TRADITIONAL GARMENTS embody the continuity of a people's life style, its social mores, cultural values and technological developments. Changes in clothing often reflect psychological, as well as philosophical, adjustment and are seldom achieved without external influence. In past people derive their identity from the clothing they wear. Kinship, rank, political function and social occasions are frequently denoted by a particular costume deemed acceptable by a peer group. Deviation from this norm implies an alteration of identity.

Traditional Chinese culture viewed costumes as symbols to identify and differentiate ethnic origin, social classes and political structures. On the official level costume and its decoration reinforced a political philosophy based on a theory of cosmic order which can be traced to the very foundations of Chinese civilization. Informally costume symbolized a wearer's cultural background, his social station or his personal aesthetic sensibilities. Such notions are not unique to the Chinese, but few cultures have defined costume symbolism so consciously or so clearly.

Most surviving evidence for Chinese costume preserved in museums and private collections dates from the later part of the Ch'in dynasty (1644–1911). Yet among this body of material which for many is exceedingly decadent, we find reflections of ancient principles and traditions.

The political reality of the Chinese empire dates from the third century B.C. when the Ch'in dynasty (221–207 B.C.) united numerous small kingdoms into a single state. Yet many of the characteristic features of Chinese empire are considerably older. The emergence of an encrusted agrarian society on the central Chinese plains at the close of the neolithic period imposed a sedentary lifestyle and encouraged the growth of large urban centers. The stratified society and the rich material culture which characterized Chinese civilization had already appeared during the second millennium B.C. This contrasted with the life style which evolved on the steppes further north, where geography and climate forced the breeders of horses, cattle and sheep to live as nomads following their herds in search of forage.

Chinese civilization was introspective and self-sufficient. Agriculture tied the Chinese to the land and stressed continuity, Chinese cultural traditions valued the past, imposed uniformity and insulated China against any change. Empire was based on belief in the superiority of the Chinese way of life and the civilizing influence it exerted on all. Within this sphere of influence men were either civilized and Chinese or barbarian.

One of the reasons for the existence of a Chinese empire reared from a conflict between barbarian, represented by nomadic steppe horsemen, and the settled farmers. Farming tied up free range land, while breeding destroyed fields, crops and irrigation systems. Yet agriculture provided the economic support for developing high urban culture and also the luxury so coveted by the nomad. The
This extremely rare late seventeenth century embroidered court coat, ca. 1695 in date, is wholly embroidered in the shade of coatest gold silk. It displays one of the sixty-eight scripts in the evolution of Manchu dragon coat decoration.

The greenish-yellow colour of this coat's obi further suggests it was for a mandarin in the imperial household. 1725-1750

Emperor's embroidered silk semi-formal court coat from the Cheng-ho period. Late eighteenth century.

An embroidered satin obi, ca. 1760 of a later emperor, from the Ta-lang period (1735-1815). After 1729 the Manchus, emperor's clothing was distinguished by the addition of the purple and black symbols of Chinese imperial authority.
In this thirteenth-century wall painting from a Taoist temple in Shansi Province, the Ninth Celestial Pole is presented in the robes of the Chinese court. 586 x 1047 cm.
conflict between farmer and herder over the political control of North China continued from prehistoric times until the twentieth century. Although East Asian culture may be seen as a recurring cycle of native development and nomadic intrusion, the Chinese way of life, its bureaucratic state, cultural achievements and civilization prevailed.

Central to the notion of empire was the role of emperor, whose mandate, or right to rule, rather than his individuality remained critical to the survival of the state. The balance between the forces of the natural world and the needs of men imputed the harmonious order required for the state and the good of all through the correct application of the Mandate of Heaven. Rites and ceremonies associated with the emperor and his court were the obligations of the Mandate of Heaven. These functions, traced back to the times of the legendary emperors who created Chinese civilization, were the solemn affirmations of the splendor and superiority of the Chinese state. The refinement of manners and luxury of dress associated with these functions were designed to impress the barbarian with the power and wealth of the state and to overwhelm the barbarian with the reality of civilization.

Rites and ceremonies were conducted within courts and halls axially arranged with the cardinal points of the compass. The precision and order displayed in laying out these finite spaces symbolized the state’s power to maintain the universal order which in the Chinese view shared a similar rigid logic. The trappings of these public events emphasized the finest material goods of Chinese civilization. Sumptuous robes of costly silk, embodying the refinements of urban life, were designed to impress the crude nomad with the power and wealth of the state, and to overwhelm the barbarian with the reality of civilization.

The Ch’ing dynasty was established in 1644 when a small band of rough nomadic warriors from the Manchurian steppe swept across the Great Wall, overthrew the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) and claimed both the Mandate of Heaven and the throne of China. Although the Manchus, like all rulers of China, dressed in silk, the shapes of their garments reflected an attempt to preserve a special separate identity while maintaining political control of the empire. These garment shapes demonstrated the differences in life styles that distinguished steppe nomads from the agrarian peoples living on the plains.

In contrast to the ceremonial clothes of urban courtiers, the Manchus, as mounted horsemen, required clothing that served as protection from the weather and that allowed freedom of movement. Long-sleeved, closely fitting coats, securely belted at the waist, helped conserve body heat while allowing free arm movement for waging military operations from horseback. Leggings and trousers protected a horseman’s legs from the elements and from rubbing against the horse’s flanks.

The shapes and construction of Manchu garments, like those of other herder societies from the steppe, can be demonstrated to students of Chinese history.
have evolved from the animal skin costume traditions of eastern and southern Siberia, rather than from the cloth traditions of the plains of northern China. In the forest areas to the north of the steppe, clothing materials were most commonly furnished by the animal and sometimes fish skins acquired through hunting and trapping. On the steppe itself herding provided wool, the raw material for felt, but most felt garments can be demonstrated to have skin prototypes.

Although contact with the cloth traditions of the southern farmers affected the making of all herder garments, the memory of skin traditions was never entirely eradicated. Even when the Manchu life style underwent radical transformation in the move from the steppe to the palaces of the Forbidden City, the older clothing traditions continued to be honoured and became an important means of expressing an ethnic identity.

Among the more obvious non-cloth characteristics of Ch'ing garments are the presence of shoulder seams and asymmetrical overlapping closures. The Manchu woman's formal court coat illustrates this point. It is a synthesis of two garments—a long-sleeved coat with a full-length sleeveless coat worn over it. Applied bindings and the flaring shoulder projections preserved the outline of the earlier sleeveless coat whose function had ceased to have meaning. This is underscored by the fact that a second sleeveless coat or court vest was worn over the garment.

Superficially the construction of the Manchu sleeveless coat, which also existed as a separate informal garment, appears similar to that of cloth coats, only made without sleeves. To achieve angled shoulder seams and deeply cut out armholes in cloth meant cutting away and wasting fabric, a violation of principles of garment construction based on the original shape of an animal skin would naturally create a sloping shoulder line and deeply curved armhole. The curved shape of the front extension which overlaps to the right side seam also echoes the contours of an animal skin, not the straight lines characteristic of rectilinear cloth.

Aware that the many nomadic conquerors who had preceded them had lost their independence and militancy and were eventually absorbed by the Chinese, the Manchus were determined to preserve their nomadic heritage and rigorously enforced policies to distinguish conqueror from conquered. One of their first acts was to banish the traditional Chinese court costume which emphatically identified its wearer as one of the people of Han, that is, Chinese. After 1644 the queue and Manchu national costume based on the more functional Manchu riding gear became symbols of authority and rule. Although these garments were made of silk and suitable only for the ceremonial wear of an urban court, the constructions still reflected the active life for which they were designed. By imposing their national costume on all in service of their government, the Manchus sought to preserve an identity by acknowledging their nomadic
An early eighteenth century noble in formal court dress (ch’ao fu) which evolved from Manchu national costume. It consists of a claret-brown surcoat worn over a riding coat, here represented by the contrasting lower sleeves. A pair of aprons covers trousers and boots to give a more formal aspect. The flaring collar, probably based on a silk hood, completes the costume.
Manchu warriors depicted in clothing which evolved from that of the hunting herd. These are two of fifty commemorative portraits, dated to 1765, in honour of officers who pacified Tibet by imperial command. Approximately 154 x 95 cm.

The Manchu man’s formal court coat consists of three units which have been combined into a single garment. The upper part is a hip-length coat with a short-sleeved surcoat over it; below is a pair of aprons covering the more functional leggings and boots. The tight lower sleeves with cuffs contrast markedly with the rest of the coat. They are generally made of a different fabric, most frequently black or dark blue which is either ribbed or patterned with sets of woven or embroidered bands. These symbolically retain a feature of long, tight-fitting sleeves which extend over the hand for warmth, but could be pushed up the arm in a series of parallel folds when the hand was engaged. Ornamental short-sleeved coats worn over more practical garb altered the appearance of the costume without hindering arm movement. These were cut from the material for the yoke of Ming style coats which had a large four-lobed yoke of concentrated decoration.

Paired aprons arranged to overlap at the sides were fashioned from the material with horizontal bands of dragon ornament which formed the skirt of the Ming style coat. These paired aprons created the more impressive bulk associated with festive or formal garb without hindering movement—a nomadic requirement.

At first, as vassals of the Ming court, the Manchus had borrowed the outward forms of these symbols for their garments; but later, as rulers of China, they embraced the spirit and substance of Chinese universal order. The Ch’ing semi-formal court coat, based on the riding coat form extended full-length for ceremonial display, became one of the clearest statements of the concept of universal order, upon which the principles of Chinese imperial statecraft rested. The entire coat became a diagram of the universe. The lower bands of diagonal bands and rounded billows represented water; at the four axes of the coat, which symbolised the cardinal points of the compass, rose prismatic rocks symbolising the earth mountain. Above was the cloud-filled heaven against which dragons, emblems of the emperors, coiled and twisted. The universal symbolism was complete only when the coat was worn. The human body became the world axis; the neck opening, the gate of heaven, separated the material world of the coat from the realm of the spiritual which was represented by the wearer’s head. Implicit in
This woman’s embroidered coat that is reportedly from the wardrobe of the Empress Dowager, Tz'u-hsi. Its pretty decoration, for spring wear, illustrates the Manchus use of Chinese nature symbolism. 1885–1890

Blue silk and gold thread tapestry-woven overcoat, worn informally by upper-class Manchurian women. Angled shoulder seams and deeply cut out armholes relate to skin traditions rather than cloth construction. 1875–1900

Woman’s pale orange silk tapestry-woven court coat (shao-fu) bearing four of the twelve imperial symbols which following Han dynasty precedents were used on the official clothing of each succeeding dynasty. This coat, which has fitted sleeves, was probably for the consort of the heir apparent. 1750–1900
The silk satin coat is an example of the informal wear of the Dowager Empress, Tzu-hsi. The embroidery depicts the phoenix, emblem of the Empress of China, 1880-1900.

This Chinese bridal coat with couched gold filigree dragons over the shoulder preserves a pre-Manchu style. Circa 1875.
The nine ranks of civil officials were indicated by bird insignia. The tapestry-woven goose badge denotes fourth rank. It is one of a pair which were applied to the front and back of a surcoat. Because the coat opened at the front, one of the pair contrasted vividly with the officer's plain blue or black coat.

The water, metal, earth, wood, fire, and plant life (by extension, wood) and earth.

Outside the imperial court clothing varied, revealing the wearer's means and cultural origins. Even after 1644 these areas of Chinese society that were unaffected by official regulation continued to follow Chinese traditions. In particular the bridal coat preserved the red full-cut coat which had been banned for court use by the Manchus. On the day of her marriage the bride was called "empress for the day", reflecting the practical as well as the philosophical view that marriage was central to the Chinese social structure in which the emperor and his consorts were the political parents of the state. Chinese bridal attire was often decorated with the emperor's dragon and the empress's phoenix to symbolize the groom and bride.

As one studies the development of the Manchu's costume during the 287 years of the dynasty, the decoration of their clothing, both official and unoffcial, reveals the increasing use of a very complex and sophisticated Chinese pictorial symbolism.
Empress's eighteenth-century silk coat with a yellow ground from the Ch'ing dynasty (1644-1912), depicting the ancient symbols for the earth (mountain) and the sun (constellation) which are related to the sacrificial obligations of the empress.

Man's embroidered silk blue twill ch'ao-fei, a composite garment consisting of a short-sleeved tunic worn over the low formal riding coat and a pair of spats worn over leggings and boots.

Emperor's eighteenth-century silk coat with a yellow ground from the Ch'ing dynasty (1644-1912), depicting the ancient symbols for the earth (mountain) and the sun (constellation) which are related to the sacrificial obligations of the emperor.

After 1759 dark-coloured surcoats were part of the official court costume. These were decorated with pictorial badges to indicate rank. This embroidered dark blue surcoat was the emperor's coat and has the requisite four circular dragon insignia.

Arts of Asia
The decoration of Manchu clothing towards the end of the dynasty showed increasing sophistication and acceptance of Chinese aesthetic principles. This woman's jacket with lotus pattern was for summer.

The transformation from nomadic warriors to urban rulers is best reflected in Manchu informal clothing. Manchu garments underwent considerable modification during the Ch'ing period with the use of luxury fabrics and magnificent embroidered decoration. The twilight of Manchu authority is seen in the clothing associated with the private court of the Empress Dowager, Tz'u Hsi (1835-1908). Amid imperial decline, financial ruin and foreign pressures which undermined the power of the Manchu government, Tz'u Hsi's private court used colour, fabric and decoration with great elegance and taste to complement seasonal variation. This complete acceptance of Chinese nature symbolism is testimony to the dilemma of sinification faced by all nomadic conquerors. Within three short years of Tz'u Hsi's death the Chinese threw off the yoke of Manchu domination.

The lower body garments worn unofficially by Chinese women bring one of the problems of polarising costume types into focus. Informally Chinese women wore leggings or trousers under three-quarter length coats. To make this costume more formal a pair of aprons were added to conceal the trousers. This parallels the garments worn by the horse-riding Manchu warrior. The official Chinese histories record that in 307 B.C. the ruler of the small state of Chao introduced mounted archers into his army. Not only did this ruler adopt a nomadic method of warfare, but he went so far as to insist that nomadic trousers and short coats be worn at his court, his reason being that the Chinese style coat was too voluminous and clumsy to be practical. History records that the full-cut coat continued as the court attire, but as informal wear and occupation gear, nomadic garments prevailed and were naturalised. Such comparisons underscore the complex relationships between steppe and plains societies and how they relate to the development of East Asian culture. Both Chinese and Manchu aprons, although worn by different genders, probably derive from a common general source, even as each represents a separate line of development. Neither nomadic nor agrarian costume styles exist in isolation. They are only two aspects of the larger phenomenon.

Historically costumes served as conscious symbols whereby men identified themselves within a social context. Although we may be somewhat less conscious of symbols today, our clothing still plays a significant social and cultural role. Certainly the restaurant sign requesting men to wear coats and ties and women not to wear pants is an attempt to use costume as a civilising influence. Acceptance of blue jeans and other work clothing expresses our contemporary concern for social, cultural and sexual equality. Whether in traditional China, or in the contemporary West, the saying "clothes make the man" has validity.
Cover: Ch'ing dynasty clothing from the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto. Left, Manchu woman's tapestry-woven coat decorated with peonies, Chinese symbol of spring, with wide sleeves faced with contrasting fabric. Right, unofficial Chinese costume recalling Manchu nomadic wear. It consists of a three-quarter length coat worn over leggings, with paired aprons added for more formal occasions. 1875–1900

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