

Costume as Symbol in Traditional China

JOHN E. VOLLMER

TRADITIONAL GARMENTS embody the continuity of a people's life style, its social mores, cultural values and technological developments. Changes in clothing often require psychological, as well as philosophical, adjustment and are seldom achieved without external influence. In part people derive their identity from the clothing they wear. Kinship, rank, political function and social occasion 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 origins, social classes and political structures. On an 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 civilisation. Informally costume symbolised 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'ing 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.) unified numerous small kingdoms into a single state. Yet many of the characteristic features of Chinese empire are considerably older. The emergence of an organised agrarian society on the central Chinese plains at the close of the neolithic period imposed a sedentary life style and encouraged the growth of large urban centres. The stratified society and the rich material culture which characterised Chinese civilisation 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 civilisation 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 civilising influence it exerted on all. Within this sphere of influence men were either civilised and Chinese or barbarian.

One of the reasons for the existence of a Chinese empire stems from a conflict between barbarian, represented by nomadic steppe herdsmen, and the settled farmer. Farming tied up free range land, while herding destroyed fields, crops and irrigation systems. Yet agriculture provided the economic support for developing high urban culture and also the luxuries so coveted by the nomad. The



A late sixteenth century portrait of a civil official wearing the Ming Dynasty p'ao coat, a court garment which restricted movement but displayed dramatically the wealth represented by its twelve metres of lustrous silk damask.



This extremely rare late seventeenth century semi-formal court coat, or ch'i fu, is solidly embroidered in two shades of couched gold filé. It displays one of the early stages in the evolution of Manchu dragon coat decoration

The greenish-yellow colour of this satin ch'i fu suggests it was for a eunuch in the imperial household. 1725-1750



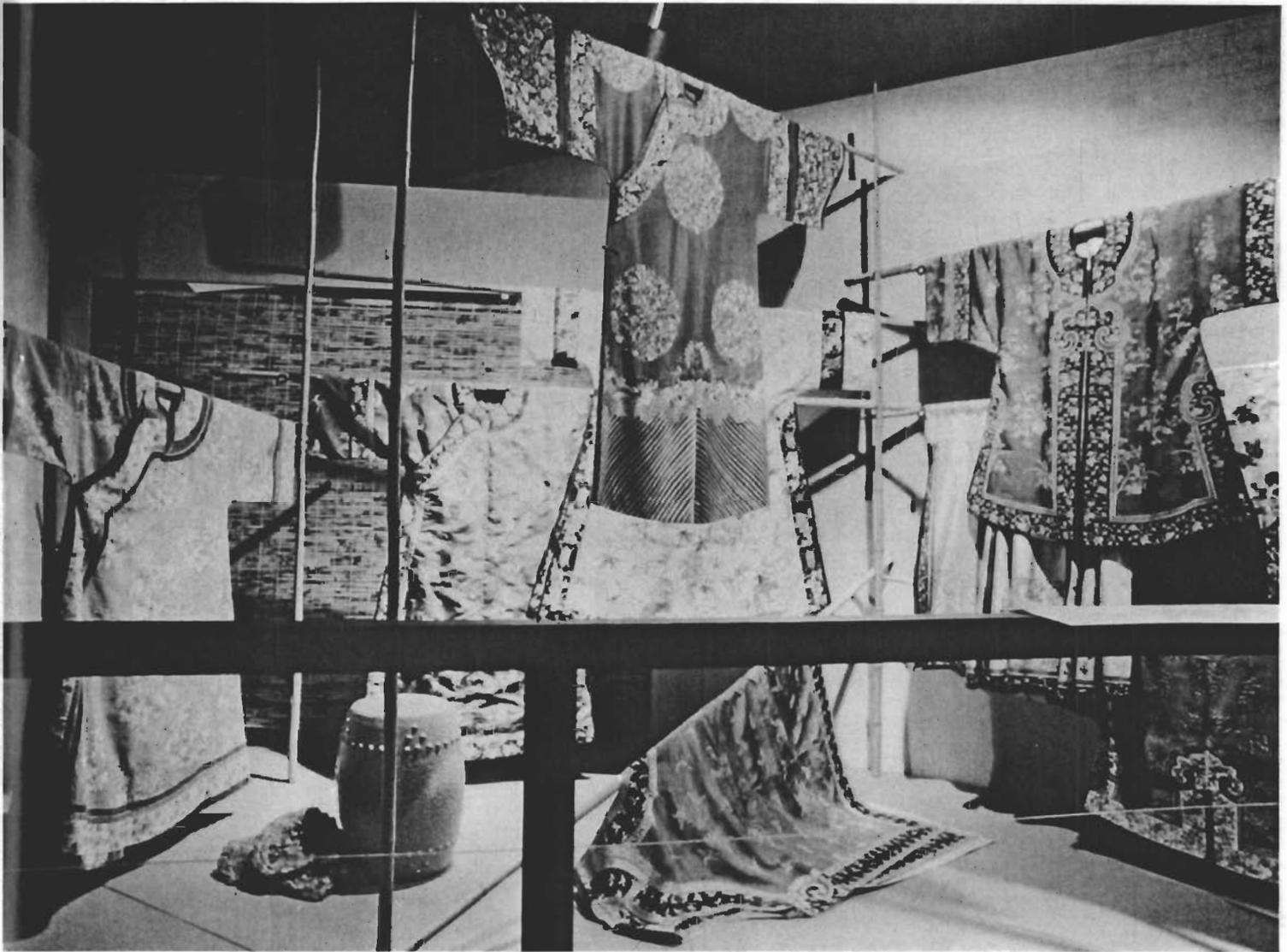
Emperor's embroidered silk twill semi-formal court coat from the Ch'ien-lung period. Late eighteenth century



An embroidered satin ch'i fu of a later emperor, from the Tao-kuang period (1821-1851). After 1759 the Manchu emperor's clothing was distinguished by the addition of the twelve ancient symbols of Chinese imperial authority



In this thirteenth-century wall painting from a Taoist temple in Shansi Province the North Celestial Pole is personified in the robes of the Chinese court. 306 × 1042 cms



A view of the exhibition of Ch'ing dynasty costume, "In the Presence of the Dragon Throne", which was held in 1977 at the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto

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 civilisation 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 insured 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 civilisation, were the solemn affirmations of the splendour and superiority of the Chinese state. The refinement of manner and luxury of dress associated with these functions were designed to impress the crude nomad with the power and wealth of the state

and to overwhelm the barbarian with the reality of civilisation.

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 symbolised 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 emphasised the finest material goods of Chinese civilisation. Sumptuous robes of costly silk, embodying the refinements of urban life, were designed to encumber movement and to impose a slow and measured pace appropriate to an autocratic state which alone brought order to a chaotic world. The traditional Chinese court costume, based on a wide-sleeved, kimono type garment, was codified during the second century B.C. Each succeeding native dynasty attempted to restore the classical form in a nationalistic gesture to stress the continuity of their reigns and to evoke the grandeur of the Han dynasty (206 B.C.—A.D. 220), the first flowering of Chinese empire.

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 clements 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



After 1759 all courtiers were required to wear a surcoat over other court attire, displaying insignia badges indicating rank. The ancestor portrait (above) of a seventh-rank civil official depicts a fur trimmed hat and a fur-lined surcoat which bears the insignia of mandarin ducks. 1875–1900



The decoration in the wave border of this embroidered silk twill child's coat shows the sophistication of Chinese symbolism. Here, the ling-chih (fungus) in the waves represents longevity and the bat above the waves happiness. For instance, a halberd in a vase with an angled stone refers to the description: "halberd and chiming stone with a vase" (chi ch'ing ho p'ing). By replacing the first, second and fourth words with homophones, the phrase can be read: "May I have good luck, good fortune and tranquility". 1850–1875

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 steppes to the palaces of the Forbidden City, the older clothing traditions continued to be honoured and became an important means of preserving 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 costly woven cloth. On the other hand, 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 short-sleeved 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 skin hood, completes the costume



Manchu warriors depicted in clothing which evolved from that of the horseriding herders. These are two of fifty commemorative portraits, dated to 1760, in honour of officers who pacified Tibet by imperial command. Approximately 154 × 95 cms

steppe origins and also to legitimise their claim to rule by symbolically linking their dynasty, the Ch'ing, with the nomadic dynasties of the past.

As conquerors of China, the Manchus were able to maintain a separate ethnic identity through the regulation of costume; however as emperors of the state, they were obliged to continue the rites and ceremonies required by the Mandate of Heaven. For this reason the Manchus used Chinese imperial symbolism for the decoration of their coats. This symbolism included the elements of the universe—water, earth and sky as well as the dragon, emblem of Chinese imperial authority.

Before the conquest, Manchu tribesmen had received dragon patterned silks as diplomatic gifts in return for paying tribute to the Ming emperors. These silk lengths were designed for Chinese style court coats, which evolved from cloth constructions. The integrity of the dragon patterns suffered when the Manchus cut these lengths to shape their riding attire that had evolved from the limitations imposed on the garment forms by the use of animal skins.

The Manchu man's formal court coat con-

sists 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 skirts 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 border of diagonal bands and rounded billows represented water; at the four axes of the coat, which symbolised the cardinal points of the compass, rose prism-shaped rocks symbolising the earth mountain. Above was the cloud-filled heaven against which dragons, emblems of the emperor, 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 satin coat is reportedly from the wardrobe of the Empress Dowager, Tz'u-hsi. Its peony decoration, for spring wear, illustrates the Manchus' use of Chinese nature symbolism. 1880-1890



Blue silk and gold filé tapestry-woven sleeveless coat, worn informally by upper-class Manchu 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 (ch'ao-fu) bearing four of the twelve imperial symbols which following Han dynasty precedent were used on the official clothing of each succeeding dynasty. This coat, which has altered sleeves, was probably for the consort of the heir apparent. 1875-1900



Ch'i fu semi-formal court coat of ivory silk satin brocaded with coloured silks marks another stage in the evolution of Manchu dragon coat decoration. Because the coat was worn tightly belted at the waist, dragon patterns were separated. From this period onward, the number of dragons is fixed at nine—eight visible on the coat, and a ninth placed on the inner flap. Circa 1725



This silk satin coat is an example of the informal wear of the Dowager Empress, Tz'u-hsi. The embroidery depicts the phoenix, emblem of the Empress of China. 1880-1900



Emperor's tapestry-woven ch'i fu of the Hsien-feng period (1851-1862). The blue colour suggests it was worn during the fasting before the annual sacrifices at the Altar of Heaven



This Chinese bridal coat with couched gold filé dragons over the shoulder preserves a pre-Manchu style. Circa 1875



The nine ranks of civil officials were indicated by bird insignia. This 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 is always divided



Military officers used animal insignia. The first rank, as shown on this embroidered satin square, was indicated by the ch'i-lin, a mythical Chinese beast. The brilliant colours of these badges contrasted vividly with the officers' plain blue or black silk coats

the design is the notion of harmony and universal order. Each courtier was constantly reminded by the garments he wore of his duty and subservience to the throne.

Perhaps the importance of this pictorial symbolism is better appreciated when we recall that from 1759 onwards the coat was covered with a plain, dark-coloured surcoat which extended to just below the knee. Although officially no one saw the coat beneath, the symbolic importance of the decoration remained paramount and it was neither eliminated nor simplified. At the chest and centre back of the surcoat were displayed pictorial insignia badges designating rank. These devices were adopted from Chinese notions for distinguishing rank and status. Manchu nobles used dragon badges. The nine ranks of civil officials were indicated by bird badges, while animal badges distinguished the ranks of military officers.

The imperial edicts concerning costume which were promulgated in 1759 regulated the costume appropriate for each court function for each rank of courtier, official and officer in the service of the Ch'ing government. Although the preface to these edicts carried the warning that Manchu identity was linked to its clothing, many of the regulations were borrowed directly from Chinese precedent. The addition of the twelve symbols of ancient Chinese imperial authority to the Manchu emperor's clothing was one of the more significant changes. These symbols related to the sacrificial obligations of the emperor.

Symbols for the sun and moon at the shoulders and for the constellation and mountain at the chest and back denoted the four principle annual sacrifices made by the emperor on behalf of the state. The *fu* symbol and axe denoted temporal power; the paired dragons and pheasant, dominion over the natural world. The water weed, libation cups, flame, plate of millet and the mountain at the back symbolised the five elements of the universe: water, metal, fire, plant life (by extension, wood) and earth.

Outside the imperial court clothing varied, revealing the wearer's means and cultural origins. Even after 1644 those 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 coats 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 views that marriage was central to the Chinese social structure in which the emperor and his consort were the political parents of the state. Chinese bridal attire was often decorated with the emperor's dragon and the empress's phoenix to symbolise the groom and bride.

As one studies the development of the Manchus' costume throughout the 267 years of the dynasty, the decoration of their clothing, both official and unofficial, reveals the increasing use of a very complex and sophisticated Chinese pictorial symbolism.



Emperor's tapestry-woven silk coat with a yellow ground from the Chia-ch'ing period (1796-1821), depicting the ancient symbols for the earth (mountain) and the stars (constellation) which are related to the sacrificial obligations of the emperor



Man's embroidered dull blue twill ch'ao-fu, a composite garment consisting of a short-sleeved surcoat worn over the less formal riding coat and a pair of aprons worn over leggings and boots



Rare late seventeenth century ch'i fu, embroidered in couched gold filé. Represents one of the earliest stages in Manchu dragon coat decoration. Circa 1675



After 1759 dark-coloured surcoats were part of the official court costume. These were decorated with pictorial badges to indicate rank. This embroidered blue satin emperor's coat has the requisite four circular dragon insignia. 1850-1875



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 patterns was for summer. 1880-1900



The narcissus and the dark blackish purple colour—associated with the clement water and the direction north—show that this coat was for winter. 1880-1900

Birds and animals denoted rank and status. Delicate floral ornament made very poetic reference to seasonal changes. The homonymous nature of the Chinese language permitted verbal puns to be worked out as rebuses using pictorial emblems, which had the same pronunciations as other words, to form phrases evoking auspicious wishes for happiness, longevity and wealth. While this literary taste marks a level of sophistication few cultures have achieved, its increasing use during the declining years of the Manchu dynasty reflects growing superstition and an increasing lack of control of Manchu fortunes.

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 concerns for social, cultural and sexual equality. Whether in traditional China, or in the contemporary West, the saying "clothes make the man" has validity.

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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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