

YONGZHENG IMPERIAL COURT ROBE FRAGMENT

Lit.:

-John E. Vollmer, Silks for thrones and altars – Chinese costumes and textiles- the Myrna Myers collection, 2004. ISBN 1-58008-590-3

-Gary Dickinson & Linda Wrigglesworth, Imperial wardrobe, Berkeley 2000. ISBN 1-58008-188-6

-John E. Vollmer, ruling from the dragon throne, Berkeley 2002. ISBN 1-58008-307-2

- The Collection of the Palace Museum of the Forbidden City, Vol. 51, nr. 16., p. 31. ISBN 962 07 5354 2



April 2008 I came across this textile fragment (58x39cm- see pictures) in the shop of a Beijing based dealer in Tibetan art. It stood out from other textile fragments because of the high quality and refinedness of the brocaded weaving, the highlights in gold and above all the wonderful rendering of the walking dragon's head, trying to catch the flaming pearl.

It came from Tibet but was Chinese made. The dealer told me that it had been part of some sort of Imperial fabric from the Forbidden City but he didn't know exactly. Maybe for the emperor's brother was his best guess.

The age of the fragment also wasn't clear.

Sometimes you are in the mood for a bit of adventure so I decided to purchase it.

After a lot of comparing it became clear that the fragment had to be placed in the Qing period, in the 1720's. This coincides with the last years of ruling of emperor Kangxi (1661-1722) and the early years of his son and successor Yongzheng (1723-1735).

This Qing Dynasty started in 1644 after the ruling Ming Dynasty had become weak and powerless. The Manchu people invaded China from the North and eventually took the throne in the Forbidden City after the last Ming emperor committed suicide.

Life within the Forbidden City was strictly regulated regarding rules and ranks which was also reflected in clothing. There was an informal style of clothes (chang fu) for daily life and common days but as soon as there was the slightest spark of an official character courtiers were supposed to turn to the semi-formal dress (ji fu) which was the dragon robe.

These tapering robes that went down to the ankles were basically the same for men and woman, with the distinction that the male version had a split at both the front and the back.

These robes were decorated with dragons and clouds that were woven into the fabric or embroidered. For each rank and social position in the court it was specified what the colour of the robe should be and what type and how many dragons it should be adorned by.

For the emperor and the empress the colour was yellow with 9 5-clawed dragons (long).

For the crown-prince the colour was abricot with the same 9 5-clawed dragons. Other imperial consorts wore a brownish yellow colour called xiangse (incense colour) adorned with 9 dragons that had just 4 toes (mang) instead of 5.

This system went further down the line from nobility to civil servants who could carry only 5 4-clawed dragons on a dark blue ground.

The fact that the dragons on my fragment are 5-clawed and on a yellow ground indicate in what direction one must seek. It doesn't belong however to a semi-formal robe but to a third style of clothing, the formal style or chao fu. This was the ultimate formal dress that was only used on special occasions with a ceremonial or otherwise ritual character.

It was worn for example when offerings were made by the emperor himself at the Altar of the Earth, at his birthday and at 39 grand audiences where the emperor -the Huang Di, ruler of the Middle Kingdom- was honoured by the inhabitants of the Forbidden City.

This type of robe was for a man of a different design than all other robes. From the middle towards the ankles it was a wide pleated skirt that reminded of the horsemen background of the Manchu people- enabling them to get on and off the horse easily.

The chao fu follows the distinction in colours and dragons of the semi-formal ji fu (or better: the other way around). For the emperor there are 4 large front facing dragons on breast, back and shoulders, like a flower's petals. The lower section, -the skirt- was decorated with 9 roundels with front facing 5-clawed dragons and at the lower end 2 walking dragons with a front facing dragon in the middle. This is where my fragment stems from; the front right side or back left side of the skirt section of an imperial robe of state from the first part of the 18th century.

But how did it end up in Tibet?

All Chinese textiles in my collection were found in Tibet and are a reminiscence of diplomatic gifts and tribute payments: Beijing paid neighbouring peoples to reward them for their friendship and loyalty. This to keep the situation in their backgarden quiet and stable. Standard part of these gifts were silks, much appreciated by the Mongols in the North and the Tibetans in the West.

An imperial silk is not a common silk though; this is about an important period when there were strong ties between the Forbidden City and the Potala in Lhasa.

What was going on back then?

After a period full of political tensions and intrigues Tibet was invaded in 1717 by a Mongol leader who took Lhasa and plundered and destroyed the Potala palace. This invader settled a harsh regime in Tibet.

The Chinese emperor Kangxi was asked for help and did send an army of 2000 man cavalry that succeeded in 1720 to liberate Lhasa and put the 7th Dalai lama on the throne.

In the years directly after the military success, the diplomatic contacts between Lhasa and Beijing no doubt will have been strong. My imperial fragment must have changed hands somewhere around 1725, either as a gift to a high Tibetan delegation in the Forbidden City, or been brought to Lhasa by a Chinese envoy. Not as a complete robe but as uncut yardage from the imperial warehouses in the Forbidden City. In the times after it has been cut and divided until this fragment remained, a stained ritual cloth with a pungent yak butter smell, once woven to cloth an emperor.....

-On the next page a picture of a painting of Yongzheng in his formal robe and a picture of the actual complete robe, both in the collection of the Museum of the Forbidden City.

