dragon robe and float tranquilly in a spacious sky. The rampant dragons (Figure 6) on the back and front of the lower part of the robe, in their customary positions of pursuit, lack, for some reason, their traditional object, the so-called "flaming pearl." Actually, the presence of the "pearl" is as mysterious as its absence. It is an object, like the dragons themselves, of infinite mystery and import. It is designated as a pearl only because pearls, in Buddhism and Taoism, are associated with dragons, who, in one of their aspects as masters of the sea, guard its treasures. The emerging spiral is read by many as thunder. In these dragon robes the pearl undoubtedly has some cosmic symbolism, but

no one seems to know what. The underflap of this robe, with its ninth dragon, is a replacement for a former back panel.

The matching dragon coat is of fine supple deep blue silk rep (the "stone black" prescribed for an imperial woman's coat) with eight dragon roundels and a wave border, as ordained for top-ranking women in the Ch'ing dynastic regulations, tapestry-woven in silks and wrapped gold on the same warps as the coat itself, with only the vertical slits where the colors change breaking the smooth surface. The colors are softened and muted shades of golden and reddish brown, blues, and hints of the original yellows and greens. The reddish brown dragons have lost their gold but dance magnificently in their medallions over triple-shaft mountains. The symmetrical wave border represents yet another variant of the style, with a network of *ju-i* wave caps spreading from the upright water stripes over billows, which, in this border, never break into the great whorls seen on the other coats.

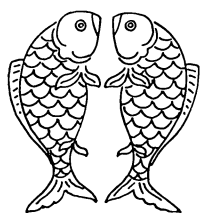


THE WHEEL



THE STANDARD

14. *The Eight Buddhist Emblems, from Chinese Textiles (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1931), by Alan Priest and Pauline Simmons*



THE FISH OF GOLD



THE SEASHELL



16. Detail of the Bat Medallion robe, ceremonial robe of satin couched with wrapped gold and embroidered floss silk. Height 54 inches. Anonymous gift, 43.119

17. Profile dragon sleeveband from the Museum's *k'o-ssu* court robe



The three newly acquired costumes, the embroidered satin court robe and the robe and coat of *k'o-ssu*, have the same original lining of sky-blue satin damask with a small all-over floral scroll pattern (Figure 8). A close variant, with lotus heads replacing the rosettes, is found on the original lining of an embroidered satin dragon coat (Figure 12) that has been in this collection since 1943. This beautiful woman's dragon coat is very close in style and color to the previous one, but shows only faint signs of burial, or tomb, discoloration. It is of deep blue satin (again the required "stone black") embroidered with wrapped gold and silk flosses in shades of yellow, brown, ocher, green, blue, and auber-

gine—all shading toward white—in the same stitches and bold sculptural style as the embroidered satin dragon robe in the Frontispiece. The same dragons dance in their cloud-and-wave medallions: in the four larger medallions, on chest, back, and shoulders, they dance over a blue, holed *T'ai-hu* rock; in the four smaller skirt medallions, over waves alone. As seems to be customary, the four upper roundels have a common cloud-and-wave layout, as do the lower four. The wave border is also used, with very minor variations in detail, on two imperial twelve-symbol court robes in the Museum, one of *k'o-ssu* (Figure 10), and one of finely embroidered gauze, and on a handsome embroidered twill twelve-symbol robe (Figure 9) in the Royal Ontario Museum of Archaeology in Toronto. The clouds and symbols, as well, on these latter three court robes seem to have been taken somewhat freely from the same cartoon, interpreted in different techniques and colors. It is rare to see the evidence of a common cartoon for three robes and a coat; in looking through the dazzling ranks of Chinese court costume one is struck more often with their infinite variety within their prescribed patterning.

Four roundels from a third dragon coat (Cover, Figures 13, 15) belong with this group of court costumes. They are slightly larger than the four upper roundels on the dragon coats, but they are in "stone black" satin. Two of the dragons are frontal, two in profile; one of the frontal medallions is slit vertically for the coat opening. The golden dragons have both upper paws raised, presumed to indicate the highest rank, and each dances over a bizarre rock, instead of a triple-shaft mountain, in the waves. Inside the rim of each circular universe, seven of the eight Buddhist emblems are regularly spaced, with the "canopy" over the dragon's head. The cloud bands and billows, in spite of their effect of rich variety, are arranged on a common pattern in each medallion (occasionally reversed horizontally). Embroidery flosses in blues, greens, ochers, yellows, and browns, all shading from a very deep to a very light tone, are used in smaller and more numerous areas than on the

two dragon coats and with a greater refinement and richness. The outlines are a single couched gold thread. This must indeed have been a coat for a great lady.

In this group of robes and coats the profile dragon bands (Figure 17), indicating in the higher ranks a feminine wearer, correspond to the cuffs and neckbands in design and are sewed on separately, partly covering the traditional wave borders terminating the upper sleeve area.

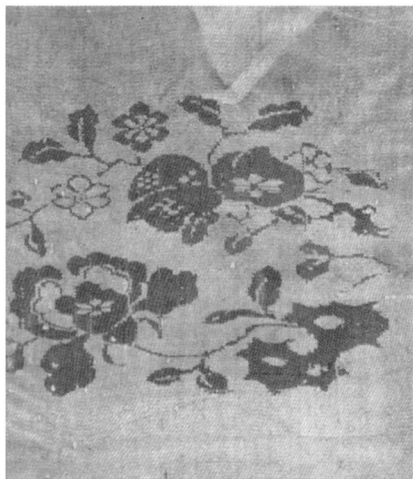
Ceremonial robes and coats worn by women for less formal festive occasions (sometimes called "birthday robes") follow the same layout as that of the court robes, with eight roundels in balanced positions and a more fancifully developed wave border than on the

formal robes and coats. The roundels are beautiful, elaborately worked out medallions in the traditional position on chest, upper back, shoulders, and on either side of the lower skirt. They show garden scenes, or auspicious objects such as linked bats (a pun – the Chinese *fu* means both "bat" and "happiness") and ceremonial lanterns, perhaps signifying that the robe was to be worn at the Lantern Festival (*têng-chieh*) at the end of the New Year celebrations, when lighted lanterns are put over doors to attract prosperity and longevity.

The famous Bat Medallion robe (Figure 16) stunningly illustrates this aspect of aristocratic costume in the early eighteenth century. Though this robe is from a tomb and has been

18. *The Hundred Birds robe, woman's informal robe, of twill and satin damask couched with wrapped gold and peacock-feather filaments and embroidered with plied silks. Height 49 inches. Seymour Fund, 60.28*



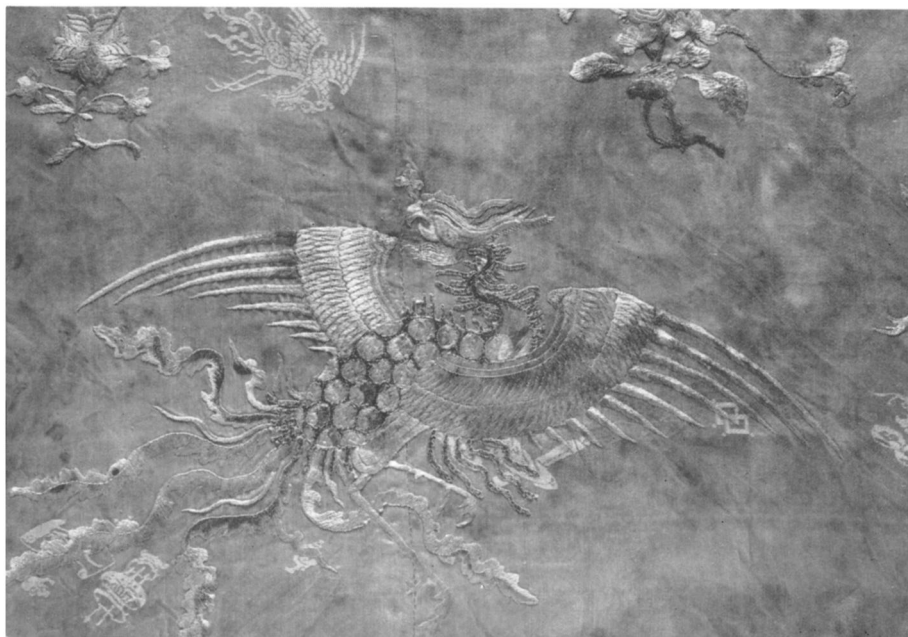


19. Lining of the Hundred Birds robe, of silk twill damask with T'ai-hu rock, peach blossoms and fruit, and tree peony

relined, it retains more of its original coloring than any known to the writer, except perhaps the satin dragon coat previously discussed (Figure 12). It is embroidered in soft luminous shades of blue, golden brown turning to cream, yellow and yellow-green, with accents of deep blue and brown, on a goose-yellow satin. The eight medallions of a ceremonial robe are each composed here of five bats – the five blessings of old age, wealth, health, love of virtue, and a natural death. Their outstretched wings are linked and their heads turned inward toward a central longevity (*shou*) medallion, originally of couched wrapped gold framed with blue clouds. The flying forms of bats are all over this robe, seeming to move at random through the golden sky but actually in balanced positions. The wave border is completely symmetrical and unadorned by jewels or objects – as clear-cut, bold, and static as if it were cut in shining metal silhouettes. Its extremely powerful and formalized design and the absence of more than a suggestion of the stripes of upright water may well be the reason for considering this robe, in Mr. Priest's chronology, one of the earliest of the Kuo Ch'in Wang type.

Few informal robes and coats are known to us from this period. Those that we can be sure of are women's robes associated with the burial of Prince Kuo. The recently purchased informal robe of satin damask (Figure 18) embroidered with the Hundred Birds represents this final delightful aspect of early eighteenth

20. Fêng huang, detail of the Hundred Birds robe



century women's costume. It is in the same style as two robes, known as the Quatrefoil and Tendril, and the Blue Lattice, in the group at Kansas City documented as coming from the tomb of Kuo Ch'in Wang. Like them, it has no neck- or sleevebands and is woven in a fine damask. On the gleaming satin ground are rows of small *fêng huang* (a bird with two aspects, symbolizing the *yang* and the *yin*, here united as one. The *fêng huang* signifies the empress, as the dragon does the emperor, and is mentioned as an auspicious mythical bird in early Chinese history.), auspicious objects, and flower sprays in a duller twill. On this soft fabric, shading from robin's-egg blue to golden brown, are embroidered endless pairs of flying and tumbling birds from legend and nature. The largest, and in the place of honor on the center of the back between the shoulders, is a beautiful *fêng huang* (Figure 20). On the front, in corresponding position but slightly smaller in scale, are a pair of *luan*, mythical birds of almost equal legend. On one shoulder is a closely circling pair of Manchurian cranes holding flowers in their bills; on the other, a pair of egrets. Seen here (also used in civil rank badges) are peacocks, golden and silver pheasants (Figure 21), wild geese, mandarin ducks, quail, paradise flycatchers, and orioles. Birds of less prestige but equal charm play in their appointed places: various kinds of swallows, kingfishers, cormorants, and a single parakeet. Each pair moves, sometimes close together, sometimes on opposite sides of the robe, but always with the male balancing the female in position. This theme, which also occurs in porcelain, painting, *k'o-ssu* panels, and lacquer, is an echo of an old Chinese saying: "When the Feng soars and the Luan flies upwards, The Hundred Birds follow them. . . ."

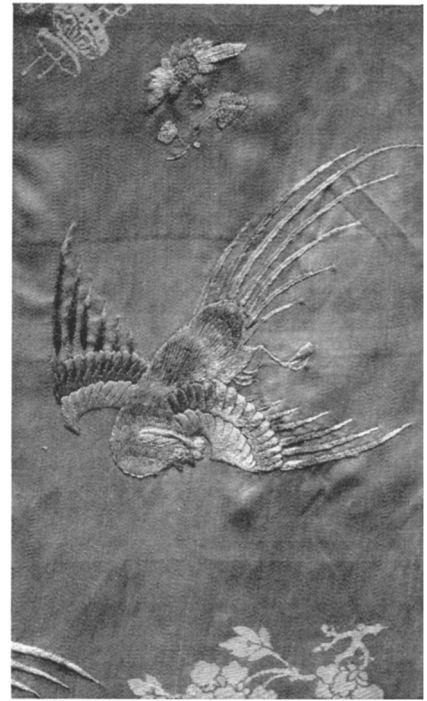
Spaced among the birds in the same seemingly random manner are butterflies and flower and fruit sprays of about the same size. These are all familiar, since from China in the Middle Ages came most of our own garden flowers: lotus, rose of Sharon, chrysanthemum, double cherry blossoms and fruit, rose and magnolia, pink, hydrangea, double and single peach, Chinese astor, pomegranate and



lemon and orange flowers and fruit, quince and Japanese apricot, orchid, and others. A few clusters of pine needles, a single cherry bud or blossom seem to fall through the air at various strategic spots, to be balanced by an accent on the opposite side. As in the court robes, the embroidery, in shades of blue, cream, and brown, is effective but not too fine, and the silks, here plied instead of floss, are largely worked in split satin and outline stitch with touches of laid work or Peking knots. Details of the *fêng huang* and *luan* and the peacocks are couched in heavy silk threads bearing faint traces of the gold leaf and peacock-feather filaments with which they were once wrapped.

The somewhat awkward repetitive poses of the birds, often with back-turned heads and strangely raised wings, emphasizing the interplay between each pair, are familiar in Ch'ing painting and decorative arts and go back to the Ming period, when pairs of birds appeared

in some of these poses even on the civil rank badges. So close as to suggest a common source with this robe are the mandarin ducks flying and fighting in pairs on the Water Garden robe (Figure 22) in the Kuo Ch'in Wang tomb costumes in Kansas City. On close observation one sees that the entrancing overall impression of these robes is the result of the combination of such details. In the Hundred Birds robe the touching awkwardness and charm of these birds add an accent of hurrying shapes to the tiny birds and flowers woven in twill in the gleaming satin ground and form as a whole an effect of delicate grace and femininity. We think of Chinese women from the days of the feudal kingdoms of the first millennium B.C., "working at variegated embroidery," as reported by Master Mo Ti, a philosopher of the time, and we remember that Chinese ladies of rank traditionally embroidered parts of their own costumes in their courtyard gardens among their birds and flowers.



21. Pheasant, detail of the Hundred Birds robe

#### NOTE

For information about Ch'ing dynastic regulations I am indebted to the translation by Alan Priest, with Han Shou-hsuan, of *Ta Ch'ing Hui Tien Tu* (Peking, 1899) and to Pauline Simmons's notebooks on the costume plates in the same.

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22. Detail from the Water Garden robe, ceremonial robe of embroidered satin. William Rockhill Nelson Gallery and Atkins Museum

