

Jifu with dragon motifs, ca.
1890s. Toronto Metropolitan
University FRC2016.01.001.
Photograph by Victoria
Hopgood, 2018.



THE JOURNEY OF A CHINESE ROBE

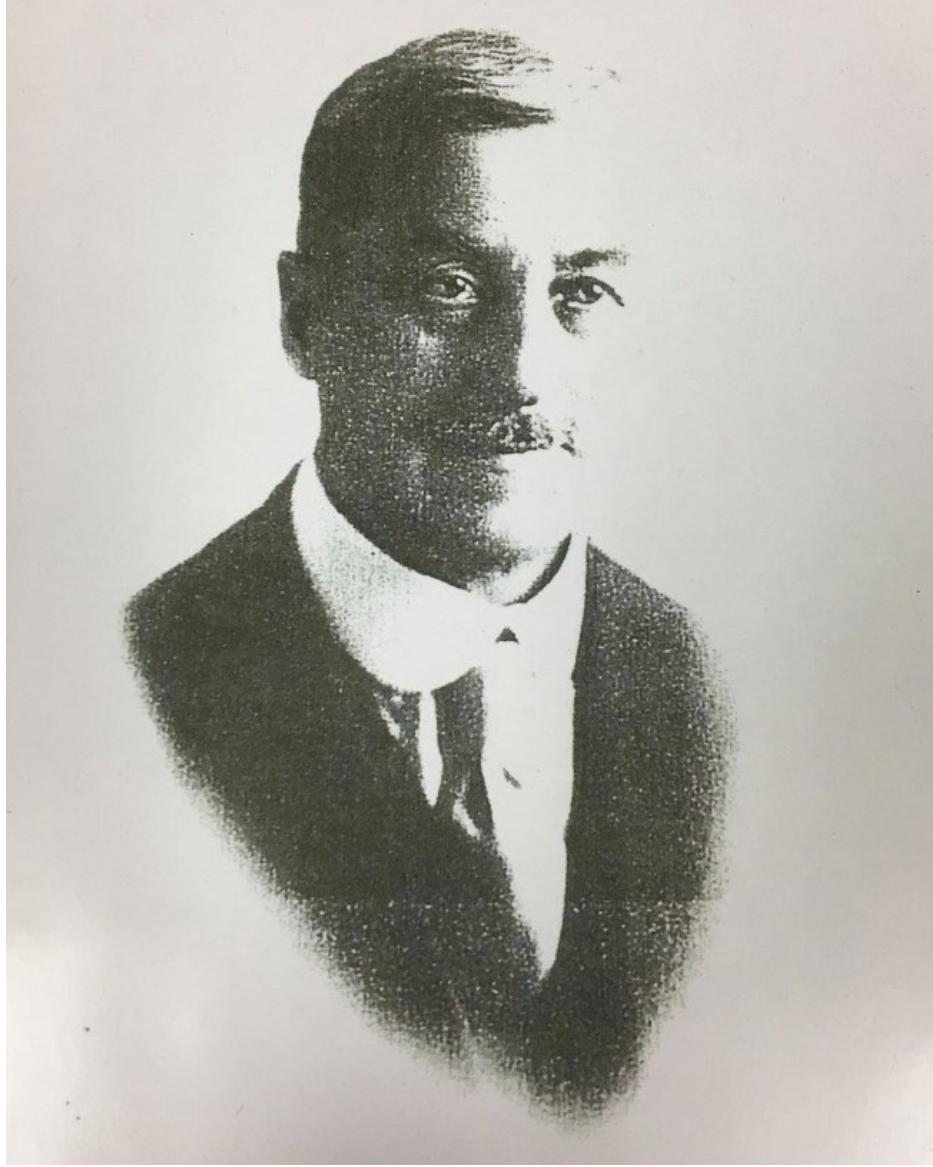
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PART ONE

Unlike Europe where a dragon is a representation of evil, dragons are a sacred symbol in Chinese culture as bringers of strength and good fortune. Dragons, although a mythical creature, are composites of real animals with "the trunk of a snake, scales of a carp, tail of a whale, antlers of a stag, face of a camel, talons of eagles, ears of bull, feet of a tiger, and the eyes of a lobster" (note 1). **Strategically placed dragons have been intricately woven into this traditional men's robe** (FRC2016.01.001 shown in the photo below) housed in Toronto Metropolitan University's Fashion Research Collection. It was the dragons on this robe as well as my Chinese heritage that led me to study this artifact.

Using the object-based research approach from *The Dress Detective* by Ingrid Mida and Alexandra Kim (note 2), I will write a series of four blog posts about this robe. In part I, I introduce the garment and the original owner. In Part II, I take a closer look at the construction of the garment and in Part III consider the symbolism. To conclude the series of posts in Part IV, I examine similar robes from the collection of the [Textile Museum of Canada](#).



Philip Brunelleschi
Cousland. Photo provided
by donor.

A robe, also known as a *jifu*, is a full-length garment worn to semi-formal occasions such as in court or serving the Manchu imperial government. A *jifu* was the official costume of the Chi'ing period (note 3).

This robe was dated to 1892 and 1903 based on extensive family history provided by the donor. **The original owner of the robe, Philip Brunelleschi Cousland, was born on July 12, 1861 in Glasgow, Scotland.** At the age of 21, he earned his Bachelor of Medicine and Doctor of Medicine from Edinburgh University (note 4).

As a member of the Barclay Church and the Medical Missionary Society, Philip travelled to the South of China where he lived in Swatow, now known as Shantou, for three years and worked in the local hospital to treat patients. Philip then travelled 30 miles up the river to Chao-Chow-Fu, a walled city with no doctors or hospitals intending to provide medical care. Philip received a very hostile reception as "foreign devils" had not been seen there before and although he was not allowed to preach, he earned the community's trust and treated up to 100 patients a day.



From left, top row: Philip and Clyde. Second row: Jessie, wife Susan and Kenneth. Photo provided by donor.

In 1892, Philip travelled home to Scotland. On his way back to China via Victoria, British Columbia, he met a missionary teacher named Susan Harrington. The two were married in Hong Kong in March 1893 and had three children.

The family lived in Chao-Chow-Fu, and land was purchased there to build a hospital in 1894. At first, many local people opposed this idea, but after rebuilding the walls which had been broken down three times, the Burns Memorial Hospital opened in March of 1896. **It was sometime thereafter, but before 1905, when he left China, that Philip received the robe and a number of related textiles as a gift in honour of his work in the community.**

In the subsequent years, Philip returned to China periodically to write medical textbooks. He also served for three years as the president of the Council on Publication of the China Medical Missionary Association and helped in the formation of the Nurses Association of China. **His work was acknowledged by the Chinese government with the Order of the Golden Sheaf.** Philip died on July 7, 1930 in Victoria, British Columbia.

Passed down through the family as a keepsake, this robe was donated to the Toronto Metropolitan University Fashion Research Collection in 2016 so that it may be examined and studied by students and visiting scholars. After a long journey of 12,378 km from Shantou to Toronto, this robe is now in its final resting place in FRC storage.



Toronto Metropolitan
University

Jifu with dragon motifs,
ca. 1890s. Toronto
Metropolitan University
FRC2016.01.001.
Neckline detail.
Photograph by Victoria
Hopgood, 2018.

NOTES

Note 1: Chinese dragon. (n.d.). Retrieved from http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Chinese_dragon

Note 2: Mida, I., & Kim, A. (2015). *The Dress Detective: A Practical Guide to Object-based Research in Fashion*. Bloomsbury Academic. Retrieved from <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.lib.ryerson.ca>

Note 3: Collections. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://collections.textilemuseum.ca/index.cfm?page=collection.detail&catId=10013&row=123>

Note 4: Written family history provided by the donor.



Jifu with dragon motifs,
ca. 1890s. Toronto
Metropolitan University
FRC2016.01.001.
Royal blue interfacing.
Photograph by Victoria
Hopgood, 2018.

PART TWO

In Part I of the series, I reviewed the history of Philip Brunelleschi Cousland, the original owner of the robe (FRC2016.01.001 shown in the photo below). **In this part, I will consider the structural and decorative elements of the garment using the Observation checklist from the Dress Detective** (note 1).

With a lining made of lilac silk, the outer shell of this robe is constructed of natural materials - heavy cotton, brocade and silk. There is also a layer of royal blue silk in between the outer and inner layers, as visible where the stitching has come undone underneath the armpit (see photo below). The body of the robe is ornamented in various symbolic motifs including dragons, clouds and mountains that will be discussed in more depth in Part III.

The robe is an asymmetrical design with the opening on the right side of the garment. The inner flap reaches from the right side seam to the center front and the over flap crosses over the body from the left to right. The main portion of the inner flap is made of the same heavy blue cotton used for most of the garment and there is a singular dragon motif a few inches up from the hem. The flap is slightly discoloured which is most likely due to rubbing against the lining of the over flap. The hem is a simple striped pattern with alternating shades of blue in sections about 0.25 inches/0.6 cm wide.

The over flap has a center front seam where the pattern of the fabric almost perfectly lines up. Whereas the back of the robe has a center back seam until 27.5 inches/70 cm down where the seam opens up into a slit. This would allow for flexibility in movement as the robe is full-length.



Jifu with dragon motifs,
ca. 1890s. Toronto
Metropolitan University
FRC2016.01.001. Pink
lining. Photograph by
Victoria Hopgood, 2018.

Made of lilac silk, the lining of the garment is in good condition. It has been delicately hand sewn on in increments of 3 small stitches and then a long stitch between 1 inch/2.5cm and 1.5 inch/4 cm in length underneath the fabric. The stitching has come undone underneath the armpit, exposing the royal blue silk interfacing. The hole is about 12 inches/30.5 cm long. Located slightly to the right of the center back seam are three dime-sized stains, along with some yellow discolouration around the neckline. This is most likely from perspiration. There is also some slight discolouration down the center back which was probably caused from friction. Around openings of the sleeves near the wrist, is also quite a bit of yellow staining.

Rather than a sleeve sewn into a sleeve hole, it has been cut as a part of the front and back pieces which are then folded at the shoulder and sewn down the sides. The sleeve, which is also lined in lilac silk and royal blue piping, features a section blue brocade with floral patterns on it that reaches 10.75 inches/27 cm up from the wrist opening. It is then accented with a 0.5 inch/1.25 cm band of royal blue fabric with gold threading. There is then a 3.5 inch/9 cm section of horizontal stripe motifs about 0.5 inch/1.25cm wide in different shades of blue, gold, green and beige. The same colours are used in the section of cloud motifs that follow.



Toronto Metropolitan
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Jifu with dragon motifs,
ca. 1890s. Toronto
Metropolitan University
FRC2016.01.001. Brass
closures. Photograph by
Victoria Hopgood, 2018.

The garment is fastened with 5 brass ball closures and an additional hidden closure similar to the others. The first brass ball closure sits horizontally at the center front on top of the band of royal blue trim. The next one is located 4.5 inches/11.5 cm down the edge of the over flap. The third closure sits diagonally underneath the armpit about 13 inches/33 cm away from the previous. 10.5 inches/27 cm down the side seam is the fourth closure and 5 inches/13 cm away from that is the fifth closure. These last two closures have been sewn on horizontally with the loop portion of it sewn onto the back of the side seam. The hidden closure is located vertically, 7.5 inches/20 cm from the fifth closure. This one is has a knot on the end rather than a brass ball.

The brass balls boast intricate detailing and are connected to the bodice with a 2 inch/5 cm piece of royal blue fabric, the same used for the neckline accents and piping. The other half of the closure is also made of the same fabric, but has been folded to create a loop for the ball to go through. The brass balls are all in excellent condition, with the exception of the gold thread fraying from the attaching fabric.

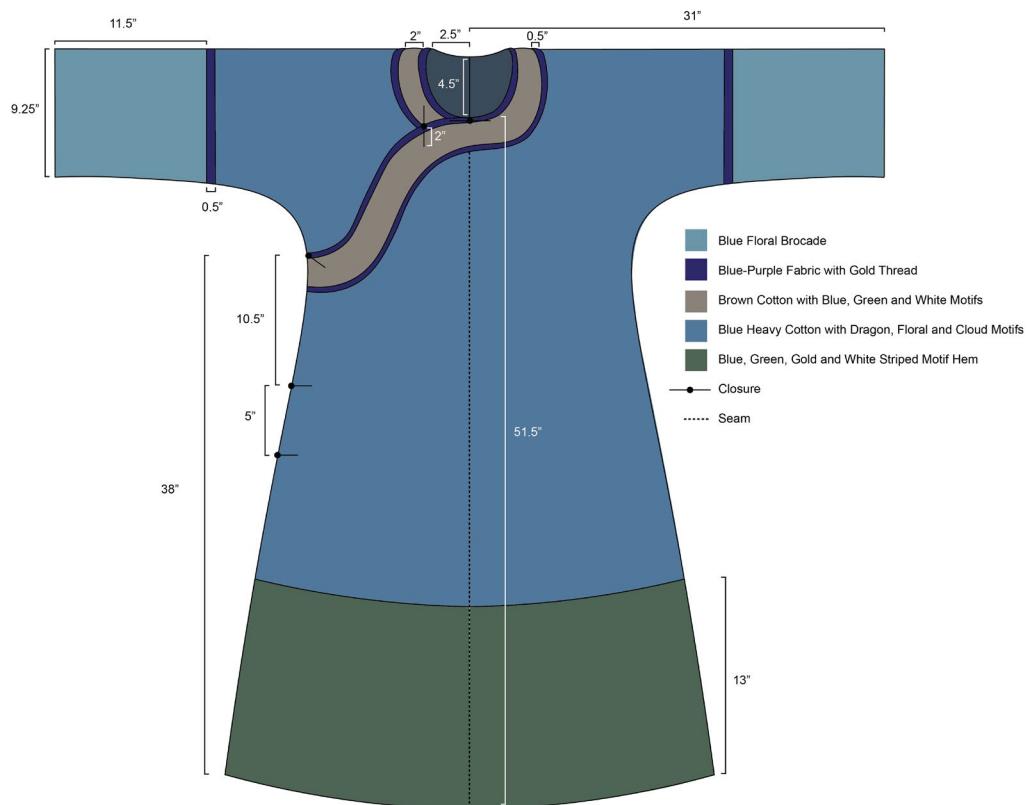


Illustration of jifu, front and back. Toronto Metropolitan University 2016.01.001. By Victoria Hopgood, 2018.



Toronto Metropolitan
University

Jifu with dragon motifs,
ca. 1890s. Toronto
Metropolitan University
FRC2016.01.001. Brass
closures. Photograph by
Victoria Hopgood, 2018.

The neckline of the robe is quite high and includes several decorative elements. Closest to the neck is a 0.5 inch/1.25 cm band of the royal blue coloured fabric with gold thread work. Next there is a 2 inch/5 cm section of brown cotton with green, blue and white motifs, followed by another 0.5 inch/1.25 cm band of royal blue fabric. This decorative section starts at the center front of the inner flap, wraps around the neckline, extends 3 inches/7.5 cm past the center front and then drops down, curving until it connects to the side opening. This gives the robe a unique asymmetrical shape.

The hem of the robe reaches 13 inches/33 cm up from the bottom of the garment and is made of a diagonal striped motif pattern. The stripes are about 0.0625 inch/0.15 cm wide, but the use of different shades of blue, green, gold and brown make it appear as though six individual stripes make up one larger gradient stripe. Above this is a section of cloud motifs about 2 inches/5 cm wide and then a section of overlapping wave patterns in different shades of blue. There is one single dime-sized rust-colour stain on the hem.



Toronto Metropolitan
University

Jifu with dragon motifs,
ca. 1890s. Toronto
Metropolitan University
FRC2016.01.001. Striped
hem detail. Photograph
by Victoria Hopgood,
2018.

For a robe that is over 100 years old, it is in excellent condition with the exception of slight fraying under the right armpit and minimal balling over the body of the garment. Consistent with garment construction of the time, the robe is both hand and machine-stitched. The seams, most are which are not visible, are machine-stitched. Whereas the lining and closures have been carefully sewn by hand. The garment is covered in different patterns and motifs each of which holds significant meaning, and in the next post, I will take a deeper look at the importance of these symbols.

NOTES

Note 1: Mida, I., & Kim, A. (2015). *The Dress Detective: A Practical Guide to Object-based Research in Fashion*. Bloomsbury Academic. Retrieved from <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.lib.ryerson.ca>



Jifu with dragon motifs,
ca. 1890s. Toronto
Metropolitan University
FRC2016.01.001.Bat,
peony, chrysanthemum
and crane. Photograph by
Victoria Hopgood, 2018.

PART THREE

Everywhere we look, symbols abound. **In historic dress originating from the Chinese culture, symbols on a robe can be read like words on a page.** In this post, I will continue my analysis of the robe that has been the focus on the last two blog posts (FRC2016.01.001). In this part, I will dive deeper in uncovering the meaning behind the symbols strategically placed on this robe.

In Chinese language, words are single syllables that can share pronunciations that are the same or similar to others. Thus, they can share the same meaning depending on the context of the phrase. This also applies to the symbols that decorate the robe. For example, the word *fu*, which is a bat, has the same pronunciation as “abundance” and “happiness”. Therefore, a bat represents happiness and long life. Numerous bats have been woven onto this robe (note 1).

Multiple floral elements are visible on this man’s robe including **peonies which symbolize prosperity and chrysanthemums which represent longevity** due to its health-giving properties (note 2). The **cranes also symbolize longevity** but in the way that it lives a long life (note 3).



Jifu with dragon motifs, ca. 1890s. Toronto Metropolitan University FRC2016.01.001. Parasol, vase, banner and lotus. Photograph by Victoria Hopgood, 2018.

Of the *Eight Auspicious Signs*, which are Buddhist symbols, the parasol, vase of great treasure, banner and lotus appear on the robe. The parasol protects from the obstacles of life; the vase represents the bringing of desired things and the fortune of a glorious life; the banner symbolizes victory, while the lotus frees one from the stains of mistakes (note 4).



Jifu with dragon motifs, ca. 1890s. Toronto Metropolitan University FRC2016.01.001. Pearl, coin, rhino horn and leaf. Photograph by Victoria Hopgood, 2018.

Four of the Eight Precious Things can be found of this robe including the pearl, coin, rhino horn and leaf. The pearl is associated with wish granting and the coin represents wealth. The horn embodies happiness and the leaf wishes good luck and prevents disease (note 5).



Jifu with dragon motifs, ca.
1890s. Toronto Metropolitan
University FRC2016.01.001.
Dragon on inner flap.
Photograph by Victoria
Hopgood, 2018.

The *Eight Auspicious Signs* and the *Eight Precious Things* are commonly mixed together. However, **they always appear in groups of eight as it is a lucky number in Chinese culture. This is because the pronunciation of eight sounds similar to the pronunciation of the word for fortune** (note 6).

As with many old things, the symbols have changed or been reimaged over time. Some sources call the symbol of two rectangles, books while others consider it bolts of silk or scrolls. One source considers a medicinal mushroom with a handle a symbol while the other considers a leaf instead. Since the motifs are so old, it is difficult to pinpoint exactly which ones are the original ones and which have been added subsequently.

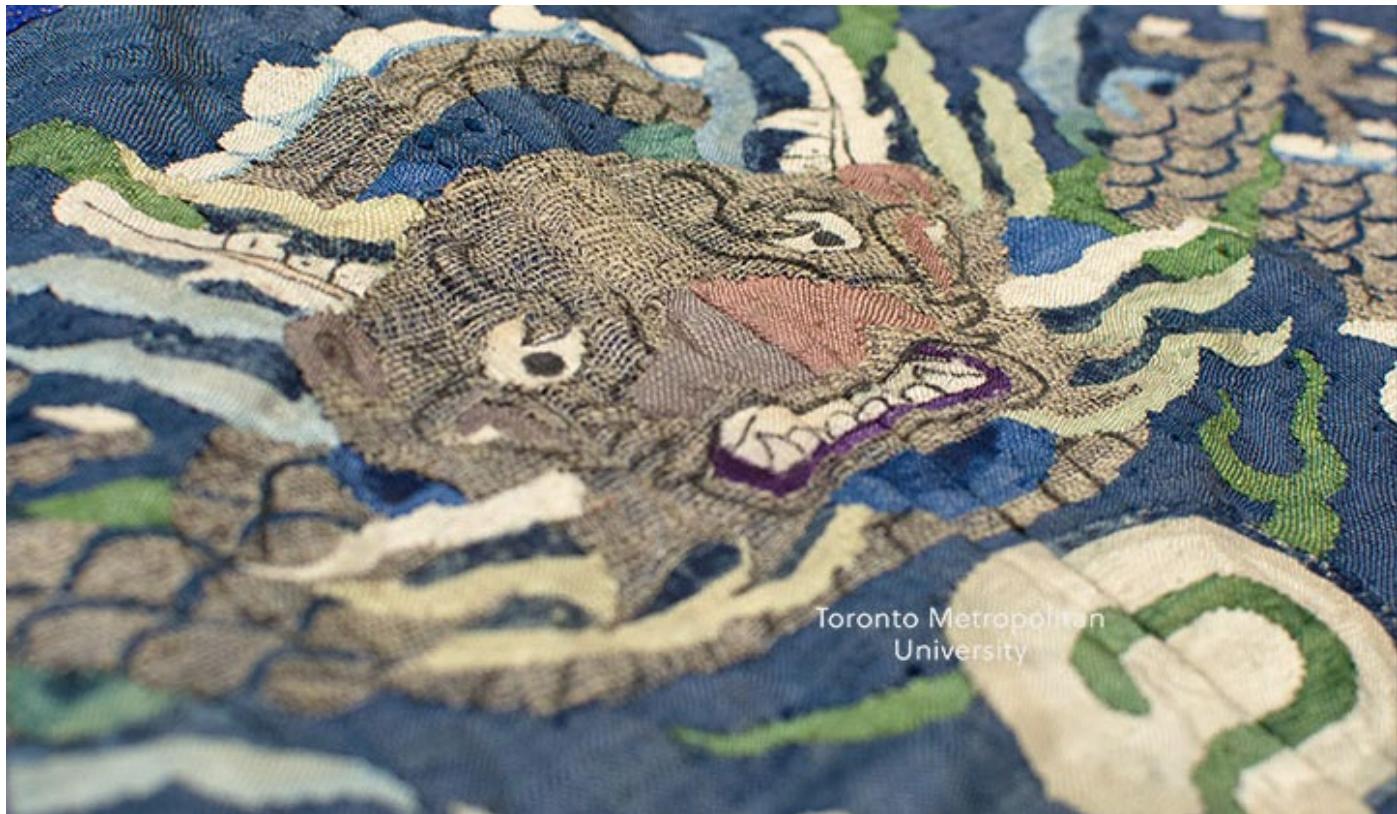
This robe is decorated with nine five-clawed dragons that have been strategically placed on the garment. Beginning in the 18th century, robes were designed with nine dragons. **Four are placed on the back, chest and shoulders around the neck.** And when “aligned with the axial organization of the Forbidden City”, each dragon points to a cardinal direction. **The other two dragons on the front and two on the back point to each intermediate direction. The single dragon located on the inner flap is the ninth.** This specific organization represents Confucius’ ancient ideal of land division called qingtien or “well-field system”. The idea of qingtien is derived from the wellhead character which is the intersection of two vertical lines and two horizontal lines – like a tic-tac-toe board. The outer eight fields protect the ninth and the fields that share a border with the center one implies the cardinal directions. This establishes “the harmonious balance implied by the wu xing system”. **In Chinese culture, the number nine symbolizes heaven and infinity and therefore the nine fields are represented here** (note 7).

During the Yuan dynasty, the five-clawed dragon became an emblem of the emperor. It was placed on all works the emperor used or represented. Robes of dragon patterns eventually became the official garment of the Chinese court and was the highest diplomatic gift. The robe may have been presented to Philip for his efforts and dedication to developing Chinese medicine (note 8).

The structure of the dragon robe represents the universe and is only complete when worn. The diagonal stripes on the hem and the semi-circular motifs embody the “universal ocean surrounding the earth”. **At the centre-front, centre-back and side seams the cardinal directions, there are geometric shapes which represents the mountains.** The main body filled with clouds and fire, is also decorated with dragons representing authority. When the robe is worn, the wearer supports the universe by becoming the earth’s axis. The neck opening is the gate of heaven while the head is heaven itself (note 9).

Every element on this robe has been created with thought and intent. Everything from the placement of the dragons to the structure of the robe holds some form of symbolism behind it. While I have uncovered a significant amount of meaning behind the robe, there is always more that might be revealed, since it is possible that the motifs have been reimagined or changed since the robe was created. In addition, depending on the artists who created the garment, the symbols may have been more abstract or different than the ones that I consulted. These two possibilities can make it difficult to determine each motif and its meaning in isolation.

With all the time, patience and thought that it would take to create such a detailed and exquisite garment it is no wonder why it required up to thirty months of work to make one robe. Although I could spend an infinite amount of time uncovering the symbolism behind this robe, the rest will have to remain a mystery.



Jifu with dragon motifs,
ca. 1890s. Toronto
Metropolitan University
FRC2016.01.001.
Five-clawed dragon.
Photograph by Victoria
Hopgood, 2018.

NOTES

Note 1: Vollmer, J. E. (2004). *Silks for thrones and altars: Chinese costumes and textiles*. Paris, France: Myrna Meyers.

Note 2: Kehoe, T. (2012, September 24). *Symbols in silk*. Retrieved from <http://www.museumtextiles.com/blog/symbols-in-silk>

Note 3: The British Museum. (n.d.). *Chinese symbols*. Retrieved from https://www.britishmuseum.org/pdf/Chinese_symbols_1109.pdf

Note 4: Rinpoche, L. Z. (2014, February 4). *The eight auspicious signs*. Retrieved from <https://fpmt.org/mandala/archives/mandala-for-2014/july/eight-auspicious-signs/>

Note 5: *Eight precious things*. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://gotheborg.com/glossary/eightpreciousthings.shtml>

Note 6: https://www.travelchinaguide.com/intro/social_customs/lucky_number.htm

Note 7: See note 1.

Note 8: Ibid.

Note 9: Ibid.



T88.0261. Photograph by Maciek Linowski. Courtesy of the Textile Museum of Canada.

PART FOUR

In ancient Chinese culture, a robe is a symbol of status depending on the colour, the quality and decorative elements of the garment. In order to compare the robe in the Toronto Metropolitan University Fashion Research Collection (FRC2016.01.001) to others in other collections, dress historian and curator, [Ingrid Mida](#) and I visited the [Textile Museum of Canada](#) to examine similar robes. In August 2018, we studied one robe that was similar in colour, rank and decoration ([T88.0261](#)), and another robe that once belonged to someone of much higher status ([T92.0276](#)). In the last blog post of this series, I will compare the two robes at the TMC to the one in the Toronto Metropolitan University collection and consider the use of symbolism and colour to represent rank.

The first robe (T88.0261) is quite similar to the one in Toronto Metropolitan University's collection (FRC2016.01.001) in that the colours are alike, the striped hem is identical, and there is even a stain in the same area on the lower front. However, the structure of the robe is slightly different. The sleeves are shorter and have a curved opening whereas FRC2016.01.001 does not have the same detail. The robe at the TMC has slits up the front and back of the garment, but the back one has been hand stitched closed. It is believed that front openings allowed for easier movement when horseback riding. The robe in the TMC has significant discolouration and staining implying that it was worn quite often. There is even a section in the left armpit that has been replaced with a different piece of fabric. It is probable that the area was repaired due to heavy wear.



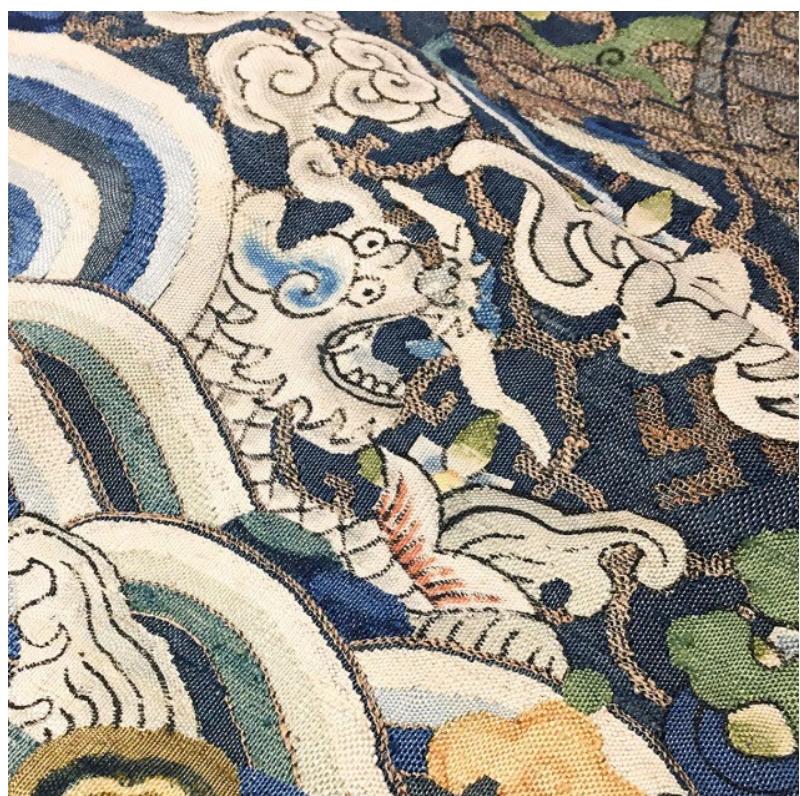
T88.0261. Detail of hem,
brass closure and sleeve.
Photograph by Victoria
Hopgood, 2018.

Nine dragons have been woven into the robe. The four dragons around the neckline point to each cardinal direction when aligned at a certain point in the Forbidden City. The two dragons on either side of the robe represent the intermediate directions and the dragon on the inside of the robe satisfies the “well-field system”. This idea is based on the wu xing system which is a harmonious balance represented by the nine dragons as fields (note 1).

Ingrid and I were able to find seven of the **Eight Precious Things** including the rhino horn (happiness), books (learning), medicinal mushroom with a handle (health and healing), coins (wealth), pearls (granting of wishes), leaf (good luck and disease prevention) and the open lozenge (victory). **The symbols always come in groups of eight since eight is a lucky number in Chinese culture** (note 2). However, after hours of searching, we were not able to find a motif that explicitly looked like the solid lozenge (unbroken conjugal happiness). Ingrid suggested maybe the diamond pattern in the background was representational of the solid lozenge as the pattern is continuous and never breaks. We decided that that was the most probable answer.

All eight of the Eight Auspicious Things have been woven into the robe. This once again, reinforces the idea that the garment belonged to someone of higher status. The parasol protects from the obstacles of life. The fish swim without fear or resistance from happiness. The vase brings the fortune of a glorious life. The lotus frees one from all the stains of mistakes. The conch shell accomplishes work for the benefit and happiness of themselves and others. The glorious peu supports others in one continuous connection. The banner symbolizes victory and the Wheel of Dharma represents the teachings of Buddha (note 3).

Aside from the *Eight Precious Things* and the *Eight Auspicious signs*, the robe is also covered in bats. As mentioned in the last post, **the word for bat has the same pronunciation as as abundance and happiness and therefore a bat represents a long life of happiness**. There are also peonies which represent prosperity, another symbol seen on the FRC robe as well. A new symbol that I have not seen before looks like it has the head of a dragon and the body of a fish. Unfortunately, I was not able to find any information of this creature.



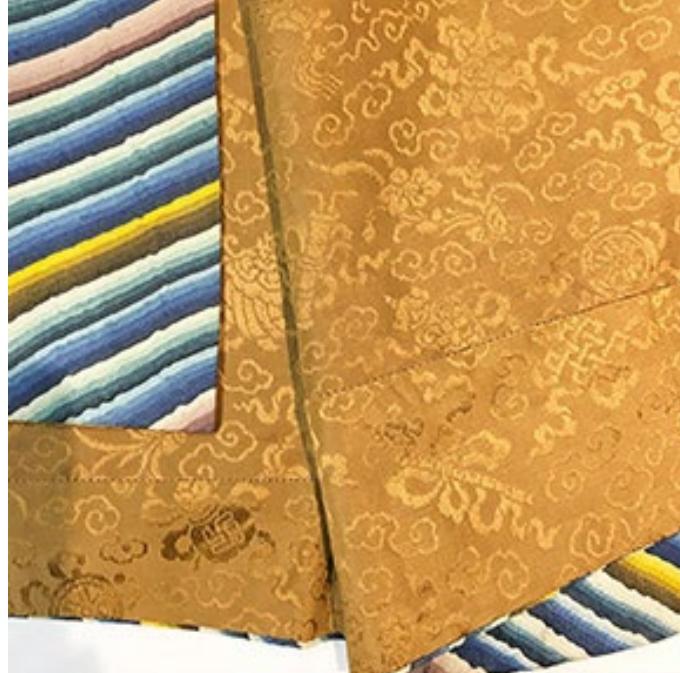
T88.0261. Fish, conch shell, glorious peau and dragon-fish creature. Photographs by Ingrid Mida and Victoria Hopgood, 2018.



T88.0261. Photograph by Maciek Linowsk, Courtesy of the Textile Museum of Canada.

The second robe (T92.0276) has all the same symbolic elements as the previous robe; all eight of the Precious Things and the Auspicious Signs, other floral elements and bats. However, **the key difference is in the quality of materials and degree of detail. The main aspect that sets this robe apart from the other one is the gold leaf threading** (note 4). Yellow reveals in itself that it was worn by someone of high rank as the colour "was reserved for monks and the Emperor" (note 5). More detail also went into the creation of the motifs such as the additional embroidering in the dragon eyes. Even the balls used for the closures are larger and more decorative.

The robe is in immaculate condition and has hardly any signs of wear. The sleeves are full length with a section of black brocade and additional detailing. The trim that lines the sleeves and neckline is more decorative than the other robes with yellow and black floral designs. Rather than a plain silk lining, a gold patterned brocade lines this robe with no slits on either front or back. **An aspect that is quite surprising is the misalignment of the fabric on the back. The patterns do not perfectly line up which is surprising for a garment of such quality and value.**



T92.0267. Detail of hem, lining, misaligned fabric and swastika. Photographs by Ingrid Mida, 2018.

The background pattern of both of the robes include swastikas. Before it ever had any negative connotations associated with it, the swastika was a symbol used in Buddhism, Hinduism and Jainism. In Buddhist culture, the swastika symbolizes auspiciousness and eternity and is often used on maps to locate a temple (note 6).

After days of research and hunting for symbols on these robes, I have learned that nothing is ever as it seems. A geometric shape may represent mountains or the placement of dragons can hold a very significant meaning. Even the colour of a garment can separate the Emperor from his court officials. In conclusion, these robes tell us about the beliefs and values of people in China from more than a hundred years ago. These garments can help us understand the traditions and lives of people from another culture. And finally, it can provide a very unique and captivating story.

NOTES

Note 1: Vollmer, J. E. (2004). *Silks for thrones and altars: Chinese costumes and textiles*. Paris, France: Myrna Meyers.

Note 2: Kozakand, R. (2017, September 4). *Dragon robes of the qing dynasty*. Retrieved from <http://folkcostume.blogspot.com/2017/09/>

Note 3: Rinpoche, L. Z. (2014, February 4). *The eight auspicious signs*. Retrieved from <https://fpmt.org/mandala/archives/mandala-for-2014/july/eight-auspicious-signs/>

Note 4: Information provided by Textile Museum Collection.

Note 5: Daveno, H. (2016, October 2). *The stitchery series: part iv - symbolism in chinese embroidery*. Retrieved from http://www.augustphoenix.com/The-Stitchery-Series-Part-IV-Symbolism-in-Chinese-Embroidery_b_70.html

Note 6: Swastika. (2016, April 4). Retrieved from <http://www.chinabuddhismencyclopedia.com/en/index.php?title=Swastika>

This post was edited by Ingrid Mida.

A special note of thanks goes to Roxane Shaughnessy, Senior Curator, Manager of Collection, and her staff at the Textile Museum of Canada for providing us with access to these beautiful robes.