

THREADS OF GOLD



# CHINESE TEXTILES

MING TO CH'ING

PAUL HAIG & MARLA SHELTON



A Schiffer Book



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PAUL HAIG & MARLA SHELTON

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## Dedications

I dedicate this book to my wife, Diane, and daughter, Eileen, who are always patient in my many efforts to acquire, conserve, and market new textiles.

—Paul Haig

I dedicate this book to the memory of my parents, Larry and Martha Shelton who raised their daughter to be caring and observant, and to my many, long-suffering friends who supported me through “the book”.

—Marla Shelton



## Prologue

# Reasons for Writing This Book

Being in the antique business we have become aware of the increased interest for knowledge concerning Chinese textiles, and we hope this book may serve as a guide to the evaluation of those textiles available to collectors and anyone interested in this beautiful art form.

Writing this book has been a great experience. We welcome any and all comments on all areas of the book, hoping that in the process of receiving feedback we can help bring this area of collecting to a more understandable level. We hope this will give further clarity to the large field of collectible Chinese textiles.

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## Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge and thank my staff at our office who have spent many hours printing and organizing the information to assist Marla and myself. I would also like to thank the helpful staff at Schiffer Publishing Ltd. who have assisted us through all of our trials and tribulations with great patience, and also Jiu-Hwa-Lo Upshur, Vince Comer, and David Hugus for patiently answering a lot of questions from left-field.

—Paul Haig

I would like to thank the dedicated staff of Haig's of Rochester for all of their support and hard work and for their understanding each time I requested "just one more measurement". I would also like to thank Diane Haig for her understanding of all the time Paul and I spent together, and most of all, to Paul for getting me "on-board" for this project.

—Marla Shelton



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# Introduction

The Chinese have produced textiles for thousands of years, although most of the ones we find today are from the last 200 to 300 years. Many are in very good to excellent condition while others have not led as protected a life. Others, still, have found new lives by being remodeled into Western style clothing or salvaged fragments of them have been made into decorative panels.

The Chinese textile market has changed dramatically today through increased awareness brought on by factors such as the internet, the currently emerging Chinese economy, and a rising number of Asian collectors in China. The Asians value their textiles as more than just garments and decorative pieces and we are able to find collectible pieces in the marketplace that well exceed a hundred years old. Adaptive reuse, either by the Chinese or other end-users, has extended the amount of surviving material over the years. For example, Tibetan and Japanese monasteries kept and reused the "tribute" pieces they were given.

During the final years of the Ch'ing Dynasty, and the turmoil that followed its fall, textiles were looted from the imperial warehouses, and also, Westerners

and wealthy Chinese who were able to leave China for western ports brought textiles with them. During the 1920s and 30s major collections were purchased in China and brought to the west, often being broken up and resold.

As in any growing market for collectibles, many modern reproductions of varying quality have come to light. Most are easily distinguished by their crude work and improper imagery, but there have been some that were good enough to be featured in major auction catalogs. Some of these were discovered before they were sold and subsequently pulled, and others have been sold as genuine. As the demand for these textiles increase, the number and quality of the reproductions increase.

This book is organized by the types of textiles most commonly found and collected today. Its purpose is to give general evaluations of Chinese textiles available on today's market and help the reader recognize what gives value to similar pieces. We have also set up a website [www.antiquechinesetextiles.com](http://www.antiquechinesetextiles.com) to create an interactive forum where readers may share and offer their input.





# Chapter 1

## Appraisals of Textiles

Appraisals of textiles can vary greatly in their accuracy and values assigned to the pieces. One reason for this is that there are different types of appraisals. A verbal appraisal can run from no charge into the low hundreds of dollars depending on the credentials, experience, and reputation of the appraiser. An informal appraisal is generally a short written statement with a brief description and value. A formal appraisal is more involved and usually includes research that often cites related pieces from museums or renowned published collections and may include auction price comparisons of similar pieces. Many formal appraisals include a set of photos both to identify the item and define the condition. Formal appraisals may be as short as one page or as lengthy as a many page "study." Regardless of the length of the document, written appraisals are only as good as the experience and reputation of the appraiser and can vary greatly over time based on market trends. Most appraisal forms have standard disclaimers that protect the appraiser against any legal actions that can be taken against the appraiser or business based on his or her evaluations.

The values being used throughout this book are replacement and insurance values and the reader should be aware that these are not resale values. Replacement or insurance appraisal values act as a strong and immediate direct replacement value for a lost or damaged item by an "exact" duplicate item. Retail replacement value is less than insurance value as it refers to replacement by a similar or comparable item, not an exact replacement of a specific piece. Many people after reading a valuation book are disappointed to find that an item they think is very valuable will realize only one third or one quarter of the stated value when they try to sell or otherwise liquidate it. When selling an item you may expect to receive approximately 75 to 80 percent of the low end of an auction estimate range of a group of similar pieces.

### Show Me Another One!

When you're dealing with antiques, in this case antique textiles, you often hear "I've never seen another one like it." This uniqueness is a source of concern when establishing value, since comparison gives us an important aspect to consider. With many of these textiles it is hard to find comparisons to help establish like values, as many

are one of a kind due to their being handmade in small workshops or even at home. If there were comparable pieces they may have been destroyed or lost over the years, leaving few examples, and even those surviving pieces are often damaged, making a comparison difficult at best. These are some of the aspects that create the value.

## Evaluating Textiles

We are often approached by people who say, "We have a dragon robe. It's blue with dragons done in gold thread. How much is it worth?" We in turn, give them the analogy of, "I have a vehicle. It's blue and has four wheels. How much is it worth?" There is a big difference between a new blue Lamborghini and a ten-year-old blue rusted out VW micro bus with a blown engine!

We have devised an evaluation system over the years to help us determine values based on color or hue, condition, quality, and rarity. This helps us determine what we should pay for a piece and what it can be sold for, giving everyone the best value. The prices quoted throughout the book are considered the replacement appraisal value.

All of the above stated factors and any irregularities, or combination of these, will affect the value of a piece. Size is not necessarily a consideration in assessing value. Children's pieces can often bring as much or more as adult pieces due to their rarity, and a twelve-inch rank badge or mandarin square may (and quite often does) have more value than a large temple embroidery.

### Hue & Color

Hue or color is usually the first thing that is noticed when evaluating textiles. The best pieces have all their original colors, whether in the background, the embroidery, or painting. Any variation from the original colors through staining or fading will effect the grading. Aniline dyes were first introduced in the 1860s, and from that time forward the colors became brighter and more light fast, but still subject to spreading or "running" when they came into contact with liquids. Most noticeable are the brilliant pinks and purples. The natural dyes were often able to achieve the same brilliance but were very susceptible to light damage. Another situation concerns black and many greens and browns. The pre-aniline blacks were achieved by using an iron mordant, and browns and greens utilized



copper salts to set the colors. With time, the metal salts have disintegrated the silk fibers causing major loss of both background fabric and embroidery threads. This will be discussed in the section on condition.

Color can be an indicator of the rank of the person who wore or used the piece, especially robes. Imperial yellow, of course, was reserved for the emperor, empress, and empress dowager; whether it is in robes or items for their personal use, such as kang (cushion) covers and bed and wall hangings. Imperial yellow items were also gifted through the emperor as tribute to a person or groups for special allegiance or service to the court. Members of the imperial family wore variations of yellow, brown, peach, burgundy, red, and sometimes orange. Orange and a more vivid reddish orange were also used for wedding robes, festival robes, and idols' robes.

### Condition

Condition is another major factor in determining a textile's value. Unused or little used pieces are the most sought after and usually bring the highest prices. They are, of course, the most difficult to locate. They must be extremely close to the original color, have original drape, no alterations, and no signs of wear. There should be no thread or fabric loss of any kind, or any stains or dry rot. Textiles in this condition are classified as "Excellent" and have the highest value.

Somewhat easier to find are those classified as "Very Good." These may show a slight amount of wear, but have been generally very well cared for. They would require very little, if any, restoration, the tacking of a few loose threads or the like. This group may also include pieces that have been resized, but without loss of material or color so that they may be returned to their original shape and size. These may have very slight color variations from the original. This level falls into the grade of "Gently worn with no flaws."

Those that fall into the "Good" condition group are probably most commonly found in collections. They show average wear for the age of the piece and may include some staining, foxing, and/or fading. They may also need moderate stabilization and tacking of loose threads. Alterations and minor material loss are allowable but should be in areas that do not detract from the over-all appearance. Also included in this group are past repairs and restorations that are in keeping with the integrity of the textile and are not obvious. These pieces can usually be stabilized and/or conserved without too much difficulty. This condition may be described as "slight wear with any flaws noted" or "notable flaws, repairable or wearable as is."

"Poor" condition is another fairly large group and consists of pieces showing excessive wear, major alteration, and/or material loss. It may also include some pieces with dry rot, light use of adhesives, improper past restorations, and some damage from incorrect cleaning. These pieces require major restoration and conservation and unless extremely unusual or of particular sentimental value, may not warrant the additional expense. An item of this grade may have "major flaws, but good design or fabric."

The last category is "Very Poor" and generally includes those pieces that are worn or damaged beyond repair.

These may exhibit excessive use of adhesives, major dry rot, alterations, and loss of material, excessive staining, and irreversible damage from improper cleaning. They are most likely not worth restoring.

As stated in the section on color there can be thread loss in both the background fabric and embroidery threads of the older pieces due to the use of metal salts to "set" the natural dyes. These salts were also used to vary the colors of the dyestuffs. As explained in *The Textile Conservator's Manual* by Sheila Landi, the use of madder as the dye: with an alum mordant it will give a rust red; with tin it will give orange; with chrome it will become maroon; copper creates yellow to brown; and iron will make it brown and black. Unfortunately, the metals will degrade the silks overtime, and as a result many earlier pieces have sections of affected colors completely missing. This is helpful in dating a piece, but disappointing in the loss. These pieces must be handled very carefully and as little as possible because agitation or abrasion can cause additional loss.

### Quality

Quality is the third element we look at in evaluating textiles. The classification of "Excellent" includes those pieces with extremely fine weaving, and may include intricately woven details such as in the k'o-ssu, or slit woven tapestry. It may also include multiple techniques such as k'o-ssu with painting and/or embroidery. The pieces with embroidery are more valuable than those with painted details, and the premiere pieces generally would incorporate only minimal painting. The very fine pieces may also have intricately crafted linings and matching cuffs and collars.

The use of many integrated techniques and secondary materials such as cording, wrapped metallic threads, integrated peacock feathers and various embroidery techniques as well as the fineness of threads, can also be a determining factor.

A "Very Good" classification would include consistency in design, good proportion, and balance. The piece should be aligned properly and constructed such that the patterns meet correctly at the seams. It should be woven or embroidered consistently, so that the piece appears continuous in design. Dye lots and colors should be uniform and embroidered designs planned and executed with skill.

"Good" is a classification for pieces that are acceptable, but lack fine detail work and are not as carefully planned or executed. These may include dragon robe sections that were woven at different times or places so the design elements do not line up quite correctly, embroidery by more than one person that shows a variation of skill levels, and pieces that are not consistent in color and dye lot. Various workshops produced pieces that used silk of different qualities so a single piece may have varying qualities of materials in it.

A "Poor" grade is given to textiles that do not match in color or design within the piece. The lack of proper support of heavier embroideries causes the background to break down prematurely, so pieces, especially hangings, will sag over time.



There are times when pieces can be dated at a glance, due to the erratic nature of the weaving and design. During the last years of the Ch'ing dynasty, many pieces of lower quality were more common, due to less quality control and mass-production. There were many variations of styles and quality control did not keep up with the mass production of textiles. Many pieces were made for a larger market of people who could now afford to present themselves in a deceptively pretentious manner, rather than through court merit. Like our current knock-offs of fine designer lines, the Chinese at the end of the Ch'ing dynasty used regulated patterns made in many small workshops, to buy their way into a higher level of court and/or social status. In effect, rank and position could become merely a financial option for an ostentatious show of wealth. Also, many areas broke off into small governmental enclaves of warlords and regional factions that were striving to individually represent themselves through their attire and actions, becoming increasingly disconnected from government controls. One aspect of these variations will be covered under Chapter 3, where we provide a comparison of one level of rank badge, and its many styles and qualities.

### Rarity

Rarity is definitely a major factor in assessing value. As previously stated, values are based on comparisons in the market. The value of a more common item or form is not as great as for an item or form that has been rarely

seen. An example of this would be the imperial idols robe in Chapter 4, and at the other end of the price spectrum is the small embroidered panel in Chapter 8. Both of these pieces are considered rare, but the small piece has very little importance or desirability compared to the robe.



A small panel of red silk embroidered with silk and metallic gold threads and fine silver metallic leather inserts. Early twentieth century. 9.75" x 10.5. \$275.



Imperial idols' robe. Over all size 67" wide x 38" high. \$75,000.



The category of "very rare" denotes that the object is one of a kind, very rarely obtainable, or an example in stellar condition or quality for its age or type. The second category, "rare," denotes an item that may be featured in a few major collections but is of an age, quality, or style seldom seen. The third category, "somewhat rare," would be an item seen as a foundation or building block element of most major collections. The fourth, "common," would denote an object that would be found in most beginning or intermediate collections. The fifth level, "very common," would connote items that are easily found and available in a moderate price range.

## Evaluation System for Textiles

This evaluation scale will be used for each piece in the book, so that the reader may understand how we arrived at the stated values. The categories are color or hue, "H"; condition, "C"; quality, "Q"; and rarity, "R." Each category will be assigned a number corresponding to the chart. An example of this would be: H2, C3, Q3, R3 meaning, hue (color) is "very good", condition is "good", quality is "good", and rarity is "somewhat rare."

### Color or Hue—"H"

H1—Excellent: bright, original colors throughout; no fading

H2—Very Good: slight, all-over fading; colors still even

H3—Good: all-over fading and some uneven areas

H4—Poor: faded colors or very uneven coloration

H5—Very Poor: excessive fading, little or almost no color left

### Condition—"C"

C1—Excellent: like new, little or no usage

C2—Very Good: slight wear, needing little or no restoration

C3—Good: normal wear for the age of the piece; may have minor alterations; minor stains or foxing; minor material loss; may need some restoration

C4—Poor: excessive wear for age; visible alterations and/or material loss; light use of adhesives; some dry rot; major staining; major material loss; some damage from incorrect cleaning; may need substantial restoration

C5—Very Poor: damaged or worn beyond repair; excessive stains and/or alterations; major dry rot; major material loss; excessive use of adhesives; major damage from incorrect cleaning; probably not restorable.

### Quality—"Q"

Q1—Excellent: extremely fine weaving, embroidery, and workmanship

Q2—Very Good: fine weaving, embroidery, and workmanship

Q3—Good: average weaving, embroidery, and workmanship

Q4—Poor: loosely woven; large stitches in either embroidery and/or construction

Q5—Very Poor: very loose weaving; large embroidery stitches; structurally does not hold together under its own weight.

### Rarity—"R"

R1—Very Rare: rarely obtainable and no known similar pieces

R2—Rare: occasional availability; occasional sources

R3—Somewhat Rare: limited availability; limited sources

R4—Common: easily availability; limited sources

R5—Very Common: easily available through multiple sources.



## Chapter 2

### Official Robes & Other Court Dress



A pair of twentieth century export scrolls in the style of ancestor portrait of the Emperor T'ung-chih (reign 1862-1874) and his empress. 32.75" x 19" each