

# Imperial robe

see DVD for additional material

吉服  
jifu  
Emperor's semi-formal court robe

蝠  
fu  
bat

福  
fu  
happiness

Manchu horsemen crossed the Great Wall of China in 1644 to take the northern capital Peking (present day Beijing北京) from peasant rebels, and ruled China under the name of the Qing dynasty 清朝 (1644–1911) for nearly three hundred years. The Manchu ruler proclaimed himself Emperor of China, Son of Heaven, and supreme ruler of all under heaven. The Forbidden City in Peking, where the Emperor resided and governed, was regarded as the Centre of the Universe. True to its name, common people were not permitted to set foot inside its gates.

The Manchu asserted their own cultural identity by imposing on the Qing court their traditional tribal hairstyle and clothing. In the area of court attire, they replaced the flowing, voluminous Chinese Ming dynasty (1368–1644) robes and flamboyant slippers with boots, trousers and coats modelled on their Manchu riding habits.

This yellow court robe (*jifu* 吉服, auspicious attire) was once worn by a Manchu emperor of the late nineteenth century, possibly the Guangxu 光緒 emperor, who ruled from 1874 to 1908. The *jifu* was worn for semi-formal occasions such as banquets and festivities at the imperial court in the Forbidden City. (bright yellow was reserved for use by the emperor as well as the empress and the empress dowager.) The robe is tight fitting with sleeves tapering to flared cuffs that resemble the hoofs of a horse 馬蹄袖式, a reminder of the Manchu's equestrian background.

Sumptuous and elegant, this imperial robe is intricately woven in exquisite silk of gold and jewel-like rainbow colours, the technique of which is called silk tapestry (*kesi* 縐絲).<sup>1</sup> It is decorated with traditional Chinese emblems of imperial authority and symbols of good fortune, arranged according to Chinese cosmological principles. Also called the dragon robe, the mythical dragon symbolising the emperor, who was often referred to as the True Dragon (*Zhen Long* 真龍), is the dominating motif. The robe is adorned with nine, five-clawed golden dragons twirling and soaring in a celestial realm of auspicious clouds and flaming pearls. Four dragons radiating from the neck, representing the principal directions of the universe, and four more dragons on the skirt – two at the front and two at the back – indicate the intervening or midway directions of the universe (drawing diagram no. 1). The ninth dragon, which is hidden, is on the inner flap of the gown.

The twelve traditional Chinese symbols of imperial sovereignty are arranged in three concentric circles and, for the first time, reserved exclusively for the ceremonial robes of the emperor. They are the symbols of cosmic power:

(1) the sun, (2) the moon, (3) a constellation of three stars (representing heaven), (4) the mountain (representing earth), (5) the axe and (6) *fu*, symbols of temporal power, (7) a pair of dragons, (8) a pheasant, representing control over the natural world, (9) a pair of bronze sacrificial cups (metal) holding a tiger and a monkey, (10) waterweed (water), (11) grain (wood) and (12) flame (fire) representing four of the five elements of the universe (drawing diagram no. 2).

There are also other auspicious symbols. Among them is the Chinese character *shou* 壽, meaning long life. The bat, a symbol of happiness, appears many times. The word 'bat' (*fu* 蝠) is a visual pun for the word 'happiness' (also pronounced *fu* 福). The bat is combined with peaches, which are symbols of longevity; and the rebus, meaning 'May you live long and be happy'.<sup>2</sup> The bat is also depicted with a swastika, which means *wan* 萬 in Chinese (ten thousand); the rebus means 'may you have the greatest joy'.

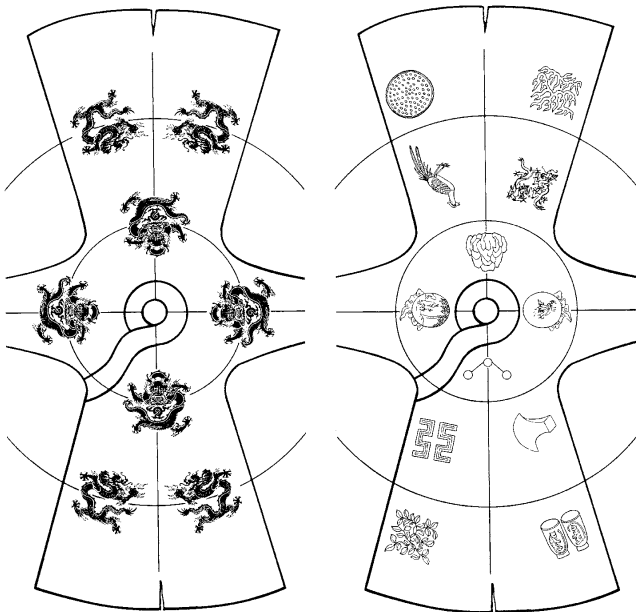
The cosmic sky is enclosed at the bottom of the garment by a sea of waves punctuated by geometric shapes that are evocative of mountain peaks (isles of immortals) and clouds. The mountains form the four cardinal points of the universe. Rising from the hemline of the robe are parallel sets of wave bands in rainbow colours called *lishui* 立水 (standing water). The *lishui* and wave patterns also appear near the elbows of the sleeves, and along with golden dragons in the border bands around the neck, the overlap and the cuffs.

Emerging from the waves are auspicious and precious objects, the eight Buddhist emblems of good fortune: (1) the canopy, a symbol of a monarch, who shelters all living things, (2) the conch shell, which symbolises the call to worship, (3) the sacred vase that holds the water of life (the vase, pronounced *ping* 瓶, is a rebus for peace, also pronounced *ping* 平), (4) the royal umbrella, a symbol of the incorruptible official, (5) the wheel of the law, the ever-turning cycle of the transmigration of souls, (6) the endless knot, or intestines, represents the everlasting love of Buddha and is a symbol of long life (*Chang* 腸, meaning intestine, is a visual pun on *chang* 長, meaning long and continuous, hence a long life, (7) the lotus flower, a symbol of purity, rises unblemished and unsullied through muddy water, (8) the pair of fish, symbols of abundance. Fish (*yu* 魚) is a rebus for abundance (*yu* 餘).

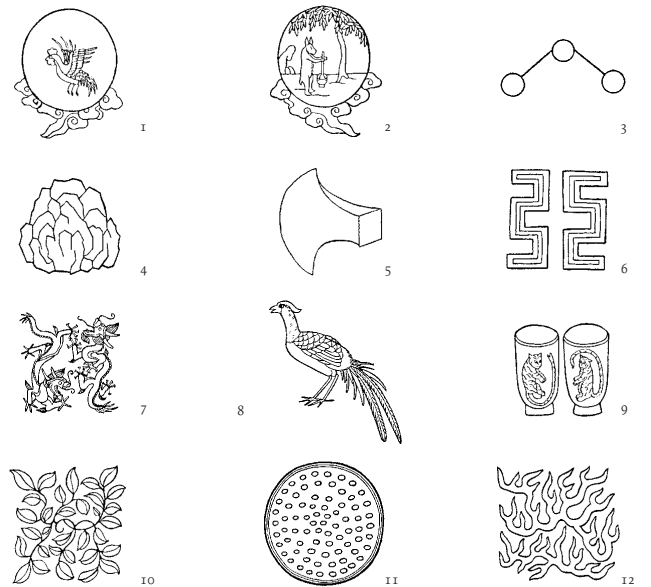
CHINESE  
Emperor's semi-formal court robe  
(*Jifu* 吉服) Qing dynasty 清朝  
(late 19th century), China  
silk, silk and metallic thread, gilt  
141.0 cm (centre back), 66.0 cm  
(sleeve length)  
Gift of Mr A. J. L. McDonnell, 1949  
(983-D4)

1. Silk is a delicate thread produced by a silk worm. It was discovered in China thousands of years ago. Archaeology has revealed the presence of silk from the third millennium BC. The art of sericulture, the cultivation of silk worms for the production of raw silk – a Chinese invention more than four thousand years ago, was attributed to the consort of the legendary Yellow emperor (c. 3000 BC), who one day saw a silk worm spitting fine threads. The secret of sericulture was a jealously guarded state secret until the fourth century, when knowledge of it spread through east and central Asia. In the sixth century silkworms were smuggled into Byzantium by monks who had hidden silkworm eggs in their hollow bamboo staffs.

2. Rebus is a mode of expressing words and phrases by pictures of objects.



(drawing diagram no. 1)



(drawing diagram no. 2)