

Ethnic Cultures of China

CHINA'S MINORITY COSTUMES

By Xing Li



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Preface

Costume is the crystal of human wisdom as well as fruits out of their labor. During human being's long process of evolution and development, minority costumes in China also have had their own changes and development, becoming the cultural symbol for China's 56 nationalities by decorating their living world.

Costume is a visual language and window for civilization. Minority costumes in China are rich in ornaments and beautiful in color. Some are long while others are short; some are simple while others are complicated. But as a whole, there is a difference between north robes and south skirts. The northern nomadic people living in the Mongolian Tableland, the Tibetan Tableland and Xinjiang Basin grassland, or the nationalities that have had the life of nomadism and hunting, have chosen their production and living ways belonging to the herding and hunting civilizations as a reason of their living space in the north of the Great Wall for a long time with freezing cold tablelands, deserts, forests and grasslands, such as the Mongols, Tibetan, Ewenki, Oroqen, Manchu, Kazakh, and etc. They wear robes and boots, which become the symbol for horse-riding nationalities. The minorities in the south living on rice economy are known for their skirts. Even the landforms vary in China's south central, south-west and south-east, as most of the regions have a warm, humid and rainy climate, the minorities living in these regions choose rice planting as their living method, such as Tong, Miao, Lisu, Buyi, Pumi, De'ang, Dai, Zhuang and Gaoshan, with their costumes suitable for their daily life in the style, quality or color. Each nationality's costume is its self-identification. Skirts are popular in the southern minorities, whereas the style, color and design vary greatly from each other. Dai's tube skirts, short skirts in Hani and Jinuo, and skirts called "Bafuluoqun" in Va and Tujia have all become kinds of decorations and signs distinguishing themselves from others. The women of Shui make an even more outstanding difference from others by putting on skirts outside their long pants.

Costume is a silent language, the pattern and color expressed is a nationality's history and cultural tradition, as well the nationality's profoundly collective memory of history. Each ethic group has come through lengthy original gens

society without a record by words. Academe holds that totems are clannish material signs. Where can we find the ancient past. The butterfly-mother pictures on Miao's costume record their ancestors' thoughts on how human beings originate; the frog design at the link-stitch of the strap of the seven-star shawl used by Naxi women records their ancestors' long history of worshiping frogs; people in Yao Nationality wear "five-color clothes" which are trimmed with five colors, with the slightly turn-up headbands, indicate that their ancestors have created the Panhu mythology.

Costume tells us history and embodies a nationality ethos. The leather clothes and boots by Mongols manifest horseback nationality's traditional vigor and their magnanimous character; the colorful costumes together with the fabulous designs on them worn by Tibetan represent their flexible and energetic verse in the snowy tableland; Miao's costume has recorded their constant migration history, reflecting their hanging-on ethos; Dong's costume is also a systematic culture denotation, represented by its rich-in-ornament festival finery, is a collection of their civilization, as well as the embodiment of their cultural spirit.

Chinese ethnic minority costume is the collective aesthetics crystal. From every aspect of the quality, weaving, color, patterns, facture and decoration, each shows its vivid folk features, full-bodied regional characteristics and unique aesthetic spice. Qiapan worn by Uyghurs and Kazakh shows a comfortably stylish beauty, the tube skirts worn by Va and Li have a slender beauty. Costumes by Hui and Salar who believe in Islam have the beauty of simplicity. Pullovers in southern ethnic groups have the beauty of ancient simplicity and peaceful harmony.

Costume of ethnic minorities is the gallery of beauty rich in ornaments. The beauty is performed when the clothes are put on, and beyond this single body beauty, it is a colony beauty, a collective aesthetic crystal from each ethnic minority. The costume is a heritage in devolution through bodies generation by generation, vividly revealing its historical meaning, its beauty value and different life styles.



MINORITY COSTUMES IN NORTH EASTERN REGIONS AND CHAPTER I THE INNER MONGOLIAN REGION



Created by man, costume is an expression of specific existence condition for a specific group of people. The grasslands, deserts and the mountains supply a vast space for a freely gallop for China's northern ethnic minorities; a tradition of life style of residing by following the water and grass makes the nomad costume strikingly different from the one by southern ethnic minorities.

"Costume is a window of civilization, clothes are images of thoughts. Costume is the performance of ethos as well as a token of social system." Costume for northern minorities is an expression of their living culture and civilization process, as well as an integrated embodiment of the ethos. Accompanying their living environment and life style, their costume carries the northern ethnic groups' grandeur and majesty and records the footprints of generation by generation.

I. Mongolian Costumes

In the vastly crescent tableland region in the north, there are fertile grassland as well as boundless desert. Mongols have been living there on herding for generations. The unique natural landscape, the long history and the unique life style leave lively marks on their costume.

Nomadic life cannot last without horse-riding. Adaptive to the life of herding and hunting on horsebacks in the icy cold weather, men and women all like to wear long robes: leather robes in winter and jacket robes in spring and autumn. There are many kinds of robes. Concerning Mongols robes, there are open-crotched long robes and non-crotched long robes, long robes with hoof sleeves and that without hoof sleeves, wide-lap robes and narrow-lap robes.

Open-crotched robes are Mongols robes open at each side, popular in Chahar and Erdos regions, with satin, oak silk or brocade trimmed on the lappets, collar basin, collar edge, cuffs and lap edge. Compared with open-crotched robes, non-crotched robes are quite big and loose. Mongols in Ujimqin and Buriat (a few live in Northeast China) wear non-kaichar robes. Robes worn by women are styled like skirts, with lots of pleats and with a partition technique on the parts of elbows, shoulders and waistlines. This unique technique has been continued is said to remember one of their national queen.

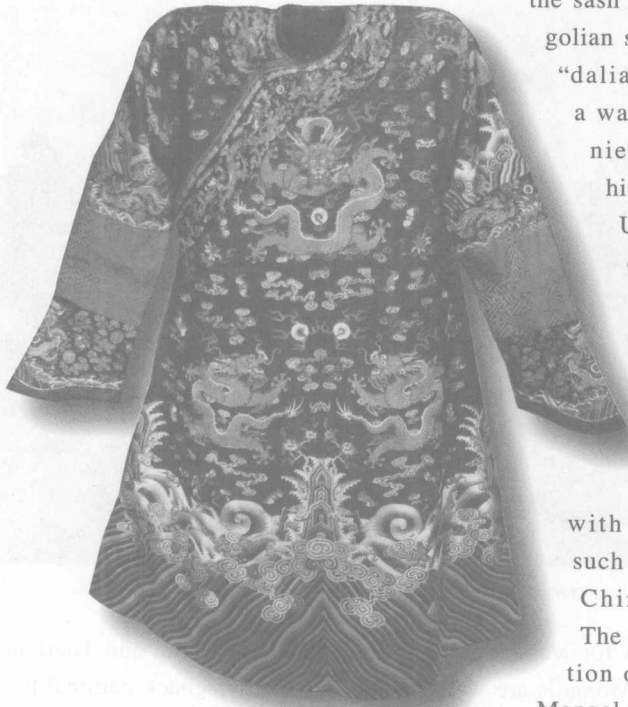
The feature of hoof-sleeve robes is that the cuffs are turned back, with the shape of hoofs and are quite loose. The hoof-sleeves for herdsmen are bigger



The costume worn in time of receiving guests by the Buriat Mongolians in the northeast China.

than those of the robes for women and children. Robes in Barag and Tuerhute all have hoof-sleeves. Mongols are well known for “the horseback nationality”, horses are their transportation tools, companions in their life, especially on the bloody battlefronts. Mongolian proverbs say, “If you cannot ride a horse, you are not Mongol.” The important position of horses in their daily life affects their aesthetic view, and the hoof-sleeves on the robes are a reflection of their aesthetic view on costume. For the robes without hoof-sleeves, the cuffs will not be folded up, but there is a difference of width and narrowness. Women in eastern Horqin and Kalaqin wear robes without hoof-sleeves.

Mongol men and women both wear robes, with more features in the men’s. concerning color, the young men like materials in indigo, gem-blue, tan and light brown; middle-aged and old men prefer colors in deep brown, deep blue, deep purple and deep green. On ornaments, robes worn by men are simple and in good taste with two to three finger-wide edge. Mongol robes must all matched with sashes, which are extremely important for Mongol herds, as they can both prevent against cold and facilitate activities on horsebacks. The sash has a length of 660 cm and is wider for men. A Mongol wearing the robe usually inserts into



The dragon robe of Mongolian princess of Qing Dynasty.

the sash his tobacco bag, Mongolian sword, fire pricker and “dalian”, the long placket, a way of bringing convenience and incarnating his magnanimous bosom. Usually there are auspicious silver or bronze buttons on the robes, some with color strings. There are many kinds of silver or bronze buttons ornamented with auspicious patterns such as fire, cloud and the Chinese character “萬”. The fire pattern is a reflection of worshiping fire by Mongol who started this custom back in the primitive society.

They call fire as “Fire Mother”,

meaning that fire is the origin of life in their collective consciousness. Herding and raising livestock in the field, they are accompanied by blue sky and white cloud; the cloud pattern on their garments is a cultural memory of their daily life. The pattern of “萬” is an auspicious symbol of chasing harmony.

As residing in the icy cold area, the northern nomads in the winter have to wear trousers. In his *On Nomad Garments*, Wangguowei says, “We cannot find in the ancient clothing the custom of wearing short coats with trousers. Even for the lingerie, there were underwear in the past...but outside must be skirts; as covered by long upper coating, the underwear could not be seen outside. Wearing trousers started with the pleat clothing which is actually a custom for the horse-back nomad.” This shows that Han nationality wear trousers which becomes men’s regular dressing comes from the nomads. Because of the cold weather the nomads wear trousers. Their traditional leather trousers are smoked leather trou-

sers, “diaomian” leather trousers, smoked and hair-removed leather trousers, and so on.

Festival costumes are the most characteristic ones for Mongolian nationality. Naadam is the Mongolian grand festival. During Naadam every year, three races called “three skills for men”, e.g. horse-racing, wrestling and archery will be held. All the competitors will put on special costumes, among them, the costume for wrestlers is most featured. These wrestlers wear a kind of sleeveless jacket made out of cow leather, deer skin and camel skin, on it with rimmed bundles, also called bubbled nails, which are made out of bronze or silver, with the function of facilitating each other grabbing the opposite tightly. They are all kinds of auspicious designs on the back of the jackets, some of them with Mongolian words, showing their self-identity. The wrestlers wear large-croched trousers, which are folded up by a piece of 10.5 m white cloth, with an average waistline of three to four meters. These kinds of trousers are comfortably loose, easily tucked into the boots. At the same time exhibiting the wrestlers’ valiant posture, they have the function of concealing skills and protecting the body. The designs



Costume for Mongolian wrestlers



Mongolian festival costumes in Xilin Gol League.

on these trousers are rich and beautiful in ornament; some of them are embroidered using colorful thread with dragons, phoenixes, tigers, elephants etc., some of them have the design of fire. There is even the design of “two-dragon-playing-with-the-bead” found in modern times. All these designs are a reflection of the cultural mentality of advocating bravery and power, which are also reflecting this grassland nationalThe nomad costume has a preference bright color, such as colors in red, yellow, green, blue, and especially white. Different from minorities in the southern west, they particularly dislike black color. This idea is related to Shamanism belief which worships the heaven and states that human being’s color sense is brought about by worshiping the heaven’s color. In the ancient times Mongols called Spring Festival as White Festival. They deeply believe that white color is a symbol of sanctity, auspiciousness, longevity and virtue. Whether for the



Mongolian festival costumes in Qinghai.

ordinary life or for festival and marriage occasions, costumes for Mongolian women mainly have colors in pink red, bright red, sky blue and white; costumes for men are purple, brown, blue and other bright colors. This is different from costumes in other regions. Beautiful patterns are embroidered on the lappets and cuffs, with the patterns of flowers and herbs occupying a big ratio. This unique feature materializes their deep love for life. Vast sky, boundless grassland, white felt houses, wandering sheep, the grand and majestic living style forms their aesthetic mind towards clothing. Wearing robes large in size and bright in color is a need for their living style of residing by following the water and grass; the thick and large robes help them resist the cold in the tableland, facilitate them galloping between blue sky and green grass.

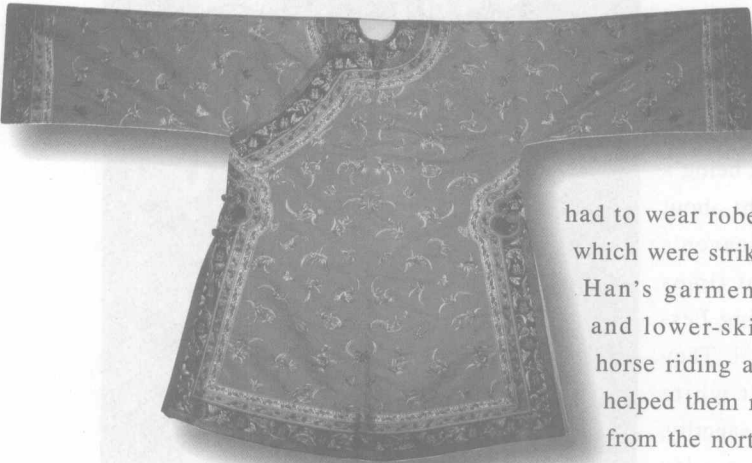
II. Manchu's Cheongsam and Korean Costumes

Manchu's Cheongsam

The land between the beautiful white mountains and the dark waters in China's northern east is where Manchu live. Manchu has a long history. The earliest

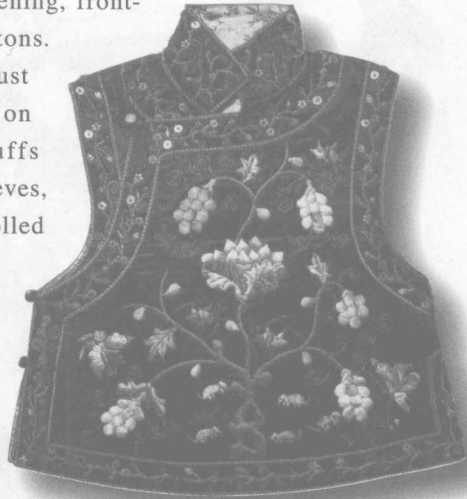
record was in Shang Dynasty. In the ancient times, hunting with archery demanded that men and women

had to wear robes with hoof-sleeves, which were strikingly different from Han's garments with upper-coat and lower-skirts, convenient for horse riding and field-hunting and helped them resist snow and wind from the north eastern plain. Men wear cheongsam which has round



Embroidered jacket of Manchu women.

collar, narrow sleeves, twisted opening, front-left, vents on four sides with buttons. The design of four-side vents is just for the convenience of hunting on horsebacks. Crescent-shaped cuffs are connected with the narrow sleeves, called hoof-sleeves, are usually rolled up but let down when hunting in winter or at war times to keep hands warm. Manchu people like to put outside the cheongsam a front-opening short gown with or without sleeves which is called a “magua”(horse gown) or “majia”(horse jacket), with a round collar, a front opening, vents and buttons. According to Manchu



Embroidered sleeveless jacket of Manchu women.

customs, the horse gown has a length reaching to the navel, with sleeves as long as to the elbows and vents at our sides. The reason for its name is that it has the feature of short body and sleeves, suitable to put it on outside the long robe in winter without hindering hunting on horsebacks and at same time helping keeping warm. As sleeveless jackets are convenient to wear and have protecting and decorating functions, Manchu people all like wearing them. The sleeveless jackets' designs vary, such as front opening, big opening, pipa opening, horizontal opening and “batulu” sleeveless jacket, etc.

Manchu are called “archery people”, hunting endows them with a colorful life. Patterns of animals and plants become their costume's ornaments. They worship nature. This religious affection is shown in their costume's patterns and ornaments, which are undergoing continuous change and development, becoming a charming flower in the China's ethnic minority costume.

Cheongsam worn by Manchu women is unique and has affected broadly and profoundly China's nationality costume. At the very beginning, cheongsam worn by Manchu women was wide-wasted straight-up, without hoof-sleeves, cuffs are flat and quite large, collar opening is low; a scarf is used if without collar. When Manchu entered inside the “Gate” in the 17th century, cheongsam's mode



Costume of Manchu young girls for ancestor worship.

changed greatly; most of them were designed as wide robes with large sleeves, without an opening or only with two openings at the bottom, various flower patterns are studded on the collar opening, lappet and the cuffs. The famous “eighteen inlays” appeared at the end Qing Dynasty, meaning that it can only called beauty when eighteen inlays have been applied. The pattern of dancing butterflies is frequently used in cheongsam, delivering their love for life and nature. Times are changing, so does the style of cheongsam; the original wide-waisted straight-up mode has been gradually changed into the present day’s cheongsam with clear and natural line, suiting the body, with high collar and pinching waist.

Cheongsam is a kind of garment connecting both a coat and a skirt, and is the costume displaying female’s body beauty; with its simple but smooth lines, full of flexibility and vigor, it flourishes up to the contemporary times, and is adored by many nationalities in China.

Traditional Costumes for Korean

Korean is a nationality with long history and is rich is culture, famous for their songs and dances, with people mainly residing around Changbai Mountain