

Imperial Chinese Court robes of the Qing Dynasty 1644-1911

After the Manchu-Qing rulers seized control of China in 1644, they moved quickly to assert authority over the dominant Han Chinese population and established a dress code. Regulations codified dress for the imperial family, the Qing court and court officials, distinguishing the ruling elite and government from the general population. Women dressed according to the rank of their husbands.

The ornamentation of formal (*chaofu*) and semi-formal (*jifu*) court robes included the dragon motif together with a decorative representation of the Chinese conception of the cosmos. The dragon symbolized the emperor, known as the Son of Heaven, and permission to wear the robe was given by him. Rank was further distinguished by a hierarchy of color and ornamentation.

Chaofu: the formal robe, known as “robe of state” and worn by nearly all elevated members of court society. The emperor and court officials wore chaofu at the most solemn state ceremonies such as accession to the throne, imperial weddings, birthdays, New Year, winter solstice and sacrifices to heaven and earth. It was generally worn with a ceremonial collar (*piling*).

Men’s Chaofu: has the right side flap closure, tapered sleeves and flared or horse-hoof cuffs, common to most Manchu-inspired dragon robes. Men’s robes are vented on the front and back.

Women’s Chaofu: There are two types of women’s chaofu. The two-piece chaofu, reserved for empress dowager, empress and imperial consorts, and the single piece chaofu, worn by all ranks of noblewomen and wives of officials. Women’s robes are vented on the sides.

Jifu: semiformal attire worn by all who attended court or served in the imperial government. Its decoration symbolizes the concept of universal order – a celestial landscape of mountains, oceans, and clouds where dragons live.

Construction: The silk fabric is multi-filament weave with a warp of .1mm and a weft of .2mm to .3mm. Imperial silk was both time consuming to produce and expensive, taking professional weavers 1 to 2 years.

Mia’s collection of Qing dynasty textiles includes over 600 imperial robes, ecclesiastical, theatrical and military costumes, one the best and largest collections in the west.

Resources:

Robert D Jacobsen, *Imperial Silks, Ch'ing Dynasty Textiles in the Minneapolis Institute of Arts*, Volume I

Powerhouse Museum



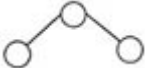





https://www.powerhousemuseum.com/hsc/evrev/chinese_dress.htm

The Art of Silk: King's Silk Art: Embroidery from Imperial China

<http://www.artofsilk.com/blogs/news/8404057-kings-silk-art-embroidery-from-imperial-china#.V9YDMCMrIzY>

The twelve symbols of sovereignty

Probably as early as the Zhou dynasty (11th-3rd century BC), the twelve Chinese symbols of sovereignty appear. In 1759 the twelve symbols were reserved exclusively for the robes of the emperor. As a symbolic interpretation of the universe, these symbols of imperial authority assumed a cosmic significance and represented the emperor as the ruler of the universe. (Pang, 1989: 38)

Name of symbol	Symbol	Description
Sun		Represented by a red disc with a three-legged crow.
Moon		Represented by a light blue or green disc enclosing the legendary hare pounding the elixir of immortality.
Three stars		Constellation of three stars.
Mountains		Symbols of stability and the earth.
Dragons		Symbolize adaptability because of the transformations they can perform.
Pheasant		Symbol of literary refinement. The dragon and pheasant represent the natural world.
Pair of bronze sacrificial cups		Symbolize respect for one's parents. One cup has a tiger (physical strength), the other a monkey (cleverness).
Waterweed		Represents purity.

Grain



Represents the country's capacity to feed its people.

Fire



Represents intellectual brilliance.

The mountains plus the last four symbols represent the five elements of the universe. Earth (mountains); metal (cups); water (waterweed); wood (grain); fire (fire).

Axe



Represents the power to punish.

Fu



Represents the power to judge.

Adapted from (Pang, 1989: 39) Courtesy: National Gallery of Victoria.

Other symbols:

Celestial Landscape, dragons flying amongst mountains, oceans and clouds

- Dragons = emperor
- Clouds = heavens
- Rock = mountains
- Waves – earth's oceans (with diagonal lines below representing standing water, *li-shui*)
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Pearls grant wishes

Coral symbolic of wealth

Red Bat The Chinese pronunciation of the word is similar to *hongfu*, which means great blessings.