
Design Exchange of Chinese Qing Dynasty Dragon Robes and Western Fashions:
Toward a Theory of Design

Shu-Hwa Lin, University of Hawaii at Manoa, USA
Rayneld Rolak Johnson, Wayne State University, USA

Keywords: Chinese dragon robes, cross-cultural design, design theory

Throughout history, the designs of one culture have influenced the designs of another culture. One notable recurring example of cross-cultural design exchange is the use of the design elements of the Chinese Qing Dynasty dragon robes in western fashions. Additionally, although there are numerous examples of cross-cultural design, there is little empirical evidence of how borrowed design elements from one culture are integrated and used in new designs of another culture. The purpose of this qualitative study is an analysis of the use of Chinese Qing dragon robe design elements in western fashions and the relevance to the development of a theory of design.

The Chinese Qing Dynasty spanned the 17th through 20th centuries. Court dress and imperial dragon robes fashioned during the Qing Dynasty were rich in symbolism, meaning, motifs, embroidery and patterns. Additionally, dress mirrored the Qing court hierarchal structure and often functioned as outward expressions of the wearer's rank and merits (Lin & Durate, 2017). Qing court dress included four categories: surcoats, formal, semi-formal and casual robes. The emperor and his family members such as the prince, princess and concubine were required to dress in symbolic clothing (Haig & Shelton, 2006). Imperial kinship and civil and military officers were also expected to wear specific garments such as dragon robes. Additionally, motifs on Chinese Qing Dynasty court dress were typically from four symbolic groups: Twelve symbols of Sovereignty, eight Buddhist Treasures, eight Immortals of Taoism and eight Traditional Treasures (Chung, 2005). Each group had unique importance and teachings, though they sometimes shared motifs (Lin & Durate, 2017). Also, many other symbols represented the yin or yang aspect. In the Twelve Symbols of Sovereignty, the sun symbol represented yang and the moon symbol represented yin (Lin & Durate, 2017). Other symbols were less prescribed and could depend on color or size variations to imply *yin* or *yang* (Lin & Durate, 2017). Additional motifs included common objects, animals and figures and often represented aspects from Chinese folklore and teachings. For example, the lotus is a symbol for Eight Buddhist Treasures and Eight Immortals of Daoism. Additionally, costly and precious materials and highly skilled techniques of court dress artisans were also indicators of rank and merit.

For this project more than 150 images of historic and contemporary western fashions from the 19th through the 21st centuries were collected from numerous sources such as museum exhibits, the internet, magazines, runways, red-carpet events, and texts that exhibited cross-cultural design exchange of Chinese dragon robes and western dress. In a comparative analysis of the design elements of style, silhouette, color, textile patterns, motif, line, embroidery and utility in images of Chinese Qing dynasty dress and western fashions, several observations were made. First, cross-cultural design exchange between East and West has recurred throughout

centuries. There is an apparent appreciation of the beauty, aesthetic value and uniqueness of Chinese design. However, as a result of the change in the way design elements were used, the cultural meaning was transformed. For example, the design elements in Chinese dragon robes are symbolic and an indication of social rank. Whereas in western fashions, design elements such as color and motifs do not convey the same symbolism, instead they are for decorative, artistic, aesthetic and personal qualities. Although in some instances, social status of the wearer is suggested such as by haute couture designs. Another observation is both male and female western fashion designs reflect Chinese design elements but fewer are male outfits, about ten, and the rest are female styles. Examples of male garments include three 18th century waistcoats from the Victoria & Albert Museum and an ornate suit jacket embroidered with gold Chinese dragons worn by a current entertainer. For females, multiple examples of beautiful garments depicting Chinese design elements were designed during different periods. More recently, a number of high fashion designers featured Chinese inspired haute couture gowns for celebrity figures at the 2015 New York Metropolitan Museum of Art Costume Institute Benefit Gala, *China: Through the Looking Glass*. Yet another observation is the silhouettes and lines of western fashions are primarily western styles such as men's tailored jackets, and women's strapless gowns, princess lines, A-lines and fitted sheaths. In comparison, Chinese dragon robes are traditionally one style composed of two pieces of fabric with shoulder seams from neck to wrist, side seams and a front closure. The sleeves could have an additional contrasting fabric attached as a horse shoe cuff. But, similarly, Chinese dragon robes were worn for special occasions and in many instances, so were western fashions.

The relevance of this research is documentation of the recurring cross-cultural use of Chinese dragon robe design elements in western fashions and the resulting transformative designs and meaning. The findings add to the theory of design, development of the design discipline and field of comparative aesthetics. The meaning of dress defined by culture is established. Design occurs within cultural boundaries. Therefore, the design process and how design elements of one culture are used by another culture to create new designs is also defined by culture. Researchers (Friedman, 2003; Bye, 2010) suggest the importance of developing the discipline of design and theoretical foundations. This evidence further adds to developing a theory of design.

Bye, E. (2010). A direction for clothing and textiles design research. *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal*, 28(3), 205-217.

Chung, Y. Y. (2005). *Silken threads: A history of embroidery*. NY: Harry N. Abrams.

Friedman, K. (2003). Theory construction in design research: criteria: approaches, and methods. *Design Studies*, 24(6), 507-522.

Haig, P., & Shelton, M. (2006). *Threads of gold: Chinese textiles Ming to Ch'ing*. Atglen, PA: Schiffer book.

Lin, S. H. & Durate, C.J. (2017). Uncovering the messages behind four imperial dragon robes from exhibitions with Yin and Yang message. *Journalism and Mass Communication*, 7(1), 1-11.