The Robes of Royalty

An old Chinese proverb says that the reign of every emperor starts when he dons his new robes. The imperial robes of the last Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) lend legitimacy to this proverb.

Clothing was seen as a status symbol for many dynasties, and was the mark of an individual's position in society. For example, the fur of a black fox and the color yellow were reserved for high level officials and members of the imperial family.

The general public was not allowed to wear or even possess such clothes, although they were allowed to sell them. Anyone found to violate this rule was subject to harsh punishment, even the death penalty.

Curved sleeves and separate, heavy collars

The Qing Dynasty was born when the Manchu horsemen from the northeast conquered the Chinese Empire's Ming Dynasty in 1644. However, in terms of culture, tradition, customs, and science, the Manchu had much to learn from the highly developed Chinese.

They accepted not only the advanced system of state officials, but also the Chinese ideograms, their rituals, customs, and even ideology and religion. After their conquest, therefore, while the Manchu admired Chinese culture, they also retained pride in their own roots.

Before they settled down, traveling clothes were the most important possession of the Manchu. They consisted mostly of animal skins cut into the shape of the dead animal to maximize the raw material.

The imperial wardrobe owes its horseshoe-shaped sleeves and the separate, heavy collars to Manchu traditions. Since the Manchu used to make a living by hunting in the northeastern climes, they had to be protected from the cold. They wore long, curved sleeves that could be placed over the hands, and the heavy, separate collar was also meant to protect hunters from the cold during long rides.

However, the sleeves turned out to be a hindrance in everyday life at the imperial court. Court officials kept them rolled up most of the time, and only rolled them down when they had to greet someone new.

This habit, started by the emperor and his officials, was eventually taken up by everyone. Thus, it became a ritual of the Chinese people to roll their sleeves up and down when greeting a stranger.

The most elaborate gown on earth

Before any gown was allowed to touch the body of a Chinese emperor of the Qing Dynasty, it required two-and-a-half years of labor at the hands of the court tailors. There was a special tailor's shop in the palace solely for making clothes.

The patterns and cuts were developed there and had to be approved by the emperor and the highest imperial officials. Then, the patterns were passed along to the silk manufacturers. When the fabric was ready, it was cut by another artisan and passed onto a third to sew it together and finally, to embroider it.

Only the finest threads were used for the embroideries — even those made from real gold. The emperor employed 500 artisans for the stitching and another 40 for the gold embroideries.

An Unprecedentedly Complex System

The Qing court attire system was strict, complex and detailed, to a level that had exceeded all other dynasties throughout the history of China. The right to wear the dragon robe and its accessories was conferred by rank and entitlement. In 1748, Qianlong emperor (r. 1736-1795) ordered a review of court dress regulations to examine all previous Qing dress regulations and developed a comprehensive strategy for dress and the ceremonial trappings of the court. After a decade of work, the *Qinding huangchao liqi tushi*, ("The Regulations for the Ceremonial Paraphernalia of the [Qing] Dynasty") was completed in 1759.

A robe for every occasion

The imperial wardrobe during the Qing Dynasty included gowns and robes of all kinds. There were robes for celebrations, special robes for ceremonial occasions, travel clothes, and clothes for bad weather, snow and rain, as well as clothes for everyday use in the private apartments and outdoor areas.

According to the demands of weather, they were either lined or unlined, made from silk, leather, or cotton. The colors were chosen to perfect the imperial wardrobe. One of the colors reserved for the emperor was bright yellow, red, blue, and light blue.

Yellow was reserved mostly as a color for celebrations. The other three colors were worn during ceremonial days of sacrifice in the three major temples — the Emperor wore blue at the Temple of Heaven, red at the Temple of the Sun, and light blue at the Temple of the Moon. With every robe, the emperor also wore a matching belt and hat.

The commonly known dragon robes are embroidered with golden dragons. They were gowns for special celebrations, and the emperor wore them only on auspicious feast days.

The color yellow was worn on festive occasions, whereas the other three colors were worn on days of sacrifice. A simple ceremonial robe was worn on all other festive occasions.

The 12 patterns of the dragon robes

The Emperor's gowns were loaded with artful ornaments and hidden symbolism for good luck, and a dragon's image dominated each imperial costume. It symbolized the emperor's power.

A dragon robe contained 9 dragons, one of them on each shoulder, another on the back, and one covering the breast of the top and bottom garments each; the last 4 decorated the bottom of the imperial robes.

The dragon robe was not simply meant to be an ornament for the Emperor; it was also supposed to bring good luck to the people. Apart from the dragons, 11 other symbols for good luck were featured: 日 (rì) — sun, 月 (yuè) — moon, and 星辰 (xīngchén) — stars, as the symbol for three brilliant sources of light; 群山 (qúnshān) — the mountain, symbolizing protection of the emperor's regency from all four directions; 華虫 (huàchóng) — the insect, standing for the emperor's wisdom; 宗彝 (zōngyí) — the cup of wine, standing for honesty, loyalty, and piety; 藻 (zǎo) — aquatic grasses, standing for purity; 火 (huǒ) — fire, standing for his honesty; 粉米 (fěnmǐ) — rice symbolized wealth; 黼 (fǔ) — a special embroidery rendered in black and white was a symbol for the emperor's decisiveness and boldness; and 黻 (fú) — an embroidery rendered in black and green was another symbol for honesty.

Another symbol on the emperor's robes was a red bat, which is a homophone of the character meaning "a veritable deluge of good luck."

Undergarments featured the oceans and mountain ranges of the world, because in Chinese tradition, the emperor was regarded as the "son of heaven" who rules the whole world.

Many Shades of Power

It is common knowledge in China that yellow robes were worn by emperors. Yet in the Qing dynasty, the use of yellow became stricter than ever, and a hierarchy of shades of yellow to differentiate rank within the imperial clan was instituted. *Minghuang*, or bright yellow, was reserved for the emperor and the empress dowager, the empress and first rank consorts in formal occasions, while *Jinhuang*, or golden yellow, *Xinghuang*, or apricot yellow—usually a shade of orange—, *Xiangse*, or incense color—usually a slightly greenish yellow shade, Qiuxiangse —usually a shade of brown or plum— were worn by imperial family of various levels. Lower ranking nobles and all others wore robes with blue grounds. The emperor did also wear other colours such as blue, red and white for different worshipping ceremonies, and he would wear clothing of various colours when outside of his official duties.

A BLUE-GROUND SUMMER GAUZE 'DRAGON' ROBE, JIFU
QING DYNASTY, 18TH CENTURY

Clue is in the Claws

Dragon insignia at the front and back of the robe were assigned to members of the imperial family according to their status. Dragons with five-claws called "*long*" were used exclusively for the robes and badges of the emperor. They outranked the five-clawed dragons called "*mang*", which were identical in appearance to the *long* dragon and only distinguished by name. These were assigned to the emperor's sons, imperial princes of the first rank and his sons, and imperial princes of the second rank. The four-clawed *mang* dragon was assigned to the emperor's grandsons, great-grandsons, and great-great-grandsons, also to imperial princes of the third rank down to nobles of the seventh rank. Nobles of the eighth and ninth rank and below, as well as court officials did not wear dragon badges, although their *longpao* were invariably decorated with five-clawed "*mang*."

In addition, dragon robes worn by the emperor were ornamented with *shier zhangwen*, or The Twelve Ancient Symbols of Imperial Authority, symbolising various virtues displayed by the emperor. Only the emperor's dragon robe would be decorated with all twelve symbols, whilst the robes of other officials would be decorated with some of them.

The Twelve Ancient Symbols of Imperial Authority date back to the Zhou dynasty or before, and therefore an important symbol in Han Chinese traditions. The Qing dynasty, founded by the Manchus, an ethnic minority, had retained certain traditional features reflecting unique Manchu customs, such as a slim-fitting body, narrow sleeves, hoof-shaped cuffs, flared collars and the lavish use of animal fur. A range of conspicuously displayed accessories further stressed Manchu heritage as horse riding conquerors. Among them, a hat, a surcoat, flaring collar, necklace and the group of items suspended from a chaodai, or court belt, that included pairs of drawstring pouches and ceremonial kerchiefs, as well as a knife, a flint and a pair of chopsticks.

In a way, the Qing dragon robes embodied elements of both the Han culture (such as The Twelve Ancient Symbols of Imperial Authority) and their Manchu heritage. The study of it may offer fascinating insights into how an ethnic minority established their power in China, as they went on to become one of the most powerful dynasties China had ever seen.