

Introduction

FASHION AND CHINESE HISTORY

GIVEN THE COUNTLESS English-language catalogs of Chinese dress filled with page after page of dragon robes and rank badges, it is unsurprising that the denial of fashion in Chinese history has proved persistent. Witness French philosopher Gilles Lipovetsky: “In China, women’s dress underwent no real transformation between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries.”¹ Or British historian Neil McKendrick: “In China . . . in 1793 a traveller confirmed the lack of change when he wrote ‘. . . the form of clothing is rarely changed by fashion or whim. . . . Even the women have scarcely new fashions.’”² Even historian Kenneth Pomeranz posited a decline of fashion during the mid-Qing, arguing that women were more likely to engage in social competition and personal expression through poetry than fashionable clothes.³ Studies of Chinese historical fashion remain isolated from studies of European fashion, whose historians rarely acknowledge the existence of fashion in China or Asia, or consider what comparisons between China and Europe might bring to our understanding of fashion.⁴

This impasse is, to some degree, a more general problem: many scholars view claims of fashion in non-Western cultures as an invalid application of a Western framework.⁵ Western cultural specificity is not necessarily inherent to basic definitions of fashion: “It is a system of dress found in societies where social mobility is possible; it has its own particular relations of production and consumption, again found in a particular society; it is characterised by logic of regular and systematic change.”⁶ But for this definition’s author, sociologist Joanne Entwistle, and others, fashion is geographically and historically specific to early modern Europe; accordingly, other types of fashion occurring in other types of societies and cultures must be excluded. Countries and cultures positioned outside this time and place have been left with two alternative

terms, folk costume and anti-fashion, neither of which can be coherently applied to Qing China.

Folk costume is defined as that in which any change is so slow as to be barely perceptible even to the wearers themselves. As the semiotic ethnographer Petr Bogatyrev (1893–1971) put it: “Folk costume is in many ways the antithesis of clothing which is subject to fashion changes.”⁷ That Qing China does not fit the folk-costume characterization is evident in the widespread and shifting usage of fashion terms to describe dress and adornment: *shishang* (fashion);⁸ *shishi zhuang* (fashions of the times);⁹ *shi zhuang* (fashionable dress);¹⁰ *shi yang* (lit., “style of the times”);¹¹ *xin shi shi* (lit., “new time style”);¹² and *xin yang* (lit., “new style”),¹³ all of which suggest that fashion was of paramount concern to Chinese society.

Meanwhile, anti-fashion—which anthropologist Ted Polhemus defined as when tradition, religious practice, or countercultural policies cause forms of dress to resist change, largely wrought in the marketplace—is equally unsuitable for a society shaped by a huge market economy with enormous reach and impact, particularly on the social mobility that predicated his conceptualization of fashion.¹⁴ Though many fashion scholars would like to make a clear demarcation between anti-fashion’s pursuit of “fixed” styles as a symbol of continuity and fashion’s pursuit of dress as a symbol of change or movement through time, the obvious problem is the spectrum of possibilities between the two, a range suggestive for Qing society in which forms of cultural stability coexisted with forces of social mobility and popular culture.

Of course, there are pitfalls in overcompensating for fashion history’s Eurocentric bias: dress historian Phyllis Tortora’s definition of fashion as “a taste shared by many for a short period of time” dilutes the matter to a degree that it becomes hard to distinguish a fashion system from any other clothing system.¹⁵ But considering fashion systems outside Western Europe not only allows study of shared themes—like the trend for the exotic (*xin qi*, or “new and curious”) or vintage styles (*fu gu*, or “return to the past”)¹⁶—it also opens up fashion history to factors beyond Western socioeconomic phenomena of capitalist states, class structure, and industrialized modernity.¹⁷ Entwistle states that it is an act of ethnocentricity to attempt to locate the fashion system within all cultures, but the ethnocentric act would surely be to suggest that the Chinese fashion system resembled that of Western Europe.¹⁸ As fashion historian Jennifer Craik observed, “There are fashions and fashions”: to define fashion as necessarily cast from capitalist economies is to imply a misleading homogeneity to fashion as a social and cultural force.¹⁹

During the 1990s, a new wave of scholarship began to challenge the assumption that China lacked the phenomena of fashion until it was brought by the West in the early twentieth century. Some scholars began with the original deniers, arguing that European travelers’ discovery of “unchanging Chinese dress” told us more about “the self-perceptions of an industrializing Europe” than what Chinese people actually wore.²⁰ Indeed, given their restricted access to domestic quarters and female dress,

these observers were hardly an authoritative voice, something acknowledged by more astute commentators of the period: “Fashion holds a sway in China little, if at all, less despotic that it does in the West, . . . though the uninitiated or unobservant foreigner may fail to detect the minutiae of change.”²¹

More recent studies have revealed key components of the fashion system in force as early as Tang China (618–907). Historian BuYun Chen showed how, as innovations in the textile industry stimulated new forms of consumption, women in and outside the court used luxury silks to “fabricate” self.²² Many historians have highlighted late Ming consumption, the beginning of the so-called second commercial revolution, when New World silver began to transform Chinese markets, in exchange for porcelain, tea, and silk.²³ Historian of consumption Wu Jen-shu charted the excited reactions to new dress styles that fill late Ming writings, showing how literati society was rocked by the ability of the lower ranks to imitate elite dress, and their efforts to create new fashions in order to deal with this identity crisis.²⁴ Cultural historian Lin Liyue also identified the late sixteenth-century period as a turning point, when fashion threw a once hierarchically stable clothing system into uncertainty. The ensuing attention to clothing was frequently blamed on women, as conservative literati turned to philosophical concepts to respond to the social anxieties created by dress.²⁵ Working on a similar period, literary scholar Sarah Dauncey contrasted the early seventeenth-century satirical novel *The Plum in the Golden Vase* (Jin ping mei) with didactic prescriptive images and texts to investigate how notions of frugality and luxury complicated fashion as status.²⁶

These studies have amassed considerable evidence to show that Chinese clothing and adornment, from the sixteenth century onward, changed at a speed that dizzied its native observers. They have transformed understanding of consumption in a historical Chinese context and demonstrated how fashionable dress was used to negotiate changing social structures. But the emphasis on the Ming has contributed to a body of scholarship with uneven temporal coverage, something highlighted by Antonia Finnane’s detailed study of Yangzhou fashions, which underscored how little we know of the interactions between fashion and place in China.²⁷ This uneven temporal coverage has limited understanding of how the expansion of the market economy and the commercialization of handicraft industries impacted dress production and consumption, or how the relationship between fashion and ethnic identity evolved through this period.

In order to shift the scholarship on Chinese fashion beyond this impasse, this book focuses on two major issues of methodology and temporality. Most scholarship has prioritized writings about fashion, while those using images and dress objects as sources tend to be from a museum background, presenting a context of official hierarchy and imperial consumption. The so-called Great Divide that separates the object-centered methods of the curator/collector and the document-based socioeconomic or cultural history of the university academic constitutes a methodological

split that I seek to bridge.²⁸ Of course, textual sources are crucial for contemporary responses to the changing styles in the late Qing: brush notes (*biji*), local gazetteers (*difang zhi*), and *The Record of Carriage and Dress* (*Yu fu zhi*) of the Official Dynastic Histories, as well as less appreciated vernacular genres such as bamboo ballads (*zhu-zhici*), novels, pawnshop texts, and encyclopedias. And material analysis of garments will always be vulnerable to criticism for charting “every flounce, pleat, button and bow.”²⁹ But integrating object, text, and image enables visual analysis to reveal significances overlooked by textually founded investigations, edging closer to the kinds of meaning these objects might have held for their consumers.

Temporally, historical studies of Chinese material culture have focused upon the late sixteenth century as a period when commercialization began to destabilize social hierarchies and, with them, conceptions of fashion and taste. But, aside from a short depression caused by the Qing dynastic accession, this commercial expansion continued through the eighteenth century, leading historians to describe China as comparable in living standards to Europe’s most prosperous regions.³⁰ And it is in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that many dress objects—particularly celebratory styles, once confined to imperial or noble circles—became more accessible. Key to this process was growth in rural and urban handicraft production, fostered by the doubling of China’s population: in 1680, it was around 150 million; by 1776, it was 311 million; and by 1850, it was about 436 million.³¹ Though only 5 percent of people lived in cities, the remainder living in market towns and villages were increasingly brought into an entwined economy. People began to use goods made by craftsmen and women they did not know. Their own crops and handicrafts were now also sold in increasingly dense market networks. These changes were most visible in wealthy cities like Suzhou, Nanjing, and Hangzhou, sites of imperial and private silk workshops, whose products were distributed through interprovincial markets and overseas trade. Previously luxurious techniques of textile adornment became much more widely consumed. While the popular uprisings, natural disasters, and foreign interventions that punctuated the nineteenth century meant the late Qing was a period of immense social and cultural upheaval, such are the conditions in which fashion—with its potential for social distinction and negotiation—thrives. This period has conventionally been viewed in art historical terms as a “nonentity”: not only did museums not collect, but many studies of Qing art commonly stopped at the eighteenth century, though this has begun to change in recent years.³² Nineteenth-century China is uniquely challenging because it both completes the late imperial and initiates the modern period. Literary and cultural historians have explored how conceptions of fashion evolved through these decades of modernity and Western intervention.³³ But objects of late Qing fashion also have much to tell us about how the Qing fashion system functioned in a context largely absent of Western presence or industrial modernizations.

Thriving production and marketing systems, developed from internal processes of commercialization and urbanization, complicate established characterizations of the

nineteenth-century as economically backward and in cultural decline. Part of the appeal of dragon robes was as dynastic embodiment: “Foreigners came to localize in dragon robes all the potentialities of a civilization they perceived to be as far removed from their own as was possible and to project onto the costumes all their personal aspirations of what a society should be. They took home these robes as tangible evidence of a myth.”³⁴ Curators interpreted nineteenth-century dragon robe forms as reflecting the waning that followed the heights of the Kangxi and Qianlong periods. Late Qing designs were described as of “crowded or pinched composition”; once “secure vitality and energetic movement” now “settled down into a mere crust of dull stodgy forms.”³⁵ How might we view this history differently if we turned not to the products of institutional workshops designed through state-controlled processes, but instead to objects produced in private workshops, designed by pattern draftsmen connected with other urban handicraft producers and influenced by local print and performance?

The museum collections from which I have gathered these examples of Qing dynasty fashion offer great potential, but they also possess limiting factors delineating this book’s reach. First, despite its claims of universal representation (“Chinese dress”), it informs only upon the consumption of the minority who could afford embellished and fashionable silk garments. Ordinary people wore mostly cotton and ramie, primarily dyed blue, much of it woven locally, sometimes by the wearers themselves. In winter they wore cotton padding and sheep skins while the wealthy wore furs and wools.³⁶ They probably owned no more than two sets of garments for winter and summer apiece, and of course the truly poor would have struggled to achieve even this. Though even poor women might have had a piece of jewelry or bright garment for weddings and festivals, in general, this group experienced little stylistic change over the course of the dynasty.³⁷

However, for a substantial minority, living conditions improved during the Qing dynasty.³⁸ Commercialization expanded the numbers of those who could access fashionable silk objects, particularly accessories. Thus, what the museum collection actually evidences are the consumer tastes of two main groups: upper class elites and the middle class. Elites, also called gentry or literati (*shenshi, jinshen*), refers to the minority of the population who were educated and engaged in political or bureaucratic professions. Broadly defined to include wealthy nobility and merchants, as well as scholars and officials of all ranks, this group comprised an estimated 1.9 percent of the Chinese population (approximately seven million) in the late Qing, receiving about 24 percent of the national income (probably at least four hundred taels a year).³⁹ The second of these groups was the mostly urban and often commercial middle class, which was more heterogeneous in income and identity. At upper levels it included teachers, head clerks, merchants, shop-owners, artisans; at lower levels, it included clerks and runners. But all these groups could supplement salary through family investments in land or business.⁴⁰ More fundamentally, economic advances, expanded education, and limited official positions meant Qing society was characterised by social mobility,

substratification, and social anxiety: there were downwardly mobile members of gentry families (lower degree holders, specialists and secretaries) who couldn't access an official position, as well as upwardly mobile educated gentry-merchants (*shen-shang*), scholar-craftsmen, successful shopkeepers, and artists.⁴¹ The mid-late Qing period is filled with officials and scholars bemoaning the increasing silk consumption by lower-status groups like actors, courtesans, and servants, a discourse oriented around concepts of fashion, luxury, and *fuyao* (outrageous dress), positioned in opposition to Confucian virtues of frugality and simplicity.

Given that fashion served as a means of negotiating social divisions, simplistically dividing Chinese society into the cotton-wearing commoner and the silk-wearing elite belies the complexity of what lay between. Commercial weavers sought to meet middle-class demand with cheaper versions of expensive weaves and diffuse ranges of silk, cotton, and ramie qualities.⁴² Those living in proximity to silk-producing districts around Suzhou, Huzhou, Hangzhou, Nanjing, and elsewhere would have been able to buy lower-quality silk garments and silk accessories. Hence, English botanist-traveler Robert Fortune's (1813–1880) well-known comment about Huzhou: "Every person I met above the common working coolie was dressed in silks or crape, and even the coolies have at least one silk dress for holyday." Still more pertinently, Fortune was struck by "all kinds of articles in common use amongst the people. Embroidered shoes, hats, caps, umbrellas . . . every conceivable article."⁴³ These low-cost objects fit historian Cissie Fairchild's definition of *populuxe*, the fans, umbrellas, and stockings that became central components in allowing the expanding consumption of lower-middle classes in eighteenth-century Paris.⁴⁴ Despite the European dress historian's insistence that fashion means changes in silhouettes (contributing to an inability to detect such changes in Chinese dress), these humble objects were central to nineteenth-century fashion change and key enablers in the spread of fashionable consumption beyond elite groups. Yet, the growth in commercial workshops' economic clout correlates to the growth in moral outcry seeking to control this consumption: how far did this tension—between the didacticism of gazetteers and family instruction books, and the valorization of fashion of urban rhymes and vernacular novels—shape the Qing fashion system?

Rather than the monolithic "Chinese dress" established in the museum, nineteenth-century fashions existed both within and between social groups, requiring work on "constructions of fashionability across social divides."⁴⁵ Doubtless this shift from an "honorific vestimentary system," centered upon courtly consumption and sumptuary regulations, to a "fashion system," enabling more personal choice and individual taste, still omitted vast sections of Qing society, but equally it allowed many more the possibilities of "self-enhancement through cloth and clothing."⁴⁶ The museum collection does not allow for the definition of regional variations of these consumption practices in material terms. One of the corollaries of Western collecting of Chinese dress was a confounding of regional dress histories: objects were rarely cataloged with any information regarding purchase or production location. Indeed, the processes outlined

in the preface mean that information regarding collecting circumstances was often omitted from accession records. Whether purchased in Shanghai, Beijing, or Guangzhou, Chinese dress was simply Chinese dress, and collectors rarely recorded *how* they acquired their purchases. Accordingly, this book is a study of the Chinese fashion system as a whole rather than the fashion system of Shanghai or Beijing. The focus is the cities of Jiangnan, the area south of the Yangzi River that was China's wealthiest and most commercialized region, but I also make comparisons and connections to the political center, Beijing, and two other heavily commercialized regions, Guangzhou and Sichuan. This broad approach has its limitations—particularly in providing a material counterpart to the regionality that texts suggest was integral to the fashion system—but it enables investigation of the ways in which fashionable consumption in diverse regions was integrated through interprovincial trade and print culture.

Despite the importance of handicraft to understanding the progression of the Qing economy and the integration of Chinese culture, historians of China have tended to disdain objects as valid historical enquiry. The following assertion from historian David Johnson gives a sense of their presumed limitation: “Values can be embodied in nonverbal symbols, and exemplified in behavior, but to be communicated with any precision, or to be explained, they must find expression in words.”⁴⁷ But by grounding these typically unprovenanced objects within written and visual descriptions and associations, I seek to recover an experience that has been largely written out of the formal textual canon. In bringing together the material archive of dress, textiles, and embroideries, the visual archive of prints, paintings, and pattern books, and the textual archive of local gazetteers, contemporary diaries, advertisements, urban rhymes, and pawnshop texts, I aim to reconstruct something of the vernacular culture of late Qing women. In using an interdisciplinary approach spanning art history, anthropology, dress history, and fashion theory to read back and forth between object, image, and text, I seek to position and understand each source within its generic constraints and audience expectations, while defending the validity of objects and images to inform upon historical experience. There are limits to how far objects can inform: garments cannot be read as a text, and the so-called language of dress (language as structural model for dress semiotics) has arguably obstructed rather than aided our understanding of clothing as system of cultural signification.⁴⁸ Still, objects are not silent witnesses to the past: the forms, materials, and adornments of late Qing dress have much to tell us about their wearers and makers. But it is by returning them to that past—surrounding them with pattern-books, urban rhymes, shop brands, popular prints, and fictional descriptions—that their perspective is most fully voiced, not only because this allows us to understand how the objects were made and used, and how they moved through society, but more fundamentally, because it was as “represented garment” that they acquired significance.⁴⁹

To ask what it means to speak of fashion in a late Qing context is also to ask what differentiated these fashions from those of the late Ming—the focus of so much

material culture scholarship. That is, when Li Ping'er, the maid-concubine heroine of *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, is described as wearing a highly fashionable summer outfit of “a lavender [lit., lotus color] silk center-opening jacket, and a white gauze joined-skirt with petit-point borders,” what distinguishes her outfit from that of Shuang Qiong, the courtesan heroine of the late Qing novel *Shanghai Dust* (Haishang chentian ying)?⁵⁰ The latter, for her part, is described as wearing “a silver stove-red Ning silk half-new, half-old, tight-bodied, lined *ao* jacket, fully embroidered with eight large knots in aniline blue, with joined-lotus foreign [style] embroidered satin edging, [together with] West Lake–color five-silk gauze ‘scattered tube’ trousers with aniline blue satin edging and a gold belt . . . [tied with] two long trailing trouser belt strips of green gauze embroidered with ‘plum, orchid, bamboo, and chrysanthemum.’”⁵¹ There were certainly continuities between the late Ming and late Qing: Han women continued to wear jacket and skirt ensembles; the pleated skirt continued to be a key garment. And yet the two heroines would have likely looked upon each other’s ensembles with surprise.

The differences between each one’s fashionable dress stemmed from three factors. First, the Manchu dynasty’s (re-)introduction of ethnicity as a source of sartorial differentiation that produced new garment types and silhouettes, and new creative tension within the fashion system. As fashion became integral to asserting ethnic separation, new silhouettes and styles emerged that shifted conceptions of fashion away from late Ming values. Second, the commercialization of small-scale textile handicrafts popularized new techniques and materialities. In particular embroidery, long a mode of adornment controlled by imperial workshops, began in the early Qing to displace weaving as dominant patterning technique. Rather than the courtly display and sumptuary laws that had previously confined embroidery’s decorative and pictorial qualities to elite consumption, market forces began to determine its reach. That we know so little of how handicraft commercialization impacted dress production, or the commercial networks through which embroidered dress was produced, reflects in part the conventional priorities of dress history toward art-historical issues of style and iconography. Museums sought to identify two basic production contexts for their objects: imperial workshops for dragon robes or female domestic work for women’s robes and accessories. The overlooking of commercial workshops has obstructed our understanding of the impact of fashion upon women’s lives and the role of women in handicraft industry.

The final factor distinguishing Qing fashions is the rise of popular urban culture that gave signifying power to the producers and sellers of garments, accessories, and prints. By exploring how popular prints and urban rhymes disseminated images and values of fashionable dress throughout China, the argument highlights the role of vernacular writers, print designers, and pawnshop employees, rather than the gazetteer editors and imperial chroniclers that have tended to dominate the textual canon. Popular imagery shows how the turn toward the commercial producer and the

fashionable consumer impacted nineteenth-century dress objects. While connoisseurship accounts of Chinese dress typically emphasized auspicious motifs as preeminent, part of an age-old decorative system, interactions between handicraft producers and other urban craftsmen and women of the nineteenth century caused the emergence of new decorative themes: dramatic scenery and literati values, each underpinned by the normative auspicious motifs. Comparisons between embroidered dress, pattern books, and theatrical prints reveal print and performance as a major inspiration for commercial dress and accessory producers. It also suggests the highly sophisticated and referential ways through which dramatic narrative was rendered in late Qing material culture, and thus the intertextuality of nineteenth-century dress—the desire to reference and shape popular culture, and the importance of the clothed body as a site for negotiating these cultured identities.

Fashion in Qing China, as elsewhere, has often been dismissed as frivolous fripperies offering little import to understanding history. This book seeks to show how the development of Qing fashion correlates to, and illuminates, important shifts in Qing society, economy, and culture. Fashionable garments, pattern-books, and beauty prints may beguile in their decorative qualities—the bright hues and patterned surfaces designed to invite desire—but they speak to issues of central interest to Chinese historians: the question of how Chinese culture managed to be both “extremely diverse and highly integrated”; the role of commerce and publishing in spreading local styles and craft techniques across provincial borders; the contribution of commercial handicraft producers to local economies; and the use of notions like *fashion* and *taste* to navigate social hierarchies.⁵² As a “vehicle for communicating power relationships,” fashion offers a critical lens on cultural integration and social differentiation, both processes created through the same socioeconomic conditions.⁵³ And yet because the prefaced and publisher-noted text remains the primary source, studies on these topics tell us primarily about literate male elites, leaving the question of women’s cultural roles outstanding.

In the decades since Prince Guo’s wife’s robe entered the American museum, there have been enormous achievements in Qing women’s history. Scholars have demonstrated that by the nineteenth century, the sought-after writings of “cultivated women of the inner chambers” were both published independently and alongside male authors.⁵⁴ They have investigated publishers’ movement toward women readers: popular tales of romance and fantasy requiring lower-level literacy skills and “explicitly gendered female” knowledge—recipes, patterns, and pedagogy circulating in the form of household encyclopedias, manuals, and almanacs.⁵⁵ This publishing shift was paralleled by “new constructions of womanhood” reflecting women’s increasingly varied roles.⁵⁶ But if we wish to understand these issues from the perspectives of late Qing women, then material culture, particularly fashionable dress, for all its evidentiary shortcomings—no preface, no maker’s mark, no publisher—remains a critical and underused source. Here, by using embroidered dress to investigate late

Qing women, I follow a definition of cultural literacy as encompassing “myths, stories, and symbols” to better characterize the range of educational levels possessed by women of this period.⁵⁷ We cannot know whether the women who wore and made these objects were able to read and write literary Chinese (*wenyan*), but they were not culturally illiterate. Employing this more nuanced approach allows us to recognize the cultural production constituted in the wearing and making of dress, something elided in both the museum’s omission of commercial production and fashionable consumption, and Chinese history’s marginalizing of handicraft objects and vernacular texts. Rather than dragon-robed emperors or rank-badged officials, fashion in Qing China changed primarily because of ordinary people in workshops, shops, and markets—pattern-drafters, tailors, merchants, and most of all, women whose days were filled with the making, wearing, and imagining of these objects.



Visualizing Fashion

ETHNICITY, PLACE, AND TRANSMISSION

In the capital, all look to the princes' estates for guidance [on] clothing and hat styles—they call this “style of the inner household” [*nei zao yang*]. Other provinces copy these as the latest styles: within a few years it is sure to reach Suzhou and Hangzhou, but by then the Beijing styles have changed again.

HU SHIYU, *EXISTING OPENINGS* (DOU CUN), 1841

THE SHANGHAI WRITER Hu Shiyu (act. 19th c.) confidently pronounced the imperial family to be the source of late Qing fashions. Yet, thirty-odd years later, the Zhejiang official Jin Anqing (1817–1880) argued differently: “The women all follow the Suzhou styles, and Suzhou follows the lead of the courtesan’s styles, and then [ladies from] those official families imitate these styles, though I cannot understand why this should be.”¹ Who was right? Who drove the fashions of nineteenth-century China: princely estates or Suzhou courtesans? The northern capital or the southern cities? Addressing this question takes us into the heart of Qing fashions, to the interaction between Manchu and Han ethnicity, and the urban identity that formed a creative force upon the period’s styles.²

Modes of transmission in Qing fashion—the question of what kind of media functioned like the European fashion-disseminating doll or the printed illustration—remain poorly understood.³ Such information was evidently of concern to female consumers, whose styles were often described with the verb “to imitate or learn from” (*xue*), as in a Hubei bamboo ballad, which told of how the Jingshan women all say “copy the



MAP 1.1. China in the Qing Dynasty.

Suzhou [styles]: short jackets, wide sleeves and long gauze sashes.”⁴ And yet fashion publications as labeled don’t appear until the 1920s,⁵ and popular prints with titles such as *A Fashionable Beauty* (Shi zhuang meiren) date only to the late nineteenth century.⁶

How can this absence be explained? After all, the ability to describe and communicate fashion is a crucial element of any fashion system. More than just disseminating styles, such media standardized markets, tying “consumers to clothing of one impulse,” channeling them into the same sartorial time.⁷ Accordingly, many of the seminal studies on early modern European dress and textiles have been concerned with the communication of visual and textual information: Chandra Mukerji’s study of how printing formed patterns of consumption, Daniel Purdy’s thesis that the impact of visual representations of dress made print culture more decisive than the industrial revolution in developing a German fashion culture, or Daniel Roche’s argument for the role of fashion illustrations in propagating fashion in a low-cost, accessible format.⁸ Yet our knowledge of marketing systems or other mechanisms of stylistic change in Qing China remains rudimentary, without explanation for what novelist Zhang Ailing (1920–1995) called “vast, unaccountable waves of communal fancy.”⁹ How did consumers, not to mention the embroiderers, tailors, and hatmakers who made their

living from producing fashionable dress, gain information about “communal fancy”? What role did print culture play in mediating this construction of fashion?

The dominance of neo-Confucian values in surviving sources makes these questions challenging to answer. Since texts were primarily penned by scholars and officials, information on everyday lives of urban, mercantile, or middle-class groups is scarce compared to the “overdocumentation” of elite culture.¹⁰ The same is true of visual culture, though here it is not only content, but also style that obstructs the historian. Literati painting principles like the disdain for mimesis, expressed in the eschewing of color and detail of the impressionistic *xieyi* style, or the use of late Ming or Song styles to render the contemporary, hinder studies of fashion. Instead, exploring the transmission of fashion information calls for attention to less esteemed and less studied media.

Rather than literati painting, three typically anonymous genres celebrated the textures and patterns of the most fashionable textiles and dress: vernacular painting, palace painting, and popular prints. In his reappraisal of vernacular painting, art historian James Cahill defined the genre as pictures “produced by studio artists working in the cities . . . as required for diverse, everyday domestic and other uses.”¹¹ Often produced in the detail-oriented *gong bi zhong cai* (fine line, rich color) style, these images are characterized by their attention to material surroundings. Particularly in the theme of “beauties,” urban workshops evolved a mode of colorful, detailed depiction that enabled expressions of fashion.¹²

Like urban studio painting, court painting often prioritized anonymized rather than personalized brushwork, mimetic rather than expressive depictions, and decorative values over philosophical meaning. Scholars have shown how court artists of the early and mid-Qing period were often closely networked to the urban studio artists.¹³ Art history’s tendency to denigrate nineteenth-century art means much less work has been done on the Daoguang and Xianfeng courts, though as shall be seen, their paintings of court women suggest fascinating connections to urban, vernacular art.¹⁴

Popular prints (*nianhua*) had a broad consumer base and were produced in a wide range of subjects and styles: from crudely printed and simply colored to finely carved, hand-painted images produced by the Tianjin-based Yangliuqing and Suzhou-based Taohuawu workshops.¹⁵ These commercial workshops competed through print-designers, brand repute, and subject matter; for both schools, women were a vital theme, crossing genres of history, drama, rural and urban imagery, and auspicious imagery. Like professional painters, prints also recorded contemporary material culture. They deserve more attention for their role in disseminating fashion knowledge and constructing ideals of late Qing dress. Suzhou’s reputation for popular prints was bound up not only in its reputation for handicrafts, but also the beautiful women who constituted such a sizable proportion of the subject matter. Similarly, Yangliuqing’s reputation for prints and female beauty was entwined—the most beautiful women of the north were said to come from this region.¹⁶

Finally, given that images and texts often present quite different views of Qing fashion, we might question the default search for fashion imagery as necessary component to the fashion system. Disparity is seen, for example, in the minutely detailed textual descriptions of the nineteenth-century Yangzhou novel *Dreams of Wind and Moon* and the sketchy drawings that accompany the 1886 Juchengtang edition (fig. 1.1). Here, a fifteen-year-old courtesan, Fragrance (Yue Xiang), plays the lute and sings “Full River Red” to her client Lu Shu, a prison officer’s son, newly arrived in Yangzhou in search of a concubine to produce a son to make up for his unhappy and unfertile marriage. The



FIGURE 1.1. A sparse illustration from the 1848 novel *Dreams of Wind and Moon*, showing the courtesan Fragrance and her client Lu Shu. Reprinted from Hanshang Mengren, *Xiuxiang feng yue meng* (1848; Juchengtang, 1886).

novel's description of Lu Shu revels in the details: "He wore a turquoise blue woolen cap embroidered with gold couching. On the front was fastened a red-gold peony design decorated in kingfisher feather and inset with a crimson gemstone ornament. It also had a crimson silk knob on top and eight-inch raw silk tassels arranged at the back. He wore an egg-white gown of Hangzhou 'foreign' crepe silk with a corn poppy design, and over it a military-style formal jacket of foreign-blue wool lined with plain white damask and fastened with cassia-bud buttons."¹⁷ Quite different to the generic male figure shown in the illustration.

Contrary to the assumption that Qing channels of fashion were visually dominated, oral culture provided a fascinating mode for fashion transmission: urban vernacular genres like "bamboo ballads" (*zhuzhici*) and bannerman tales (*zidishu*) form a rich vein for reconstructing the details of fashionable dress. The bamboo ballad, a folk-style poetic form composed of verses made up of four seven-character lines, gained increasing popularity during the nineteenth century because of its vernacular format and colloquial language. The genre's preoccupation with city life offers an opportunity to explicitly engage in the question of locality in fashion systems. Like bamboo ballads, the Manchu bannerman tales were materially attuned and hugely popular in the mid-late Qing period. Both provide a critical source in countering the bias toward educated male elites in the historical record, which has so obscured female and vernacular communities.¹⁸

Visual and textual analysis of these understudied sources enables investigation of the changes that occurred during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Detailed examination of mid-late Qing fashions not only negates claims such as Lipovetsky's, who so blithely claimed that Chinese women's dress hardly changed between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, but also furthers our understanding of *how* those changes occurred.¹⁹ We begin with a painting of a Manchu family's birthday celebration in late Qing Beijing.

Ethnicity and Fashion: Regulating Manchu and Han Women's Dress

"Family auspicious pictures" (*jia qing tu*) were a specialty of urban workshops. Figure 1.2 exemplifies the genre's professional *gong bi* style—highly finished, densely colored, loving of and faithful to detail (the calligraphy from the famous preface to poems from the Orchid Pavilion Gathering [Lanting Xu] hanging on the wall behind the main male characters, the wheel-along elephant pulled by the center child). While this style earns it little legitimacy in the Chinese art historical canon, dominated by a literati art defined precisely against these qualities of detail, color, and mimesis, it is a fascinating image and richly informative for the historian of nineteenth-century dress.²⁰

It is also a curious work. On the one hand, it is defined by structure and harmony, both within the family and between the natural and social world at large. Its vast size—nearly two meters in height and four in width—the smooth use of



FIGURE 1.2. An anonymous family portrait of four generations of a Manchu family in late Qing Beijing, ca. 1853. Ink and mineral pigments on paper, 185.5 x 384 cm. Mactaggart Art Collection (2007.23.1), University of Alberta Museums. Gift of Sandy and Cécile Mactaggart.

perspectival receding space, first introduced by Jesuit art interactions with court painting, and the viewer's lofty vantage-point enables the artist to panoramically capture much of the family's luxurious residence.²¹ The dull weather and fur-lined hats and robes suggest a winter's day; the carefully arranged plants and the many floral reproductions in embroidered and woven silks, carved wood, and painted paper all convey harmony with seasonal nature. Four generations have gathered to celebrate the birthday of the family matriarch, a widow. Her three grandsons bring nine *ruyi*, a symbol of wish-blessings, to mark the occasion. In so doing, as with the prominent dragon-adorned carpet, this wealthy Manchu officials' family was following court fashions, highlighting the relationship between imperial and urban consumption.²² The focal matriarch is accompanied by a daughter-in-law by her side; her two sons sit at the table to the left, wearing formal dress (*li fu*) of rank badge surcoats (*bu fu*) and winter hats (*ji fu guan*).²³ Three younger men, presumably their sons, stand to their right, wearing the rank badges of middling-level civil officials.²⁴ Three younger women, their wives, stand to their right. Six young children punctuate the piece, each attended by a maid, whose dress and stance mark her as inferior. Rather than size (a conventional visual strategy in Chinese painting to convey social status), here it is facial exposure: whereas the family members, both adults and children, are shown in full-frontal poses, the maids are all shown immersed in caring for their charges, with their faces turned away to varying degrees.

Despite the careful structuring, the piece is also concerned with leisure and intimacy. Even while the composition communicates a balanced figural order, it seeks to flout it: the maid peeking out oddly at the side, the children bringing a "hundred sons at play" (*bai zi tu*) sense of controlled chaos. But the figure who most obviously breaks down that balanced structure is the single Han woman, on the far right, wearing a jacket and skirt, rather than full-length robe. This ethnic sartorial contrast is only manifest to us because, unlike the men, none of the women are wearing official dress, but instead wear an unregulated form of dress (*bian fu*).²⁵ That is to say, it is the women's fashionable dress that enables the artist to express ethnic difference.

When the Manchus defeated the Han Chinese Ming dynasty and established the Qing dynasty, they initiated what would be nearly three hundred years of interaction between Manchu and Han dress, articulated through imperial regulations but implemented and interpreted in both official and domestic settings. The primary signifier separating Manchu and Han women was that the former wore long robes, while the latter wore divided outfits of upper jackets and lower skirts. The Manchu writer Zhenjun (1857–1920) explained: "In Manchu custom, women's jackets are joined to the skirt, and do not separate the upper and lower; this is the ancient system."²⁶ Differential components of this long robe also evolved, such as the *matixiu* horseshoe cuffs on the *pao* robe (worn beneath the *gua* gown), which apparently referenced Manchu nomadic culture. *Matixiu* featured in three of the four dress categories worn by Manchu court women: ceremonial or formal court dress (*li fu*),

auspicious court dress (*ji fu*), and informal court dress (*chang fu*). Only the last category, leisure clothing (*bian fu*), did not feature this silhouette, and only it was unregulated by the Qing court, worn as it was for everyday and leisure activities.²⁷ Accordingly, it evolved more quickly and in closer dialogue with Han fashions. But this evolution took place in the face of numerous attempts to define and dictate what both Han and Manchu women should wear.

The sartorial revolution ushered in by the 1644 Manchu dynastic ascent took hold slowly for women: Ming styles remained dominant for some time. The styles described by late Ming–early Qing novels such as *The Plum in the Golden Vase* and *Marriage Destinies to Awaken the World* (Xingshi yinyuan chuan)—loose, center-fastening jackets (*duijin shan*, *dui chenshan*) worn with narrow skirts (*qunzi*); long sleeveless jackets (*bijia*), or the *beizi* (long, buttonless, center-opening jackets with side slits)—can still be found in mid-Qing depictions.²⁸ Although the painting in figure 1.3 dates to the mid-Qing, the artist has chosen to clothe the enticingly languid courtesans in late-Ming styles, reflecting its enduring prestige: the women wear *shan* and *beizi* jackets with long flowing lines, paired with slim skirts, two button-fastened collars, and narrow damask or brocade trimming leading down from the collar. The artist has highlighted their textile designs of woven roundels and floral scrolls as the primary fashion focus.

These were the styles confronted by the Manchu emperors when they ascended to the throne and faced, like all rulers, the decision as to what kind of clothing system they wanted. In China, clothing has always been a metaphor for the civilized world. Chinese civilization is traced back to the moment when the legendary founding emperors—Yao, Shun, and Yu—“allowed the upper and lower garments to hang down and the world was in order” (*chui yishang gai quzhu qian kun er tian xia zhi*).²⁹ From this point on, the establishment of dynastic rule was bound up in the clothing systems it regulated, and the distinction between the upper and lower garment became an important symbolic assertion. Like all dynastic rulers, the Manchus sought to use clothing as an implement of power and control, and like all non-Han rulers, they sought to construct a clothing system that would simultaneously assert their right to the throne as Chinese emperors and still preserve their ethnic identity and culture. The lessons of their Liao (907–1125), Jin (1115–1234), and Yuan (1271–1368) predecessors—whom they viewed as having miscalculated the balance between sinicization and cultural preservation—evidently weighed heavily. As the Qianlong emperor cautioned, “one must not speak lightly of changing dress and headwear”—to do so was to forget the ancestors, endanger the sacrifices, and weaken the dynasty.³⁰ From Hong Taiji (1626–1643) through to the Jiaqing emperor (r. 1796–1820), imperial edicts alerted the Manchu people not to “abandon our ancestors’ traditions!”³¹ But while they aimed to control through sumptuary regulation, these same texts reveal the tension of sustaining Manchu identity, a tension particularly central to women’s dress—a touchstone of political stability and moral wellbeing.



FIGURE 1.3. Six beauties adopt various leisurely poses as they recline, stretch, and play musical instruments in a well-furnished set of rooms. *Women in a Brothel*, seventeenth or eighteenth century. Painting on paper. Emil Preetorius Collection, Museum Fünf Kontinente (77-11-23).

Over the course of the Qing dynasty, the Manchu court developed detailed regulatory frameworks of hierarchically organized, sartorial rights for the imperial family, nobility, officials, and commoners, as defined by color, material, motif and pattern. These texts focus on clothing worn on official and court occasions; ostensibly they express little interest in controlling the dress of either Han or Manchu women outside those arenas.³² But studying these sumptuary regulations alongside objects and images reveals their limited reach, and hence the necessary supplementation in the form of imperial edicts and moralistic discourse, which we will examine shortly.

The tomb of Kangxi's third daughter, Princess Rongxian (1673–1728), excavated in 1966, provides some of the earliest surviving women's garments of the Qing period (contemporaneous with the Prince Guo robe). Rongxian was married to the Mongolian prince Wu Ergun (d. 1721), who gained Kangxi's gratitude during the 1690 Battle of Wulan Butong, and was sent to Inner Mongolia at the age of nineteen. Her tomb contained hundreds of objects, including multiple garments: ten were worn upon her body, but only three survived, the outermost layer, a pearl-embroidered yellow dragon roundel robe probably worn for summer court dress; the second layer—a butterfly-embroidered informal robe; and the innermost layer, an antique motif-embroidered informal robe (fig. 1.4; see also chap. 5). All three robes show early Qing imperial styles: a round neck, right overlapping lapel, straight narrow sleeves (*ping xiu*) that covered the wrist, and a slit-less skirt.³³



FIGURE 1.4. An antique motif-embroidered silk informal robe, tomb of Princess Rongxian. L 147 cm, W 161 cm. Chifeng Museum. Reprinted from Qin Bo, “Chifeng bowuguan cang san jian gongzhu paofu,” with permission from the author.

When Rongxian married in 1691, she was titled a second-rank princess (*heshuo gongzhu*); in 1709, she was promoted to first-rank princess (*gulun gongzhu*). The following regulation specifies the auspicious court dress (*ji fu*) to which she was entitled:

Dragon robes. Princesses of the first rank, princesses of the second rank, the wives of the princes of the first rank, the wives of the princes of the second rank, the princesses of a commandery, and the princesses of a county should be incense color, embroidered throughout with nine *long* dragons. The wives of the *beile* lords, *beizi* lords, defender generals, bulwark generals, and the ladies of a commandery, ladies of a county, and ladies of a village should wear blue or slate blue, according to use, and embroidered throughout with nine *mang* dragons. Wives of commoner dukes, down to the third-ranking titled ladies, wives of the

supporter generals should wear [robes] embroidered throughout with nine four-clawed *mang* dragons.³⁴

Such sumptuary rules effectively laid down status bands—groupings of material entitlement: first-rank princesses wore the same dress designs as the second-rank princesses, and so on. But they also left considerable room for manipulation, something evident in Rongxian’s yellow dragon roundel robe (*long pao*), which overstepped the regulated colors for her rank. Furthermore, her sleeves and sleeve-cuffs both featured a design of longevity roundels, also against the regulations.³⁵ Rongxian’s excess might be explained by her favored status, but the object-text comparison highlights how individuals manipulated the gaps created, in part, by the regulatory reliance on textual description. Here fashion flouted regulation in a formal dress genre, but the opportunities to deviate were greater in the informal genres, in which women possessed, arguably, more autonomy.

The two informal garments in Rongxian’s tomb bear close resemblance to an informal garment called *chenyi*. Then just coming into currency (the earliest dated example is from the Qianlong period), it would become the most popular informal style for nineteenth-century Manchu women.³⁶ Both garments also feature southern influence: embroidered in the Suzhou style, they feature patterns and motifs found in southern pattern books of this period.³⁷ Other tomb finds corroborate this. When the Qianlong period tomb of Imperial Consort Rong (Rong Fei) was excavated in 1979, it contained several garments and fabric lengths with southern loom-marks: a blue damask dragon robe fabric with the loom-mark “Jiangning [Nanjing] imperial workshop [supervised by] official Cheng Shan”; a dark brown (sauce-colored) “inch *mang*-dragon-patterned” damask robe fabric with the same Jiangning mark, and also “Weaver Wang Qi”; and a camel-colored dragon roundel and antique motif–patterned satin with the loom-mark “Suzhou imperial workshop [supervised by] official Si De.” Imperial workshop archives record the employment of Cheng Shan and Si De in the Suzhou and Jiangning (Nanjing) workshops during the Qianlong period.³⁸ The tomb also contained several embroidered garments and accessories, all of which came from Suzhou.³⁹

The garments from Princess Rongxian’s and Consort Rong’s tombs demonstrate the way material culture itself disseminated fashion: silk robes traveled through the empire, bringing Suzhou design to Beijing and even on again to Inner Mongolia. They also underline the influence of southern Han style on the Manchu imperial court. This was not something that the Manchu emperors appeared to appreciate. Rather, edict after edict sought to limit the degree of Han influence upon Manchu women. For example, in 1759, after inspecting the elegant ladies (*xiu nü*) to be selected as imperial consorts, the Qianlong emperor (r. 1735–96) was apparently shocked to discover that:

Some banner women have been imitating Han people’s clothing and adornment. This is certainly not the Manchu custom. If in front of the

Emperor you esteem such things, then what kind of willful clothing is being worn at home? This may be a trifling matter, but if I do not admonish it, then it will inevitably become common practice, and this would be of great concern for traditional Manchu culture. Therefore, I am explicitly charging the senior officials of the Eight Banners to clearly communicate to each of the bannermen: from now on they must attach importance to being simple and frugal, and cease in this willful costume!⁴⁰

The main mechanism for this influence was the triennial selection through which all eligible daughters of officials in the Manchu banners (administrative military divisions) were inspected and selected to become imperial concubines. Beginning in the eighteenth century, the imperial consorts were also chosen from Mongol and Han banners. Expanding the ethnic scope became problematic: many of the elegant ladies might have had Han Chinese mothers or relatives, and were hence raised in the Chinese way; later, the Qing court narrowed the selection by reducing the numbers of eligible Han banners.⁴¹ But the problem of controlling cultural interaction remained, despite repeated edicts charging fathers, brothers, and a whole catalog of officials with responsibility and threatened punishments. The problem was that, as an 1806 edict put it, “It is easy to control men and boys, but women and girls are secluded deep in the woman’s quarters, and their clothing is hard to monitor.”⁴²

In these edicts, “bad habits” in women’s dress tends to reference wide-sleeved robes, foot-binding, and extravagance: “Recently the banner women often wear clothing of wide sleeves . . . and their consumption is also several times greater than before . . . competing to esteem extravagance, even imitating the Han people’s foot-binding, these kind of bad habits . . . have great bearing on the minds of our country’s ordinary people.”⁴³ The edicts suggest the “wide-sleeved Han styles” came to synecdochally represent notions of gendered ethnicity, but visual culture presents more complex interactions between fashion and ethnically defined sartorial standards, implying that, rather than imitation of, or differentiation from, Han styles, hybridity defined Manchu fashions.

An informal portrayal of a mid-Qing emperor-to-be and his women, *Yinzhen Enjoying Pleasures* (Yinzhen xingle tu), one of a set of five hanging scrolls, was painted when the Yongzheng emperor (1678–1735; r. 1722–35) was about thirty-one (ca. 1708), a decade or so before he became emperor (fig. 1.5).⁴⁴ As Prince Yinzhen, he is dressed in scholarly blue robes and accompanied by four women, separated from him by the study walls, and divided into two pairs by the balustrade. They are also divided by dress: the older two in the back wear Manchu-style plain robes, one with decorative collar and border, and their hair is in the *ruan chi tou* style (soft wings hairstyle), a predecessor of the *liang ba tou* style, associated with Manchu femininity.⁴⁵ But the younger front pair draw the viewer’s attention with small cloud collars (*yun jian*),

long sleeveless jackets (*bijia*), pleated skirts, and tasseled belts, all features associated with southern Han fashions of the time.⁴⁶ The disjuncture between this vision and the many textual edicts prohibiting Manchu women from wearing Han Chinese styles has generated some controversy and a number of explanations.

How to explain the consorts' dress? Perhaps it was just a play. The Qianlong emperor once commented on a similar painting, in which the women also wear Han-style dress (though in an archaic mode), that the garments were merely an artistic device.⁴⁷ That is, the choice of Han clothing should not be read as real, but rather as a masquerade, and should therefore be categorized along with other "enjoying pleasures" (*xingle tu*) images, which depict the Yongzheng and Qianlong emperors as fictional figures or generic characters, such as a Taoist monk or Ottoman prince.⁴⁸ Yet it is hard to accord this playful stance with the Qianlong emperor's stern words in the edicts cited earlier. How could he simultaneously rebuke and revel? After all, unlike the other Qianlong and Yongzheng images depicting women dressed in archaic Han styles, the *Yinzhen Enjoying Pleasures* scroll not only shows contemporary styles (not historical fantasy), but also the emperor himself with these women. Perhaps, then, the images were a realistic record—the consorts were Han women wearing Han dress. The Kangxi emperor famously forbade Han women from entering the Forbidden City, and expressed his concern over "the customs becoming more luxurious and those who would wear clothing in excess of their position."⁴⁹ But both Kangxi and Yongzheng were known to desire Han beauties, surreptitiously bringing them to the palace through lower-level consort selections.⁵⁰ Yet it seems that even Han women were not sanctioned in wearing Han dress. During the Shunzhi reign (1644–61), Empress Xiaozhuang (1613–1688), the second spouse of Hong Taiji, insisted that the Han banner girls her husband had introduced as palace consorts could neither bind their feet nor wear Han dress in the palace.⁵¹ Another possible explanation lies in aesthetics. Curator Shan Guoqiang argued that since Manchu dress was perceived as "excessively austere," it could not satisfy the emphasis upon feminine beauty and aesthetic pleasure required by the *shinü* beauty genre's conventions, hence the practice of wearing Han Chinese clothing.⁵² Yet this situation that he presents as intuitive is worth querying: why did Han beauty standards prevail? After all, these are not the archaic, Song dynasty Han women's styles—the standard mode of female dress used within *shinü* or *meiren* beauty paintings, associated with literati aesthetics—rather the women wear early-mid Qing fashions. The *Yinzhen Enjoying Pleasures* demonstrates not only that these styles were well known at court, but also that Han fashions were alluring, both to the women who wore these clothes and the emperors and princes who controlled their dress. In this respect, debating whether this was real practice or fantasy misses the point. The visualization of the southern beauty in images commissioned by the Qing emperors underlines the aesthetic dominance of Han women's dress and beauty during the eighteenth century. To consider how this influence was perpetuated, we turn to the southern courtesan.



“Study the Suzhou Fashions”: The Fashionable Southern Courtesan

Decades of dragon robe–focused research created a model dominated by court taste or palace style (*gong yang*), in which styles originated in the capital’s courts and princely mansions and then circulated southward to more ordinary folk. In this model of fashion as conspicuous consumption, whereby imperial practice inspired domestic imitation, tastes ran from top to bottom: initiated by the upper classes, imitated by lower classes.⁵³ This was how early Qing writer Ye Mengzhu understood fashion: “It likely begins in the gentry families, [then] their maids and concubines copy, and this gradually seeps through to their families and then catches on in the neighborhood.”⁵⁴ And it was how many late Ming commentators interpreted fashion—it was something founded upon social mobility and competition.⁵⁵ But though emulation is an undeniably powerful force in the social behavior governing fashion, the “trickle-down” processes that dominate classic sociological models of fashion like those of Thorstein Veblen or Georg Simmel have been discredited for overly simplistic mono-directional analysis, particularly for assuming that only elites can innovate, rather than multiway patterns of influence.⁵⁶ Evidence from Chinese fashion counters such theories, showing instead the role of lower-class figures like courtesans and entertainers.

In the late Ming satirical novel *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, it is actually female entertainers rather than gentlewomen who exert the most influence: the protagonist Ximen Qing’s concubines anxiously assess the outfits of the sing-song girls who visit the house and with whom they compete for the favors of their master.⁵⁷ Indeed, contrary to Ye Mengzhu’s account, most other commentators—from the late Ming through to the late Qing—singled out nonelite groups like courtesans and entertainers as integral to the Chinese fashion system: “In recent years, the clothing and adornment of men and women change roughly every few years. Men’s clothing and headwear styles follow the capital; all follow the trend of extravagance. [But] the women’s clothing and adornment all follow the courtesans’ styles, even women from good families follow this bad example, it is really very strange.”⁵⁸ Their influence puzzled such commentators, but several factors explain why courtesans became tastemakers: their ties to entertainment and performance, their relative mobility and moral freedom, and their necessary expenditure on adornment and fashion.⁵⁹ The relative freedom of entertainers, like servants, made them a point of contact, a mechanism by which new material culture could enter the homes of otherwise secluded women. But arguably their position as fashion arbiter was also a function of the gentlewomen’s absence, an absence created primarily by moral discourse.

As seen in figure 1.3, the fashionable dress worn by courtesans went hand in hand with “informal and suggestive poses” and objects of erotic symbolism.⁶⁰ Bound feet, tiny

FIGURE 1.5. One of a set of five hanging scrolls depicting the mid-Qing Manchu emperor-to-be at leisure, accompanied by four women dressed in both Manchu and Han styles. “Yinzen Enjoying Pleasures” (Yinzen xingle tuzhou), ca. 1708. Color on silk, H 157 cm, W 71 cm. Palace Museum (0006440). Photograph by Ping Hui.

shoes, a glimpse of red linings, sleeves pushed up to expose a slender wrist, symbols like peonies, zither or Buddha's hand citron: these visual codes alluded to their sexuality and accessibility. Such poses and details feature in many such workshop-painted beauties, underlining the importance of the courtesan to this genre, and the apparent absence of a viable visual genre in which the gentlewoman could be depicted. Other than the ancestor portrait—a genre confined by key principles like static, full-frontal poses, conservative material surroundings, and official dress—prior to the late Qing, there were few examples in which genteel woman could be visually presented, let alone shown in informal pose or informal dress, contributing to the sense in which gentility was expressed primarily through an absence of fashion.

Needless to say, the very places where courtesan influence was strongest—cities like Suzhou, Yangzhou, Nanjing—were the places where urban workshops filled marketplaces with paintings and prints of these fashionable beauties. As Finnane argues, the southern courtesan's "highly gendered image" was synecdochic of southern urbanity, "a representation of the exotic."⁶¹ But the power of the southern courtesan also points to the importance of place within the Chinese fashion system, the degree to which renowned commercial centers like Suzhou disseminated their styles throughout China. To speak of Qing fashion was to speak of the clothing of Suzhou—all sought to "imitate the styles of the Wu beauties" (*xue Wu jie*).⁶² One way in which this influence was perpetuated was through oral culture. Hence, in historian Fan Jinmin's survey of how Suzhou style (Suyang, Suyi) reached across China—from Zhenan, Wenzhou, where "the Suzhou styles have just arrived, pale white skirts embroidered with peonies" to Guangxu-period Xiangtan, Hunan, where "the women tie their hair so it hung down behind, slightly raised, lightly tied at the front but with the hair floating forward" in the "Suzhou bai" style—his primary evidentiary genre is the bamboo ballad.⁶³ But visual culture was also a vital medium for spreading Suzhou styles, a process evident in the development of a key fashion accessory, the cloud collar.

The Cloud Collar in Popular Prints

The cloud collar actually has a long history in Chinese dress, but it first appears as a fashion accessory in the so-called Gusu (Old Suzhou) prints from Suzhou's Taohuawu district that are dated to the early eighteenth century, due to their export to Japan during this period.⁶⁴ Figure 1.6, an anonymous print later titled "Playing the *Qin* in the Double Osmanthus Veranda," shows early Qianlong period styles worn by the focal female, the central *qin* player; her companion's size suggests lower status, likely

FIGURE 1.6. Both women in this anonymous print wear dress and hairstyles of early Qing Suzhou. *Playing the Qin on the Double Osmanthus Veranda* (Shuang Gui Xuan tanqin), Qianlong period (1736–95). 95.4 × 54.4 cm. Reprinted from Feng Jicai, *Zhongguo muban nianhua jicheng, Riben cangpin juan*, 87, with permission from the Zhonghua Book Company.

雙桂軒

茶烟
琴韻
書聲

古雨
松風
竹茶



a maid. Both have the fashionable “goose heart” (*e'dan xin*) hairstyle, and though their dress is still styled to late Ming proportions, the appearance of the cloud collar is new.⁶⁵

Contemporaneous prints from Yangliuqing in north China show quite different styles, evidence of the variations encoded in place. A Qianlong period Yangliuqing print depicts ladies out visiting for the Spring Festival, wearing, like the Suzhou prints, waist-length jackets and vests over longer jackets, layered over skirts (fig. 1.7). In this mid-Qing aesthetic, the emphasis upon structured garments, such as waistcoats and jackets, divides their bodies in thirds, each portion emphasized by the patterns: large floral medallions against geometric backgrounds, and narrow monochrome patterned trimmings.⁶⁶



FIGURE 1.7. This rare Yangliuqing print, *Ladies Enjoying Spring* (Youchun shinü tu), is symmetrically divided across the two separate prints (*duiping*). The ladies' clothing, in particular the waist-length layering, reflects the transitions from late Ming to mid-Qing styles. Qianlong period (1736–95). New print from historical print-blocks, 63 × 110 cm. Tianjin Yangliuqing Museum, reprinted from Feng Jicai, *Zhongguo muban nianhua jicheng, Yangliuqing juan*, with permission from the Zhonghua Book Company



FIGURE 1.8. This Yangliuqing print awards the viewer access to a lavishly furnished niched-off room, where two young beauties play happily with two plump boys. *Soothing the Infants* (Fu ying tu), later Qianlong period (1736–95). Qi Jianlong printshop, 61 × 109 cm. Tianjin Museum. Reprinted from Feng Jicai, *Zhongguo muban nianhua jicheng, Yangliuqing juan*, 68–69, with permission from the Zhonghua Book Company.

The cloud collar was absent in this Qianlong Yangliuqing print, suggesting the fashion had not yet reached the north (other than in the palace; see fig. 1.5). But by the nineteenth century, the cloud collar was central to Han women’s celebratory dress, and it became an integral component of Yangliuqing print beauties, though styled rather differently than the versions shown in the earlier Suzhou prints.⁶⁷ The example in figure 1.8 has a print-shop brand mark, the “Qi Jianlong old print-shop,” suggesting a late eighteenth-century dating.⁶⁸ Though both women—shown inside a well-furnished alcove, playing with two plump male children, and accompanied by various auspicious accoutrements—wear decorative collars, the central woman’s four *ruyi*-lobed (*sihe ruyi*) style would become most popular.

By the nineteenth century, countless Yangliuqing prints, in particular those produced by the Daoguang period Aizhu Studio, would depict this style with its heavier, bordered outlines, worn over much embellished jackets and finely pleated skirts.⁶⁹ It is this style that is described in the novel *Tales of Heroic Lovers* (Ernü yingxiong zhuan; ca. 1850), by Manchu bannerman Wenkang (ca. 1798–after 1865). The knight-errant heroine, Thirteenth Sister (He Yufeng), is wed dressed in “a crimson *pifeng* jacket embroidered with the ‘hundred flowers blossoming simultaneously’ pattern, and a sand-green gauze skirt embroidered with the ‘hundred butterflies meeting happily in spring’ pattern, matched with a ‘four joined *ruyi*’ cloud collar.”⁷⁰

By the late Qing, the cloud collar jacket was integral to celebratory dress. In his description, Xu Ke quoted a poem that describes the cloud collar as metonym for

fairy maidens—to secure one was to gain a night spent with such a maiden: “Women cover their shoulders with the cloud collar as adornment. Its use began in the Yuan dynasty with dancing girls. In the Ming it became ceremonial wear for women, and in this [Qing] dynasty Han women also wear it as wedding dress.”⁷¹ The Yangliuqing and Taohuawu popular prints enable us to understand how the cloud collar might have been visually spread across China, and how it became associated with Han women’s wedding attire; these beauty prints reference the values of beauty, fertility, wealth, cultural attainment, and happiness that women wished to evoke on celebratory occasions.

The wedding day was one of the few days in a woman’s lifetime that she could wear such gorgeous dress, and the preparation process would have taken months, indeed years in the case of a childhood engagement. Critically, weddings involved not only the labor of the girl herself, as accounts of dress production have typically emphasized, but increasingly over the early modern period, also the labor of strangers, employed both in and outside the home. The Qing period saw an increasing expectation of (and thus pressure to achieve) a rich material consumption to adorn ceremonial occasions—births, marriages, festivals—yet most women would have struggled to afford the embellished formal wear so expensive in tailoring, fabrics, and decoration. Small accessories like the cloud collar or decorative borders succeeded precisely because of their ability to allow a wider range of women to participate in celebratory consumption.

The cloud collar’s ceremonial role partly derived from its material presence, its ability to structure the shoulders, modifying the body shape to create width and presence, and offering a clear, auspiciously framed canvas to “carry” motifs of good fortune. Like other components of ritual dress—detachable neck pendants, overskirt lappet aprons, and belt hangings—the cloud collar created movement and presence that demarcated the ceremonial space in which the bride was transferred to her new home and family. The cloud collar was often trimmed with silver pieces, bells, and tassels, additions which ceremonialized the procession and drew attention to the bride. In Henan, for example, brides wore cloud collars with hanging ribbons and bells, their tinkling walk accentuating their movements.⁷²

Equally, less prosaic points also favored the cloud collar. Its practical function in protecting the clothing from hair-oil was early noted by taste arbiter Li Yu (1611–1679): “Cloud collars are used to cover the clothes, to avoid dirt and oil, and made into the most beautiful shapes.”⁷³ Many women could only afford one or two items of formal clothing for celebratory occasions, and protecting them from dirt was challenging—embroidered silks were not easy to wash.⁷⁴ Cloud collars not only adorned, they also protected from and covered up stains, an association explicit enough in the early nineteenth century for Lin Sumen (ca. 1748–1809) to name the cloud collar “hair-oil collar” (*you jian*).⁷⁵ They could also facilitate the rejuvenation of dated outfits and, like the growth of secondhand clothes shops, hire-shops, and pawnshops, should be understood as responding to the challenge of securing new clothes for New Year celebrations or other formal events.⁷⁶

Both ceremonial associations and practical functions may have contributed to the appearance of a style central to nineteenth-century fashions: *ao* or *shan* jackets with appliqué cloud collar and coordinated bottom and overlapping front borders, as seen in the nineteenth-century Yangliuqing prints. The attachment of the cloud collar to the jacket had been anticipated by Li Yu, who advised coordinating the cloud collar's coloring with the main jacket, so as to prevent the lining from being exposed through the cloud collar's movements. After further thought he found this still unsatisfactory: "If the collar moves and the color is the same, it is still not as good as the collar not moving at all." His solution to the problem was prescient: "The [cloud collar] is suitable for wearing at home, but if you go out visiting, then you must subtly affix [the collar] with threads, so as to avoid it coming apart from the clothing."⁷⁷

Ethnicity and Embellishment in Nineteenth-Century Fashions

These cloud collar embellished and bordered jacket styles, worn with similarly adorned skirts and trousers, defined the look of the late Qing. Taohuawu and Yangliuqing print shops filled the markets with these fashionable beauties, shown in their boudoir or garden accompanied by a younger maid or female relative, and rollicking sons. The rise of these beauties in popular prints occurred against shifts in the defining characteristics of gentlewoman and courtesan. The archetypical late Ming–early Qing courtesan was a talented beauty renowned for music, performance, and poetry. As companions to gentlemen in a society where men and women, even within the same kin unit, were not expected to intermingle, their presence effectively removed the function of education or culture on the part of the gentlewoman's wife. But Manchu attempts to regulate entertainment quarters in cities like Nanjing or Yangzhou accompanied commercialization of the industry to make the late Qing courtesan figure a hollowed-out version of her late Ming rendition.⁷⁸ This coincided with a growing acceptability, at least among affluent families, that daughters should receive a full and rich education, and an assertion by gentlewomen (*guixiu*) that their identities as wives and mothers should be defined not just by their gentry status, but also by their own cultural achievements.⁷⁹

The gentlewoman's newly articulated claims of culture and literacy was accompanied by a shift in the representation of beauties, now surrounded by symbols of literary attainment—brushes, scrolls, books. In addition to the continued production of overtly erotic renditions aimed primarily at a male viewer, another genre of woman's portraits that "present women more as subjects in their own right" suggests women's increasing involvement in purchasing and commissioning vernacular painting.⁸⁰ Popular prints also support this argument. Whereas earlier depictions of beauties were dominated by courtesan figures sporting flirtatious poses that highlighted sexualizing motifs, late Qing popular prints portray women as validated by symbols of literary attainment, rather than erotic implications. In a print like figure 1.9, it is symbols of literacy and



FIGURE 1.9. The elegantly dressed mother and her son hold the viewer's eye as they gaze out calmly, surrounded by emblems of literacy—ink, brush, paper, books. *Educating Sons in the Women's Quarters* (Guifang jiaozhi), mid-late Qing. Yishengcheng printshop, 90 × 54 cm. Xinjian County Museum, reprinted from Feng Jicai, *Zhongghuo muban nianhua jicheng*, Jiangzhou juan, 205, with permission from the Zhonghua Book Company.

education—brushes, books, scrolls, painting—in addition to the male child that award the female sitter cultural heft. These women assert a newly defined social function—their education justified by their roles as teachers to their sons, and as such, responsible for family fortunes. But in turn, their fashionable clothing, featuring details such as the embroidered border or the cloud collar, came to reference the social status of being a cultured and educated lady.

The print workshop's circulation of this ideal had wide influence. Both Yangliuqing and Taohuawu prints were highly commercialized endeavors, with printshops establishing branches to consolidate market share and reach. Yangliuqing, whose location on the Grand Canal meant it could access paper and dyes from Suzhou, had more than seventeen shops during the mid-late Qing period, and the most well-known shops opened branches beyond Yangliuqing, disseminating not just the artistic style and content of their prints but also fashionable styles.⁸¹ For example, when the Wan Chang print shop established a branch in Weixian, Shandong Province, print designers and print carvers were sent to help; even the prints themselves were sent along. Thus, the Yangliuqing print aesthetic infiltrated Weixian's local print tradition (Yangjiabu).⁸² In Yangliuqing, most families worked in this trade, either full-time or part-time, and women's labor was particularly important. Each year, during the spring quiet, or after the autumn harvest had been gathered, the print shops would distribute work to women in the surrounding forty-six villages. Their labor was most critical during the final stage, when color was added (some was printed, but much applied by hand); women had a reputation for talent in tinting facial features and dress details.⁸³

With the expansion of Yangliuqing's commercial reach, its style eventually reached the court. Successful print shops like Qi Jianlong opened a branch in Beijing's Qianmen Gate neighborhood, and Yangliuqing print artists traveled to the capital, to work in locations such as Langfang Toutiao and Longfu Temple Street, and perhaps even at court.⁸⁴ In providing a point of connection between imperial and vernacular styles, artists infused Yangliuqing prints with influence from imperial workshops, while at the same time this vernacular art form impacted imperial art, something evident from the nineteenth-century Manchu court's "enjoying pleasures" portraits.

These informal dress portraits (*bian fu xiang*) were the counterparts of the official court dress portraits (*chao fu xiang*), and like today's carefully curated magazine-spreads of celebrities at home, dress was a key way in which the desired construct of informal domesticity was communicated.⁸⁵ Thus, in several examples from the Daoguang and Xianfeng periods (1859–61), the imperial consorts wear informal robes as standard. One example, *Autumn's Overflowing Happiness Courtyard* (Xiyi qiuting tu), shows the Daoguang emperor sitting together with his third wife, Empress Xiaoquancheng (1808–1840), along with consorts and children on an autumn day in the Garden of Perfect Brightness (Yuanmingyuan; also known as the Old Summer Palace). The women all wear *chenyi* robes, which by that point was the established informal robe for Manchu women (fig. 1.10).⁸⁶



FIGURE 1.10. An anonymous family portrait of the Daoguang emperor and his third wife, Empress Xiaoquancheng, alongside consorts and children. *Autumn's Overflowing Happiness Courtyard* (Xiyi qiuting tuzhou), nineteenth century. Ink and color on paper, L 181 cm, W 202.5 cm. Palace Museum. Photograph by Hu Chui.

Xiaoquancheng was raised in Suzhou, apparently with artistic talents, and she had been swiftly promoted to first-rank concubine and then empress in 1834 after giving birth to the Daoguang emperor's first prince, Yizhu (later the Xianfeng emperor). But intrigue blighted her rise, and she died suddenly at thirty-three after plotting to kill Prince Yixin, who was competing with Yizhu to become emperor.⁸⁷ In images of Xiaoquancheng and female contemporaries, the vision of Manchu dress promoted by the regulations, and which circulated through imperially sponsored media like court painting, contrasts sharply with the Han-style dress seen in the earlier Yongzheng period beauties. These images present a new mode of informal beauty: a more confident assertion of Manchu style and a quite different bodily aesthetic—their heads larger in proportion than before, with sharply pointed chins and widened foreheads.

This development is especially significant given the lack of Manchu female figures in popular prints.⁸⁸ And yet, likely influenced by the Yangliuqing print workshops and probably professional workshops in Beijing (compare, for example, the women in the Mactaggart painting in fig. 1.2), similar facial shapes and figural proportions are found in another painting of Empress Xiaoquancheng in informal dress, *Portrait of Empress Xiaoquancheng in Informal Dress* (Xiaoquancheng huanghou bianzhuang xiang), unusual in presenting a woman and girl pairing (fig. 1.11). The empress wears a floral silk *chenyi* embroidered with plum and cherry blossoms, accessorized with embellished sleeve-bands, an elaborate, three-layer, willow-leaf-shaped cloud collar, and the Manchu headdress (*liang ba tou*) of stiffened black satin adorned with artificial flowers and precious stones. She stands, wrist exposed, leaning in behind the corner of the wooden table topped with a bowl of peaches, while the girl, likely her daughter, adopts a similar posture, playfully positioned by the stool. Both composition and fashionable dress visually connect this depiction with the Yangliuqing and Taohuawu beauties, a comparison particularly striking next to this Taohuawu print of a Suzhou gentlewoman (fig. 1.12).⁸⁹ One wears a Manchu robe, the other a Han jacket and skirt, but the comparison hints at the convergence of each group in their confident presentations of fashionable dress.

By the mid-nineteenth century, the *chenyi*, previously close-fitting around the chest and sleeves as in figure 1.4, had evolved into a loose, embellished garment, generally worn underneath outer garments, unless in private.⁹⁰ In his anecdotes on the Daoguang and Xianfeng courts, Mongolian scholar-official Chongyi (1885–1945) described the social mores that dictated how Manchu women wore these garments: “[When] inside [women] don’t wear [formal] *pao* robes but instead wear *chenyi* robes in green, yellow, peach, or moon white, but not crimson.”⁹¹ In the Mactaggart painting (see fig. 1.2), the women wear *chenyi* with long sleeveless vests (*da kanjian*) on top.⁹² But the *chenyi* was often combined with another less formal garment, the *changyi* outer gown. This had developed around the same time as the *chenyi* and was similar in style—straight-cut, round-necked, ankle-length—but it could not be worn alone and was even more decorative in style, particularly in the *ruyi*-headed slits on each side extending up to the armpit (*kaixi*).⁹³ Chongyi described both styles in some detail: “The next most formal dress styles are the *changyi* and the *chenyi*, both have *wanxiu* sleeves (large cuffs turned back and bordered with patterned trimmings). The *changyi* comes in crimson, lotus pink, or moon white (either embroidered or plain, depending upon the wearer’s age and seniority). These styles are worn by married women, but if the woman is widowed, then she should wear a blue *changyi*, or if [she wears] a dark reddish brown *chenyi*, then it should match the color of the outer *changyi*.”⁹⁴

This explains why the senior and widowed birthday-celebrating matriarch in the Mactaggart painting is wearing the somber blue color (with stylized *shou* longevity-character roundels as befits the occasion), and her younger relatives are wearing admittedly not very much brighter shades of brown and blue bamboo and



FIGURE 1.11. An anonymous portrait of Empress Xiaoquancheng and her daughter. *Empress Xiaoquancheng in Informal Dress* (Xiaoquancheng huanghou bianzhuang xiangzhou), Daoguang period (1821–50), before 1840. Hanging scroll, ink and colors on paper, 177 × 96.5 cm. Palace Museum (GU 6582). Photograph by Liu Mingjie.



FIGURE 1.12. A mid-late Qing Taohuwu print of a well-dressed mother, while her son plays with a sprig of osmanthus (*guihua*) symbolizing nobility (*guizi*). *A Beauty and a Vase of Flowers* (Meiren chahua tu), 80 × 55 cm. Reprinted from Feng Jicai, *Zhongguo muban nianhua jicheng*, Taohuwu juan, shang, 87, with permission from the Zhonghua Book Company.

chrysanthemum patterned silks, with touches of green and red. Writer Xia Renhu (1873–1963) concurred that “the color of women’s dress is determined by age. Clothing of gold embroidery and pale colors is only worn by newlyweds or young ladies [*guixiu*]. Once one is married, then proper colors are black, blue, purple and dark reddish-brown.”⁹⁵

The muted shades singled out by these writers partly explains the trend toward embroidery and ribbon-trimming in both *chenyi* and *changyi* garments and their popularity. The records of Empress Dowager Cixi’s maid, He Rong, note these embellishments’ appeal: apart from a few special occasions such as imperial birthdays, when they could wear red, the rest of the year consorts basically wore two colors: green in spring—light green, dark green, or old green, as they wished, but not be too eye-catching—and purples and browns in autumn. Hence the primary site for color and decoration were the woven ribbons and embroidered borders applied to the



FIGURE 1.13. Scottish photographer John Thomson has positioned these two women to show off their contrasting hairstyles and garments. “Tartar Lady and Maid,” from *Through China with a Camera*, 420.

sleeve-bands, collars, hems, and shoe bases.⁹⁶ But another reason for the prevalence of this fashion was its ease of participation, regardless of ethnicity—whether *chenyi* robe or *shan* jacket, both offered equally good sites for repeated bordered embellishment. Thus the bordered garment can be understood as providing Manchu women with a chance to participate in the same fashion site as Han women, something visualized in a striking photo showing a Manchu woman in a long robe and *liang ba tou* hairstyle, with her Han maid wearing a jacket and skirt, and hanging bun (*Suzhou ji*) hairstyle (fig. 1.13). Even while each ethnic group maintained defined styles of dress—Manchu women wore *changpao*, *changyi*, *chenyi*; Han women wore *ao*, *shan*, *gua*—the fashionable border breached the sartorial separation theorized in regulations and moral discourse.⁹⁷

Just as the Daoguang period *Enjoying Pleasures* portraits present a more confident vision of Manchu femininity, so too, in the nineteenth century, did “banner” (*qi*) begin to be used to mark Manchu women’s dress. Hu Shiyu, whose thoughts on fashion began this chapter, considered that “when it comes to the splendid in women’s clothes, none can surpass that of Wu Prefecture” where “borders are exceedingly wide, and they trim [clothing] with the ‘devil railings’ [*guizi langan*].” But he also singled out another style: “When the border is extremely broad, perhaps even two *cun*, then these are called “banner borders” [*qi bian*]; woven with gold and colored threads, they compete in the new and contend in the fine, and are not a bit concerned with the cost of workmanship.”⁹⁸ The Palace Museum collection shows a notable shift in the use of banners to label Manchu women’s dress, beginning in the early nineteenth century and becoming ubiquitous in the Tongzhi and Guangxu period (1875–1908) archives. Clothing containers featured banner labels like “banner gown,” “banner robe,” and even the handkerchief (*shoujuan*) was renamed *qi pa*.⁹⁹ A length of silk yardage, prepared for but not made up into a *chenyi* gown, now in the Mactaggart collection (fig. 1.14), demonstrates the use of this terminology and specifies the instructions for making and labels it a *qi chenyi* garment (fig. 1.15).

Despite the assertive Qi fashion terminology, there is little difference between the sleeves of the Han woman and that of the Manchu women in the Mactaggart painting (see fig. 1.2). They wear the same makeup, the same style earrings (three connected rings rather than three separate earrings), and the same ribbon trimmings. Distinction has been reduced to three places: the skirt and knee-length jacket rather than ankle-length gown, the bound feet, and the hair ornaments—the Manchu women’s oversized fake flowers are contrasted with the Han woman’s kingfisher coronet.¹⁰⁰ Many have seen this period as the final movement in the merging of Han and Manchu women’s dress, as described in bamboo ballads like “New Words on the Fashions” (Shishang xin tan): “More than half of the bannerwomen have changed to Han dress, palace robes are cut [in the style of the] short jacket and skirt.”¹⁰¹ Like Qing emperors, observers narrated this development with reference to an age-old assimilation of the ethnic outsider: “Recently, the Manchu women have all changed to the Han styles, and since then the difference between Han and Manchu people, just like the difference between the Han and the Hu, the Qiang, the Rong, the Qidan, and the Nüzhen of former history can no longer be distinguished.”¹⁰² Women’s fashions modeled wider processes of cultural separation and assimilation.

And yet this process worked both ways. Though southern urban centers of Suzhou and Yangzhou dominated accounts of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Qing fashion, late Qing trends like the beribboned *chenyi* seem to have been created in the capital.¹⁰³ The nineteenth century saw a shift away from the Grand Canal route towns of Suzhou and Yangzhou toward new urban hubs like Shanghai and Tianjin, questioning assumptions of continuity between fashions of the early-mid Qing period and those of the late Qing. By the nineteenth century, structures of controlling taste



FIGURE 1.14. A length of unmade plum silk yardage, embroidered with lotus flowers in the three blues palette and gold thread, ca. 1900. Silk floss; silk gauze. Mactaggart Art Collection (2005.5.366), University of Alberta Museums. Gift of Sandy and Cécile Mactaggart.



(right) **FIGURE 1.15.** Detail of notation from figure 1.14, listing color, number of embroidered flowers and intended usage.

had been altered and the state system had lost much of its purchasing power; both the Daoguang and Xianfeng emperors implemented frugality measures reducing imperial patronage.¹⁰⁴ In painting and porcelain, private patronage filled this space, tilting the market toward the tastes of wealthy merchants in cities like Shanghai. In dress, this shift resulted in the emergence of new decorative themes of drama and literati culture, explored in more depth in the second half of the book.¹⁰⁵ But this geographical shift explains Hu Shiyu's argument for the dominant role of the Beijing style in late Qing fashions. Hu tells a story of meeting an acquaintance who had recently arrived in the capital, and being about to call upon a senior, wished to confirm that his clothing was suitable. The acquaintance assumes it must be, for "the silhouettes and colors are the newest styles coming from Suzhou, how can it not be suitable for Beijing style?" But Hu informs him, with some pride, that "nowadays the patterns and styles are completely different."¹⁰⁶

Whether fashion-seekers sought to imitate the style of the Manchu mansions or the Suzhou boudoirs, this dress-historical reconstruction demonstrates how ethnicity and place were critical to determining women's engagement with fashion. As a microcosm of the Beijing fashion system, the Mactaggart painting suggests the ways in which both Manchu and Han women contributed to the fashion trends of the period. Styles like the *chenyi* and *changyi* enabled Manchu women to re-create their traditional narrow-sleeved robes, applying the broader sleeves, ribbon-embellished sleeve-bands, and *ruyi*-lobing found in Han women's *ao* and *shan* styles. The detailed depiction in visual sources like popular prints and professional painting may be read alongside bamboo ballads and novels to reconstruct this consumption as an arena of creative autonomy for women. The images studied here suggest that, by the nineteenth century, both Han gentlewoman and Manchu nobility had evolved a valid mode for depicting themselves in fashionable dress. And yet, curiously, texts throughout the Qing continue to assert the courtesan's power as fashion leader. To understand this, it is necessary to investigate the moral discourse of fashion. For many male critics, fashionable accessories, in fundamentally confusing social distinction, threatened a sartorial assimilation that denied more normative attempts to order. As an 1817 bamboo ballad inquired, "The young ladies of the famous brothels have faces like flowers, they sit alone in the scented chariot loving the bright yarn shades. Their paired sleeves are wider than one *chi*, neither Manchu nor Han style, from which family do they come?"¹⁰⁷ Such critiques present a discursive force quite different from that of popular prints and urban rhymes, but they too shaped the Qing fashion system.



A Fashionable Century was made possible by a collaborative grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.



Publication of this book has been aided by a grant from the Millard Meiss Publication Fund of CAA.



A Fashionable Century was also supported by a generous grant from the William Sangki and Nanhee Min Hahn Fund for Books on East Asia.

Additional support was provided by the Association for Asian Studies First Book Subvention Program, the Pasold Research Fund, and the Scouloudi Foundation in association with the Institute of Historical Research.

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Design by Laura Shaw Design

Composed in Warnock Pro, typeface designed by Robert Slimbach, and Ideal Sans, typeface designed by Hoefler & Co.

Maps by Bill Nelson

24 23 22 21 20 5 4 3 2 1

Printed and bound in Korea

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UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON PRESS
uwapress.uw.edu

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Names: Silberstein, Rachel, 1977– author.

Title: *A fashionable century : textile artistry and commerce in the late Qing* / Rachel Silberstein.

Description: Seattle : University of Washington Press, [2020] | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2019041152 (print) | LCCN 2019041153 (ebook) | ISBN 9780295747187 (hard-cover) | ISBN 9780295747194 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Textile design—China—History—19th century. | Textile industry—China—History—19th century. | Fashion—Social aspects—China—History—19th century. | Women textile workers—China—History—19th century. | Women artisans—China—History—19th century.

Classification: LCC NK8883.A1 S55 2020 (print) | LCC NK8883.A1 (ebook) | DDC 746.0951—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2019041152>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2019041153>

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