

Published in association with the exhibition Celestial silks:
Chinese religious & court textiles
31 July – 24 October 2004

Art Gallery of New South Wales Art Gallery Road, The Domain Sydney, Australia www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au

Design Analiese Cairis
Editing Jennifer Blunden
Photography Jenni Carter, AGNSW
Production Catherine Ferrari, AGNSW
Pre-press Spitting Image, Sydney
Print Australian Book Connection

© 2004 Art Gallery of New South Wales 'Ming festival textiles' essay © Jacqueline Simcox

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or any other information storage and retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publisher.



Celebrating Asian Art and Culture

National Library of Australia cataloguing-in-publication data

Rutherford, Judith.

Celestial silks: Chinese religious & court textiles / Judith Rutherford & Jackie Menzies.
Includes bibliographical references

ISBN: 0.7347 6357 3

Costume-China-Exhibitions.
 Textile fabrics-China-Exhibitions.
 Menzies, Jackie, II. Art Gallery of New South Wales. III. Title.

746.0951

Details

Cover: front detail cat no 24 back detail cat no 68 front flap detail cat no 34 back flap detail cat no 11

- p 4 detail cat no 9
- p 7 detail cat no 14
- p 72 detail cat no 40
- p 73 detail cat no 45
- p 111 detail cat no 26
- p 114 detail cat no 42
- p 115 detail cat no 44

CONTRIBUTORS

Diana Collins has lived in Hong Kong for the past 25 years, where she has preserved Chinese and Southeast Asian textiles in her private textile conservation practice. In 1993 she founded the Textile Society of Hong Kong and in 1995 initiated and coordinated Hong Kong's first international conference on Chinese textiles. She has contributed to several publications on Chinese textiles and is a member of the Advisory Board for the Suzhou Silk Museum.

Jackie Menzies is head curator of Asian Art at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. She was appointed as the gallery's first curator of Asian Art in 1980, and has since authored many publications and curated or co-curated numerous exhibitions, including Buddha: radiant awakening in 2001. She has also been involved in two major expansions of the Asian collections and galleries. Menzies has a master's degree in Oriental studies from the University of Sydney.

Judith Rutherford is a specialist in the field of Chinese textiles from the Ming and Qing dynasties. She is president of the Asian Arts Society of Australia (TAASA) and founded the Textile Study Group of TAASA in 1994. She has lectured extensively in Australia, Hong Kong, Korea and New York on various aspects of Chinese costume, symbolism and rank insignia and has contributed articles to many journals both in Australia and internationally.

Ken Rutherford, an engineer by profession and Sinologist by choice,

has been collecting and researching Chinese hats and hat finials for the past 20 years. He has lectured in Sydney and New York on the development of hats and hat finials as indicators of rank with a special focus on the use of hat finials during the Qing dynasty.

Jacqueline Simcox is a Londonbased fine art dealer specialising in Chinese antique textiles. She exhibits regularly at a number of fairs and lectures to museums and societies in Britain and abroad. Simcox studied western art and literature at Leeds University and afterwards joined the Chinese department of Spink & Son Ltd, fine art dealers in London, where she was able to study an exceptional number of Ming and earlier examples. From the late 1970s her interest in Chinese textiles grew as unusual examples came to the Western market.

Zhao Feng, deputy director of the National Silk Museum in Hangzhou, obtained his first degree in engineering at the Zhejiang Institute of Silk Textiles in Hangzhou in 1982, and his master's degree in the history of textiles at the same institute in 1984. He was appointed professor there in 1996, and obtained his doctorate in the history of textile technology at the China Textile University in Shanghai in 1997. Zhao has published over 100 research articles and was awarded the Sylvan and Pamela Coleman Fellowship by the Metropolitan Museum of Art. New York, in 1997-98 and the Veronika Gervers Memorial Fellowship by the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, in 1999-2000.

CELESTIAL SILKS CHINESE BELIGIOUS & COURT TEXTILES



JUDITH RUTHERFORD & JACKIE MENZIES

Foreword 6 Lenders to the exhibition 6

INTRODUCTION

Divine inspiration: silk and the culture of Chinese embroidery Diana Collins 9
Ancient treasures: silk robes from the 6th century Zhao Feng 16

HEAVENLY THREADS

RELIGIOUS TEXTILES

Buddhist textiles Jackie Menzies 21 Daoist textiles Jackie Menzies 50

THE REALM OF THE DRAGON

COURT TEXTILES

Court robes Judith Rutherford 59
Ming festival badges Jacqueline Simcox 74
Indicators of rank from Imperial China Judith Rutherford 83
Hats and hat finials Ken Rutherford 90
Uncut textiles: constructing dragon robes Judith Rutherford 94

List of works 112
Rank regulations 116
Chronology & symbols 117
Notes to entries 118
Bibliography 118

CELESTIAL SILKS

CHINESE RELIGIOUS & COURT TEXTILES

此为试读,需要完整PDF请访问: www.ertongbook.com

Published in association with the exhibition Celestial silks:

Chinese religious & court textiles 31 July - 24 October 2004

Art Gallery of New South Wales Art Gallery Road, The Domain Sydney, Australia www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au

Design Analiese Cairis
Editing Jennifer Blunden
Photography Jenni Carter, AGNSW
Production Catherine Ferrari, AGNSW
Pre-press Spitting Image, Sydney
Print Australian Book Connection

© 2004 Art Gallery of New South Wales 'Ming festival textiles' essay © Jacqueline Simcox

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or any other information storage and retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publisher.



Celebrating Asian Art and Culture

National Library of Australia cataloguing-in-publication data:

Rutherford, Judith.

Celestial silks: Chinese religious & court textiles / Judith Rutherford & Jackie Menzies.
Includes bibliographical references

ISBN: 0 7347 6357 3

Costume-China-Exhibitions.
 Textile fabrics-China-Exhibitions.
 Menzies, Jackie, II. Art Gallery of New South Wales. III. Title.

746.0951

Details Cover: front detail cat no 24 back detail cat no 68

front flap detail cat no 34

back flap detail cat no 11

p 4 detail cat no 9 p 7 detail cat no 14 p 72 detail cat no 40 p 73 detail cat no 45 p 111 detail cat no 26 p 114 detail cat no 42

p 115 detail cat no 44

CONTRIBUTORS

Diana Collins has lived in Hong Kong for the past 25 years, where she has preserved Chinese and Southeast Asian textiles in her private textile conservation practice. In 1993 she founded the Textile Society of Hong Kong and in 1995 initiated and coordinated Hong Kong's first international conference on Chinese textiles. She has contributed to several publications on Chinese textiles and is

the Suzhou Silk Museum.

Jackie Menzies is head curator of Asian Art at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. She was appointed as the gallery's first curator of Asian Art in 1980, and has since authored many publications and curated or co-curated numerous exhibitions, including Buddha: radiant awakening in 2001. She has also been involved in two major expansions of the Asian collections and galleries. Menzies has a master's degree in Oriental studies from the University of Sydney.

a member of the Advisory Board for

Judith Rutherford is a specialist in the field of Chinese textiles from the Ming and Qing dynasties. She is president of the Asian Arts Society of Australia (TAASA) and founded the Textile Study Group of TAASA in 1994. She has lectured extensively in Australia, Hong Kong, Korea and New York on various aspects of Chinese costume, symbolism and rank insignia and has contributed articles to many journals both in Australia and internationally.

Ken Rutherford, an engineer by profession and Sinologist by choice,

has been collecting and researching Chinese hats and hat finials for the past 20 years. He has lectured in Sydney and New York on the development of hats and hat finials as indicators of rank with a special focus on the use of hat finials during the Qing dynasty.

Jacqueline Simcox is a Londonbased fine art dealer specialising in Chinese antique textiles. She exhibits regularly at a number of fairs and lectures to museums and societies in Britain and abroad. Simcox studied western art and literature at Leeds University and afterwards joined the Chinese department of Spink & Son Ltd, fine art dealers in London, where she was able to study an exceptional number of Ming and earlier examples. From the late 1970s her interest in Chinese textiles grew as unusual examples came to the Western market.

Zhao Feng, deputy director of the National Silk Museum in Hangzhou, obtained his first degree in engineering at the Zhejiang Institute of Silk Textiles in Hangzhou in 1982, and his master's degree in the history of textiles at the same institute in 1984. He was appointed professor there in 1996. and obtained his doctorate in the history of textile technology at the China Textile University in Shanghai in 1997. Zhao has published over 100 research articles and was awarded the Sylvan and Pamela Coleman Fellowship by the Metropolitan Museum of Art. New York, in 1997-98 and the Veronika Gervers Memorial Fellowship by the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, in 1999-2000.

CELESTIAL SILKS CHINESE BELIGIOUS & COURT TEXTILES



JUDITH RUTHERFORD & JACKIE MENZIES



Foreword 6 Lenders to the exhibition 6

INTRODUCTION

Divine inspiration: silk and the culture of Chinese embroidery Diana Collins 9
Ancient treasures: silk robes from the 6th century Zhao Feng 16

HEAVENLY THREADS

RELIGIOUS TEXTILES

Buddhist textiles Jackie Menzies 21 Daoist textiles Jackie Menzies 50

THE REALM OF THE DRAGON

COURT TEXTILES

Court robes Judith Rutherford 59
Ming festival badges Jacqueline Simcox 74
Indicators of rank from Imperial China Judith Rutherford 83
Hats and hat finials Ken Rutherford 90
Uncut textiles: constructing dragon robes Judith Rutherford 94

List of works 112 Rank regulations 116 Chronology & symbols 117 Notes to entries 118 Bibliography 118

FOREWORD

This is a spectacular exhibition of a seldom seen aspect of the arts of China, which is perhaps strange bearing in mind that it was silk which gave its name to the exotic and fabled Silk Roads, and the word 'seres' (silk) was the name by which the Chinese were known at the time of those first tentative contacts through trade between the classical world of the Eastern Mediterranean and far-distant China some 2000 years ago. No single product better evokes the image and essence of China than silk. The works in this exhibition, varying from extraordinarily rich imperial dragon and Daoist robes to temple hangings and hierarchical badges of rank, illustrate with glorious richness one of China's defining artistic traditions, and the stunning range of techniques, designs and applications of Chinese silk.

The courts of imperial China, especially during the Ming and Qing dynasties, were noted for their lavish silk robes, hangings and decorations, but so too were Buddhist and Daoist temples. Among the more unusual and splendid of the works on display are the robes, hangings and thangkas made for religious ceremonies and festivals. Some of the most distinctive and dramatic of these, distinguished by their innovative and expressive designs, are those made for use in Tibetan temples.

Silk is a fragile commodity and examples centuries old are exceedingly rare. This exhibition includes three silk robes dating from the 6th century which have never been on public display. Of similar rarity are Buddhist silks of the Yuan and Ming dynasties, some 400-600 years old, as well as imperial textiles of the Ming and Qing dynasties.

The gallery has staged this exhibition to coincide with the first International Conference on Oriental Carpets (ICOC) to be held in Australia. It is also a response to a growing interest in Chinese silks and textiles. We are indebted to Judith Rutherford and her husband Ken for their generous and enthusiastic commitment to the project; for not only are they substantial lenders to the exhibition but also generous donors to our nascent Chinese textile collection. To all those who have lent to the exhibition I extend my thanks and most especially to Chris Hall of Hong Kong, who kindly lent an imposing and rare Thousand Buddha robe to the Buddha: radiant awakening exhibition of 2001. Mr Hall has once again been particularly generous in lending a number of rare and significant textiles, including another Thousand Buddha robe, to the current exhibition. My thanks also to all those who have contributed to the catalogue, to our head curator of Asian Art, Jackie Menzies, and to all the gallery staff who have worked so hard to realise this captivating exhibition.

Edmund Capon Director, Art Gallery of New South Wales

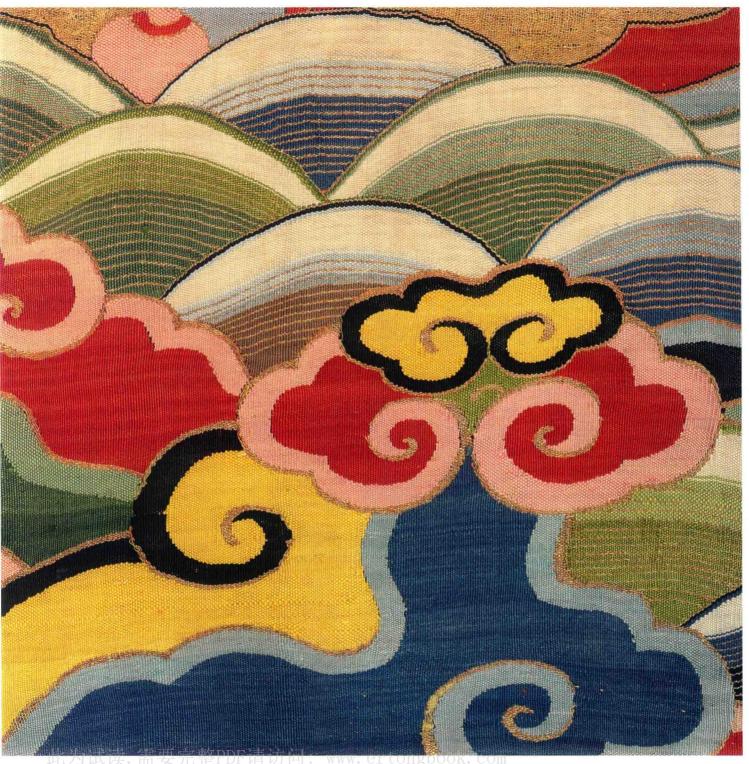
LENDERS TO THE EXHIBITION

AUSTRALIA
The Edrina Collection
James Fairfax AO
Judith & Ken Rutherford

HONG KONG
Valery M Garrett
Chris Hall Collection
Humphrey K F Hui

Hong Kong and Australia

USA Robert & Marilyn Hamburger Collection and private collectors in England,



www.ertongbook.com

INTRODUCTION

DIVINE INSPIRATION

SILK AND THE CULTURE OF CHINESE EMBROIDERY Diana Collins

Unrivalled in their splendour, Chinese silks have been valued since ancient times. Lustrous, strong and vibrantly coloured, silk gave perfect form to the expression of China's cultural and spiritual beliefs, and was ideally suited to dressing and adorning the elite. So magnificent were China's silks that by the early years of the Common Era silks were the most popular trade item along what was to become known as the Silk Road. By this time the culture of Chinese silk embroidery was firmly established. The Chinese were skilled in all aspects of sericulture - cultivating mulberry trees, raising silkworms, processing the fibre, dyeing the threads and weaving suitable ground cloth. The addition of a stable government and the patronage of the ruling leisure classes enabled fine needlework, like other decorative arts, to thrive.

DISTINGUISHING THE ELITE: EARLY EMBROIDERY

While it is difficult to trace the history of such a perishable commodity, fragmentary examples of woven silk dating from as early as 3500BCE have been found. Further evidence has been provided by impressions of silk and other fabrics in metal and clay. Archaeologists have identified over 100 different characters relating to the technology of

sericulture and associated textile expertise inscribed on Shang dynasty (c1700-c1050BcE) oracle bones,¹ revealing that by that time China's silk industry had already become extraordinarily sophisticated.

Chinese textile arts and technology flourished because of a fortuitous set of circumstances. Silk, from the domesticated caterpillar Bombyx mori, proved unequalled as a fibre for textile production. With its high tensile strength, long continuous filaments, appealing lustre and affinity for dyes, silk enabled ancient Chinese artisans to accomplish remarkable feats in the field of textile technology and design that far exceeded developments in the West.2 Indeed loom technology had reached such a level of accomplishment that by the Shang dynasty self-patterned weaves such as fine silk tabby (plain weave) with patterning floats, similar in appearance to damask (fuwengi) and complex gauzes (si jing jiao luo) were being produced.

The production of exquisite textiles, whether woven or embroidered, required skilled and dedicated labour. As a slave state during the Xia, Shang and Western Zhou dynasties (c2000–770BCE), China had at its disposal a strong workforce able to make significant advances in almost every field of development. A separation of labour between agriculture, craft and animal husbandry evolved along with a ruling class whose responsibility was to oversee production and business matters.

From the 5th century BCE Chinese society was also based on the division of labour by gender,

depending on a partnership between men and women. The maxim 'men till, women weave' defined production ethics and those who created and embellished cloth were invariably women who came from all levels of society. Records show that embroidered cloth was considered to be of greater worth than special weaves as it was more labour intensive and was graded into different standards according to the quality of the stitching.

The rapacious appetite of the elite class for exclusive and innovative garments, and household and other accessories, fuelled advances in technique and creativity in style. The sizeable ruling class was able to indulge in leisurely and intellectual activities and flaunted its wealth profusely in displays of conspicuous consumption. With such fine, patterned and colourful woven textiles available, embroidery could have been considered redundant. Embroidery, however, was highly valued because of the skill, artistry and time involved in its creation. Throughout the history of dynastic China, the elite utilised embroidered embellishments as signifiers of their status, wealth and refinement. Highly elaborate and rigid dress regulations specified in minute detail the colour, cut and symbols that could be worn by the emperor, different ranks of officials and nobles for a variety of occasions and ceremonies. These regulations became an integral feature of court life, embodying the Chinese worldview and bringing order and harmony to the earthly realm. It was recorded in 80cE that 'The ancients used clothing for the purpose of

distinguishing between the noble and the common and to illustrate virtue so as to encourage the imitation of good example.\(^{13}\) The codes varied but persisted throughout imperial times, although they were often flouted.

Clothing made for the elite demanded abundant quantities of silk, embroidered by the bolt. It has been calculated from excavated robes that it would take 32 metres of 50-centimetre wide silk to produce a lined, bias-cut robe of the wraparound style that became popular during the Han dynasty (206BCE-220CE), indicating a production-line model of embroidery was probably in force with two or more embroiderers working on a single length.

The design of Chinese textiles in general developed in parallel with other art forms. For example, the few known examples of Shang embroidery reflect the rectilinear lines found on Shang bronzes (the thunder fret design, known as leiwen, that evolved from the squared-spiral motif of that period continues to be applied in embroidery and other media today). Straight stitches such as backstitch5 and some satin stitch were used in this period but by the Western Zhou dynasty (c1050-770BCE) chain stitch (suoxiu) examples show a shift in preference. By the Warring States period (475-221BCE) chain stitch was applied almost exclusively in examples found to date. Used as an outline, filling and linear stitch, it was employed in elegant, large-scale motifs reflecting the curvilinear grace of brushpainted lines that are difficult to reproduce in weaving designs dominated by a square grid.

Subjects popular during this and previous periods include supernatural entities such as dragons and phoenix as well as stylised natural creatures. By the Western Han dynasty (25–220cE) the motifs, typically of scrolling clouds, had become much smaller and pattern repeats were closely set and often heavily packed with stitching.

Chain stitch dominated Chinese embroidery for at least 1000 years from the Zhou to the Han dynasties. It is a relatively fast stitch to work over large areas and being a short, well-anchored stitch has a durability that enables it to withstand daily wear. It has been suggested that this stitch may have been inspired by 'the finger-manipulated methods of weaving fishing nets.' Variations of the stitch existed reflecting regional or personal interpretations as much as its chronological development. Knot stitch (called *dazi*, 'making seeds') examples dating from this period have also been found.

The spread of Buddhism and Buddhist art throughout China in the early centuries of the Common Era stimulated much creativity and was to have a profound influence on the development of stitches and embroidery as an expressive art form due to the need to depict realistic subjects as a focus for meditation and devotion. A chain stitch embroidered image of the Buddha made during the Northern Wei dynasty (386–534CE) found in the Magao Grottoes near Dunhuang in Gansu province, is the earliest-known embroidery for devotion. Smooth satin stitch, rarely seen in early tomb finds to date, over time developed as a medium with which to render images of the

Buddha, human faces, lotus, peonies and birds in more naturalistic forms. With the spread of Daoist art, the list of embroidered devotional subjects and symbols expanded. Although potent religious iconography had been used in Chinese embroidery on hangings and liturgical and secular garments prior to this period, it was not with such refinement.

In Chinese, the general term for satin stitch is chan zhen or ping zhen, however there are a number of varieties of satin stitch in listings of Chinese stitch techniques. Each version derives its name from the stitch's direction or the manner of placing rows of stitches together. It is doubtless that satin stitch, worked in lustrous silk floss, remained the most popular stitch among Chinese embroiderers. It produces an endless play of light over long strands of silk worked in multiple directions and allows the blending of colours over a smooth area to create the appearance of painterly tonal washes with thread lending a three-dimensional quality to the work.

SOPHISTICATION AND CHANGE: TANG AND SONG EMBROIDERY

The Tang dynasty (618–906) saw a flourishing of art and literature. With inspiration from devotional embroidery and international cultural influences imported along the Silk Road, needlework of the Tang developed new levels of sophistication. Clothing and decorative textiles of this time carried increasingly refined and delicate embroidery, often of stylised birds and flowers on fine silk-gauze grounds.



The impact of the Song dynasty (960-1279) on Chinese embroidery cannot be underestimated. Song emperor Huizong, a talented painter of birds and flowers himself, collected art and this interest imprinted legitimacy to all creative endeavours. He encouraged artists to ignore previous styles of painting and strive for realism in colour and form, and even included painting as a topic in the highest civil examinations. Landscape painting and gardening were equally popular as leisurely pursuits of the time and these subjects were reflected in embroidery (and in silk slit-weave tapestry known as kesi) that directly imitated paintings. These textiles became valued as art rather than as patterned fabrics.8 Subject matter extended beyond the floral and figurative and included well-composed naturalistic landscapes attempting perspective.

Social and technical changes of the Song dynasty continued to have a profound effect on the lives of women and therefore on the production of embroidery. Neo-Confucian reforms formulated by philosophers of the Song dynasty rejuvenated the principle that men work outside the home and women within, a principle that had been affirmed by the nature of women's work with textile production. However technical achievements and consumer demands of the Song dynasty resulted in radical changes in textile production that were to alter the nature of women's work and their contribution to the family unit, which had been by providing tax payments in cloth.

During the Song dynasty, the ever-increasing

requirements of the state and the leisure classes to produce greater quantities of textiles, especially the more technically demanding weaves that required progressively more complicated looms, resulted in commercial urban workshops that were dominated by male weavers. Once any production becomes commercial, manufacture almost invariably moves away from the home, displacing women as producers. In China this meant that a woman's productivity was severely marginalised, particularly in large towns and cities (though women continued to be responsible for raising silkworms, considered a maternal occupation).

THE ENRICHING STITCH: EMBROIDERY OF THE MING AND QING

With the diminishing home production of textiles, women took up embroidery as a way of maintaining a contribution to the family unit and of fulfilling the traditional obligation to be industrious. Embroidery gave meaning to their secluded lives. Where embroidery in the past had been a limited practice, over time it became widespread and distinct regional styles developed. Embroidery became an important part of every girl's education. Records show a girl would start learning embroidery from as young as six, soon after her feet were first bound, a practice that rose in popularity during the Song dynasty. As a bride-to-be, a young woman's value was judged by the quality of her stitching, particularly of her finely embroidered shoes. Embroidery also gave a woman a voice to express her dreams and

desires; the potent messages stitched into her work she believed charged her with influence over her destiny. These messages were in the form of rebuses (symbolic or pictorial representations) based on punning words and thoughts; by displaying what was desired, it was believed that benevolent supernatural forces would bless the wearer with all he or she longed for. Clothing, accessories and furnishings all became talismans, rich in the elegant language of symbols encoded into embroidered compositions, expressing wishes for long healthy lives full of wealth and happiness but, above all, for the birth of sons, who would rise in office and were a woman's best investment for her future, ensuring her family would command respect and an income.

In the Ming and Qing dynasties (1368-1911) moralists held varied opinions on the subject of embroidery and its relative value in society. While some lamented that women who did not embroider were idle, one pragmatic agrarian referred to embroidery as a frivolity. Others scorned families who taught their daughters to embroider, dismissing embroidery as a mediocre skill compared to reading, which would enable girls to study moral teachings. Women's education was increasing, as can be verified by the numbers of text books available for women around this time but from personal records and diaries we learn that 'virtuous' women would not start reading during the day until they had finished their embroidery. It is interesting to note that an English diary of the 18th century contains identical sentiments.10

Women mostly worked on smaller embroidered objects at home while in general, men stitched larger items such as attire, furnishing fabric and banners in workshops. Embroideries commissioned by workshops were produced as piecework at home and it is known that women of all stations would supplement the family income at times of financial hardship by taking in embroidery work. The workshop would provide the designs and ensure quality control. Badges of rank were produced in imperial or special workshops though it is thought officials' wives, other relatives or household staff who were highly skilled needlewomen produced some.

From the Ming dynasty new traditions evolved particularly around embroidered betrothal exchanges that were to remain in Chinese culture into the 20th century. With the decline in home weaving, embroidery added both economic and sentimental value to the dowry objects a bride would take to her new home. Brides were expected to embroider great numbers of objects, particularly for the marital bed. For brides living far from their natal homes, wedding gifts of embroidery from friends and relatives who they may never see again provided lasting mementos.

The range of materials used for embroidery also expanded during the Ming and Qing dynasties. As well as gold thread in flat or twisted form, couched (*dingzhen*) to the surfaced with holding stitches, in use since the Tang dynasty, thread wrapped in peacock feather filament came into use during the early Qing. Both types of thread were also incorporated into weaving. Although

gemstones were rarely attached to textiles, tiny seed pearls, said to have been stitched to Song dynasty women's garments, 12 were used occasionally in Qing embroidery. The five panels of a finely embroidered diadem displayed in this exhibition are bordered with tiny seed pearls and a pair of rank badges is exquisitely worked with both seed pearls and couched peacock feather filament (cat nos 23 & 48). Small coral beads were a popular addition to late Qing badges of rank, attached in concentric circles representing the sun disc.

STITCHES OF STATUS: COURT EMBROIDERY

Without doubt, the most remarkable and exquisite of all Chinese embroidery was made in the service of the emperor, his family and his officials. Imperial textile workshops were established at least 2000 years ago in Henan, Xian and Shandong, with the latter employing several thousand people and the workshop at Henan specialising in embroidery. 13 During the Ming and Qing dynasties the production of imperial and official robes was under the strictest supervision by the Imperial Bureau of Weaving and Dyeing in Beijing. It was here that designs were formulated under exacting regulations, and while some embroidery was executed in Beijing much of it was worked in Suzhou. Master embroiderers oversaw production and ensured standards were of the highest quality in workshops where several hundred embroiderers would be responsible for the colossal requirements of the court, which included not only clothing but also personal and

household accessories. According to records concerning an embroidered robe belonging to the emperor Qianlong, it took 16 days to transfer an embroidery pattern to the cloth of the robe, 16 months to complete the silk embroidery and another 13 months to couch the gold thread.¹⁴

The body of a robe, imperial or otherwise, was constructed from two vertical halves (front and back were continuous with no seam at the shoulder) plus the over-flap, sleeves, collar, cuffs, neck facings and bindings.15 For ease of production, robes were usually embroidered in their constituent pieces. The dragons stitched to official and imperial robes were each couched from a single gold-wrapped thread, always used as a double width when attached. After the centre seams were stitched together, the couching of the central dragons was completed - this was considered one of the most exacting specialties of embroidery expertise. Often with workshopmade clothing and other embroidered pieces including badges, evidence such as slightly different drawing or stitching styles suggests that different embroiderers worked on separate halves of the same object. This and other flaws and inconsistencies would not have been tolerated in work destined for an emperor.

NEEDLELOOPING

One of the most outstanding embroideries in this exhibition is the exquisite needleloop roundel featuring two cranes (cat no 49, and detail overleaf), publicly displayed for the first time. The technique used is thought to have originated