

## Chinese robes in Western interiors: transitionality and transformation

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### Introduction

The reuse of Chinese clothing in the West in the early twentieth century is an example *par excellence* of textiles that knew no boundary between bodies and their domestic settings. In Europe, America and Australia, the first three decades of the twentieth century saw a fashion for chinoiserie and for objects from China, peaking in the 1920s. Butterflies, flowers, dragons and 'Chinese' landscapes appeared on wallpapers, upholstery and clothing. These were often drawn from eighteenth-century chinoiserie designs, whilst the lacquer-inspired colours of red, black and gold were used for a modern effect that said 'China' (Minter, 1927: 43–5; Ionides, 1926: 40, 61–3; Phillips and Woolrich, 1921: 132). For women, the Chinese trend included the wearing of dresses, robes, coats and capes incorporating traditional Chinese garment shapes, Chinese motifs and also actual pieces of Chinese embroidery. At the same time, domestic spaces were being clothed in Chinese textiles; furniture was draped with Chinese robes while cushions were created from Chinese garments and their associated sleeve bands.

The easy interchange that existed between body and room as sites of display for Chinese textiles draws our attention to matters of self and identity, constructed through cloth objects in a variety of spatial relationships to the body. It seems that in the West, Chinese robes and sleeve bands were highly flexible textiles that moved from body to furniture and back again, presenting us with complex border crossings between fashion and furnishings, East and West, self and other. This essay is focused on interrogating this unusual flexibility, in textual and visual representations and in materiality, to consider the ways in which meaning and identity can be created in textiles that cross the decidedly porous divide between body and interior design.

The relationship between subjectivity, identity, fashion and material culture is a vexed one, producing valuable enquiries into individuality, social identity, fashion and interior design (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Halttunen, 1989; Cohen, 2006; Finkelstein, 1991). Susan Stewart's reflections on subjectivity and collecting evoke an almost stifling saturation of the domestic interior by issues of identity as 'the self is invited to expand within the confines of bourgeois domestic space' (Stewart, 1993: 157). The objects selected to decorate a room may have as their ultimate referent the interior of the self, but crucially, they are both an (unconscious) expression of the self, and also a (conscious) model of the self (ibid.: 157–8). Thus, in the relationships between fashion, interior design and identity, historically specific notions of fashion and self-fashioning interact with the material manifestations of unconscious being to produce a picture that cannot be easily reduced to one theme. Here, I consider how the use and representation of Chinese textiles operated within various economies of style and aesthetics, class and gender, race and imperialism, sexuality and the body in the production of social and psychic identities.

The cultural cross-dressing of bodies and of rooms also raises some intriguing questions about the interrelation of clothing and domestic interiors during moments of East/West cultural appropriation. A change in the context of an object can result in a change of meaning and the diffusion of new ideas; China may be re-imagined through its textiles and British femininity re-articulated through Chinese material culture. Thus, it is important to remember that the Western acquisition and use of Chinese textiles during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were underscored by the escalation of imperialist attitudes towards China as well as the emergence of new and challenging models of modern femininity. Furthermore, the uses of textiles, as clothing or as upholstery, entail a proximity to the body within powerful discourses of femininity, sexuality and race. In his introductory chapter to this collection, John Potvin highlights the negotiation of the 'three material and conceptual links of body, fabric and space' (3) in the production of modern identity through fashion and interior design. In this essay, the concepts of transition and transformation form a central theme with which to interrogate the movement of Chinese textiles through and across these three modalities in the construction of modern femininities.

In the slippage between the presentation of woman and her room, and between textiles on the body and about the body, the relationships between fashion, the body, interior spaces, subjectivity and the geography of empire can be opened up for reassessment. Material objects may have been treated as a tangible extension of individual personality through clothing and furnishings, yet the objectification of women in Western tradition makes the notion of a unified feminine subjectivity problematic. Decorative textiles

were largely expressive of femininity, whether on the body in the frills of fashion or applied to a room in the pleats and bows that adorned dressing tables and drawing room mantelpieces (Kinchin, 1996: 21). Drawing-room wallpapers were conceptualised as a 'becoming' background for a hostess, and décor colours and dress fashions were certainly interrelated. The use of fabric pieces on furniture, such as antimacassars, also became a trope of cloying feminine tendencies toward over-decoration (McEwan, 2007).

Clearly, while dress and interior design are powerful tools in the expression of social distinction, the identities produced are multilayered and contingent. From the 1890s, a new importance was placed on displays of individual personality, rather than Victorian 'good character', especially in middle-class homes (Halttunen, 1989; Cohen, 2006: 122–44). However, the notion of fashion, in dress and in interior design, plays into concepts of irrational behaviour, fickle forms of conspicuous consumption and surface displays, framed as innately 'feminine' shortcomings that result in a shallowness of identity (Wilson, 1985: 47–66). In the 1920s, a fractured and consumption-led identity for women was being celebrated in the home advice writing of authors such as Lady Kitty Vincent (1888–1969), who, in *Good Manners* (c.1924) remarked that although Chinese-style rooms produced 'an impression of wickedness', a woman might still 'make shirts for the poor on an Oriental divan' (Vincent, 1924: 63). In other words, a room's décor and a woman's manipulation of cloth objects were understood as both conscious and natural displays of self. The creation of 'an impression', true or false, was at stake, and an important element of playful performance emerges in the tensions between socially constructed images, personal subjectivities, material culture and modernity, where fashion and furniture take part in the active creation of multiple identities in ethnicity and in society. Here, a closer examination of cloth and subjectivity may help to further elucidate how textiles function in the relationships between fashion, interior design and modern identity.

### Materialising the self

Textiles, by their very nature and use, are particularly suited to mediating the interior/exterior boundaries of the self through dress, furnishings and interior decoration, and in the most personal ways. As Judy Attfield writes:

Because clothes make direct contact with the body, and domestic furnishings define the personal spaces inhabited by the body, the material which forms a large part of the stuff from which they are made – cloth – is proposed as one of the most intimate of thing-types that materialises the connection between the body and the outer world. (2000: 124)

Attfield's exploration allies cloth's physical qualities with its psychoanalytical and social symbolism to reveal the multiple layers of cloth's role within subject formation. Clothes and furnishings also play a crucial part in the construction and projection of social identities through 'personal acts of self-creation' that are conceived as a statements of individuality (ibid.: 142). Thus, textiles mediate the physical and psychic boundaries between the inner self and the outside world, by both joining and dividing an individual subject from society at large, at a highly significant and dynamic point of tension between subject and object, inside and outside, self and other, person and thing.

Psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott's 1971 example of the baby's comfort blanket as a transitional object between inside and outside is central to this part of Attfield's examination of textiles and subject formation. Especially interesting here, from the point of view of a study of Chinese textiles used on the body and on furniture – and indeed textiles that have been adapted from one culture to another – is the notion of transformational qualities. Cloth objects, as transitional objects, incorporate a degree of ephemerality as a central characteristic. The highly charged cathectic status of the transitional object gradually dissipates as the infant or child's sense of independent being grows; meanwhile, in the realm of the tangible, cloth comfort objects unravel, wear out and are discarded, in a material as well as metaphorical dissipation. Attfield thus identifies a temporality in the relationship between objects and the formation of self to which textiles are well suited. Because textiles can endure decades of use and be preserved for centuries, or may disintegrate over time, and because textile objects can be adapted to changing needs and conditions by cutting and sewing and yet 'retain vestiges of their original form', textiles serve to express identities that are continuously produced, contingent, multiple and changing (ibid.: 132). The physical and symbolic transitions of Chinese textiles from body to furniture, and from culture to culture, can be seen as an aspect of these intrinsic qualities of cloth to not only bridge differing situations, but also to mediate shifts and tensions in social identity and individual subjectivity.

Equally as mutable are the boundaries between women's bodies and rooms as sites of expression for identity through material culture. A total enmeshing of interior, fashion and modern women can be seen in the fashion plates of elite French fashion magazine, *Gazette du Bon Ton*, wherein woman and room form a single statement of fashionable modernity, synchronised in colour and in style. For example, in George Barbier's 1923 illustration for evening gowns by Frederick Worth, *Studies in Red (Sanguines)*, two women in heavy make-up are depicted posing before a lacquer screen, yet the spatial illusion of the image places them on the same plane as the screen, so that they become part of its decorative surface (*Gazette du Bon Ton*, 1979: 51). Although the screen is Japanese in design, the overall colour scheme

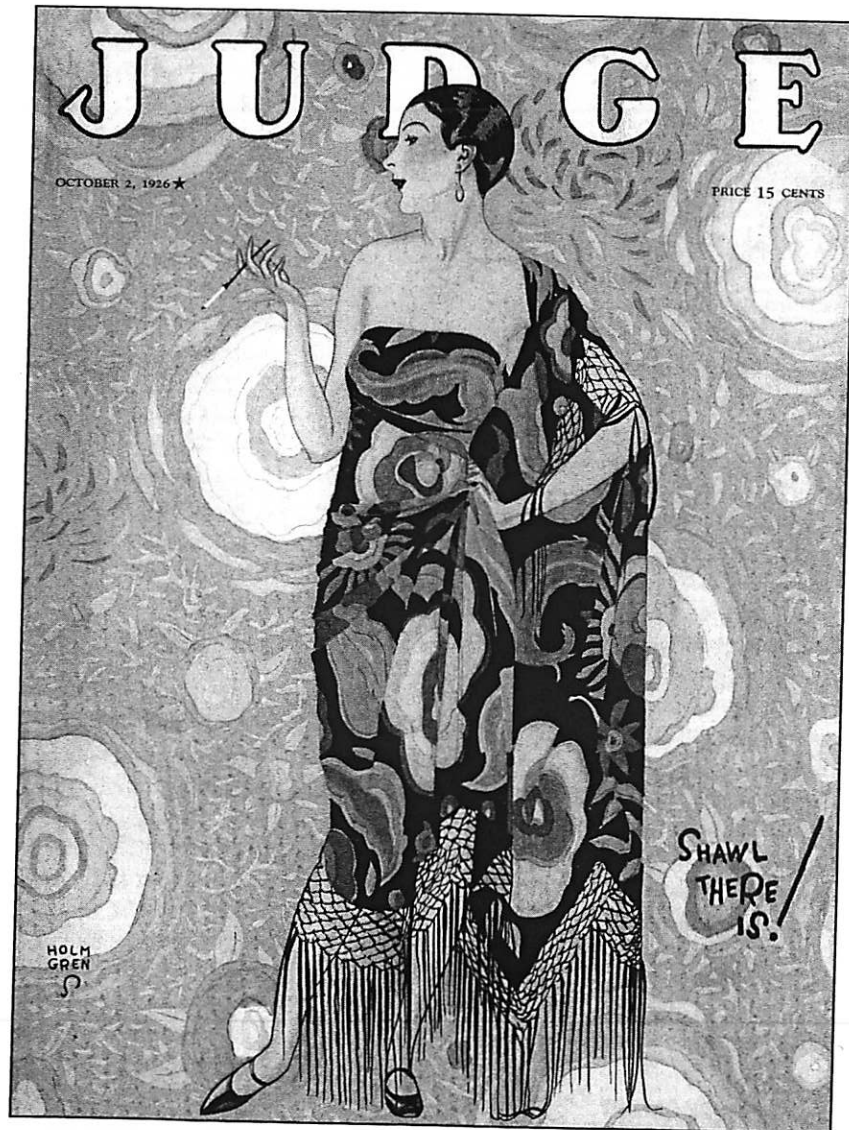
of black, red and gold points toward a Chinese theme, and the women also wear the fashionable 'Chinese' hairstyle (Zdatny, 1999: 183–5) in a synthesis of body, dress and room. As French hairdresser Emile Long lamented:

Chinese fashions, which at the present moment have so much influence on French fashions in furnishing, decorating, and even ladies clothes, have already invaded everywhere, from the top to bottom of our houses, theatres, and our modern illustrated papers ... all productions of luxury, ornamentation and coquetry have fallen under their influence. (Quoted in ibid.: 183)

In representation and in materiality, therefore, fashions for Chinese designs pervaded the boundaries between body and room, transferring easily between the latest wallpapers, pyjama lounging outfits, dresses, evening gowns and coats.<sup>1</sup> The fertility of this state of transpositionality is amply demonstrated by the cover picture of American satirical magazine *Judge* of 2 October 1926 (Fig. 6.1). This image depicts a fashionably coiffured young woman with cigarette and make-up, apparently naked except for a long fringed shawl known as a Chinese shawl.<sup>2</sup> This is wrapped tightly around her body, covering the flesh from the breasts to the knees whilst revealing the entire body's outline down one side, and also one shoulder. This way of wearing the Chinese shawl finds a precedent in both fashion magazines and seductive female stage performance of the 1920s, combining the exotic, the sexual and the fashionable (Wilson, 1999: 241–2). The shawl's dramatic pattern of colourful flowers and foliage on a black ground bears a striking resemblance to Chinese embroidery motifs, magnified to create a more spectacular effect. It is also very similar to 1920s chinoiserie wallpapers that were based on eighteenth-century Chinese wallpaper patterns, printed in bold colours with the use of black and gold for added visual contrast and excitement (Ionides, 1926: 63). Thus, the magazine cover shows a woman clothed in a garment that brought together textiles and wallpaper, body and interior. Furthermore, a caption 'Shawl there is!' plays on the words 'That's all there is', alluding to the woman's nakedness beneath the shawl and the availability of her body (a shawl can be flung off in an instant, or may slip). However, we may also catch an undercurrent of how a woman's sense of self is *seen* to derive entirely from the fashions that she wears – at the level of subject formation, she is 'nothing' without her shawl, so heavily does her identity *in this moment* rest upon the Chinese fabric wrapped around her.

Jean Christophe Agnew observes that in literature, the imagined commodified home is often used to establish the plausibility of a fictional character, so that a woman in her drawing room becomes a 'mobile pastiche of properties, an assemblage of commodities', and is literally objectified (Agnew, 1989: 135; see also Edwards, 2005: 149–50). Peter McNeil has noted the way in which, within interior design discourses of the period, the concepts of





6.1 *Judge* (cover), showing a fashionable woman wrapped in a 'Chinese' shawl (October 1926)

woman-as-consumer and woman-as-consumer-of-fashion situate women as both subjects and objects within the home (1994: 645–50). However, Deborah Cohen argues that it was only from the 1890s that women were so strongly associated with interior decoration, as part of the assertion of women's rights and a female agency within the home, so that it was during the late Victorian and Edwardian periods that women 'became' their furniture (Cohen, 2006: 89–121). Certainly, in terms of gendered constructions of creativity and of cultural worth (Battersby, 1989), the newly professionalised female designer was placed on the horns of a dilemma. *Decoration and Care of the Home* (1923) by Millicent Vince aimed to give practical advice to housewives and pioneer professional women decorators alike.<sup>3</sup> In establishing a background for the employment of women in interior design, Vince referred to a meeting of the (all-male) Architectural Association of London in 1912 at which it was suggested that if women designed houses, the roofs would change every year like the fashions in hats (Vince, 1923: 5–6). In this humorous reaction to the worrying notion of women architects, we see reflected a deep-seated attitude towards women as generally incapable of intellectual engagement, fascinated by absurd surface trivialities and 'naturally' unfitted to many professional fields.<sup>4</sup> A woman's role was as the facilitator rather than builder of domestic spaces, where 'home' functions as a nostalgic, stable wholeness (Young, 1997: 134–5), entirely antithetical to the lurch of fashion with its 'irrational' fancies and constant change. In Vince's book, the challenge and legacy of this prejudice can be felt through her rejection of 'fashion' as a concern in interior decorating. A recurrent theme was the condemnation of novelty decorating dictated by fashion, in which the contemporary vogue for Chinese motifs figured as a trope of the negative connections made between women, fashion and design ability (Vince, 1923: 248–9).

It cannot be claimed that Chinese fashions were unique in being able to bridge the blurry dividing lines between fashion on the body and fashion applied to the domestic interior. Indeed, in the 1920s, it is likely that Chinese motifs served as such useful negative exemplars of fashion because they were distinctive, had a novelty value born of exoticism, and could therefore be pointed to as absurd.<sup>5</sup> A shawl, Chinese or not in design, could furnish us with another potent example of a garment that was equally at home draped over a body, a piano or a sofa. However, when we consider the material and symbolic specificities of Chinese robes in the West, a more particular and complex picture begins to emerge.

#### Chinese robes, pictured on (and off) the body

Whilst paintings frequently show women in dress that is co-ordinated in colour, texture or pattern with the furnishings and hangings of a room, it could

be argued that Chinese robes offered (male) artists an extra dimension to the portrayal of women in interior settings. In portraits and domestic interior paintings, and also in works by Impressionists, white Western women were sometimes portrayed with Chinese robes. Early-twentieth-century examples range from *The Chinese Coat* (exhibited 1912) by British painter Samuel Melton Fisher (1859/60–1939), which shows an elegant woman wearing an embroidered Chinese woman's robe as a dressing gown over a plain dress, to *Lady in Chinese Silk jacket* (1909) by American Impressionist Bernhard Gutmann (1869–1936), where a woman wears a Chinese woman's robe over her white dress. The bright colours and lustrous qualities of embroidered silk robes created an alluring surface for painters interested in experimenting with light and colour. Some American Impressionists so revelled in the patterns and textures of Chinese embroidered garments that they were to appear repeatedly, in works such as *Marguerite* (1909) by Guy Rose (1867–1925), *Chinese Robe* (c.1915) by Maren Froelich (1868–1921), and Joseph DeCamp's (1858–1923) painting that is misleadingly titled *The Red Kimono* (c.1919), but which nevertheless shows a Chinese robe or long jacket.

Such images are sometimes compared to the works of James Abbott McNeill Whistler (1834–1903), whose paintings, such as *Rose and Silver: The Princess from the Land of Porcelain* (1864) or *Purple and Rose: The Lange Leizen of the Six Marks* (1864) were very influenced by Japanese art, and contained a mixture of Japanese and Chinese textiles and objects. The sublimation of the sitter's identity in favour of formalist concerns produced images of modern women whose bodies and clothing became an additional surface for colour arrangements, and, in this case, for East Asian textile arrangements too. American Impressionist Richard E. Miller (1875–1943) collected old silks and fabrics with which to invent costumes that gave the desired colour effects (Kane, 1997: 44). He not only produced paintings of interiors and women in Chinese robes explicitly entitled *The Mandarin Coat* (undated) and *The Chinese Robe* (1909), but also depicted similar garments in at least seven other works: *La Toilette* (c.1911), *Goldfish* (1912), *The Blue Beads* (c.1916–17), *Girl with Guitar (Day Dreams)* (c.1916–17), *Portrait of Girl by a Red-Lacquered Stand (Princess in the Land of Sunshine)* (c.1916–17), *Reverie (Sylvan Dell)* (c.1916) and *Portrait of Elsbeth Miller* (c.1927). In each case (interestingly, except for the portrait of his daughter Elsbeth), the robe is worn as a loose coat over a white dress, and in a state of *déshabillé* that exposes the model's shoulders.

In many of these paintings, there is a synergy between garment and interior spaces that plays upon the use of Chinese robes by women in the West as tea-gowns and dressing-gowns, a category of Western dressing related to private spaces. Being very loose about the body, the very construction of these garments spoke of informality, intimacy and secret luxury (Steele, 1998: 189–91, 215–17). Such gowns could be more luxurious and fanciful than clothing

worn in public; however, as a consequence of their suggestive secrecy they were rarely portrayed in art, with the notable exception of Chinese gowns and the Japanese kimonos that had constituted artistic and fanciful dress in Europe since the Japanese craze of the 1880s (ibid.: 200–201). With their broad sleeves, wide armholes and capacious body, many forms of Chinese robe had an immediate appeal in the West as loose, comfortable and informal clothing, whilst the materials from which they were made – silks, satins and embroideries with 'exotic' motifs of birds, butterflies, flowers, dragons and other Chinese symbols and patterns – surely fulfilled all that the East could promise in terms of ostentatious luxury. As Western interactions with China accelerated through military action, such as the Opium Wars (1840–2 and 1856–60) and the Boxer Rebellion (1900–1901), and through increasing missionary activity, tourism and investment by Western businesses, Chinese garments became more readily available (Cheang, 2008a: 225–8). By the early twentieth century, Chinese gowns were vying with the kimono as a fashionable garment for women.

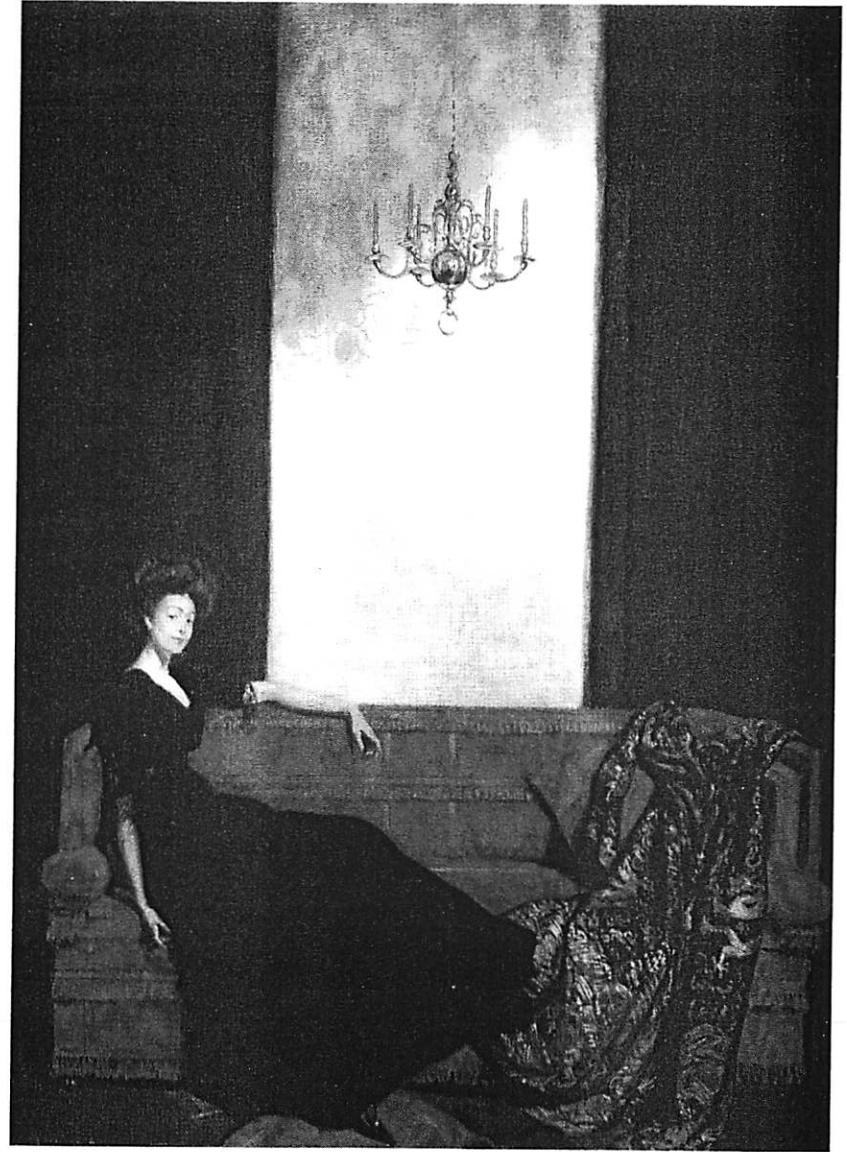
In art, the linking of Chinese robes with private feminine spaces was further underlined when used in depictions of a woman at her toilette, along with mirrors and necklaces as central tropes of feminine vanity and self-adornment. The Chinese robe, being an opulent product of the East, also had more generalised associations with Oriental sexuality and harem languor. This made it ripe for employment within a sign system that combined titillatory images of partially clad women viewed in private, with moral judgements about women as vain and self-regarding consumers of sensuous luxuries pertaining to the body. *The Chinese Coat* by Fisher and *The New Necklace* (1910) by American artist William McGregor Paxton (1869–1941) furnish good examples of this. However, for Western women, the Chinese robe was also a transgressive garment in terms of public and private spaces, because it could be worn over a dress as a sumptuous and unusual evening coat as well. The timing of this shift from tea-gown and dressing-gown to evening coat just after 1910 feels significant, as suffrage and other women's rights issues set the stage for new models of fashionable femininity to emerge after the War (Purvis, 1991; Vicinus, 1985; Dyhouse, 1981; Rowold, 1996).

The domestic consumption and manipulation of Sino-Japanese goods by women in the West has been considered as a conceptual voyaging in the East that offered women access to the exotic and an agency within Orientalism (Cheang, 2003; Yoshihara, 2003: 15–43). However, notwithstanding their connections with Oriental interiority, femininity and embodied forms of immorality, embroidered robes were known to have been the working raiment of male government and court officials in China; this was no more obviously shown than in the labelling of many types of Chinese robes as 'Mandarin' robes, no matter what their design.

Verity Wilson has explored the way in which such robes acted as powerful souvenirs of imperial China at a time when China was in the process of radical change (1999: 232–3). Whereas embroidered garments had served as part of legally enforced dress codes since the mid seventeenth century, in 1912 a new Republic of China officially declared these styles not in keeping with the construction of a new, forward-thinking and modern China (Finnane, 2007: 69–100). The Qing emperor was deposed, and new policies for both governmental and civilian dressing were part of a process of social reform that might enable China to compete for a more favourable position on a world stage heavily dominated by Western imperialism. In a Saidian reading, Western representations of old and outmoded Chinese robes and repetition of the term ‘mandarin’ kept China stuck in a timeless East that continued to be antithetical to the West through a denial of China’s capacity for modernity. For these reasons, Wilson draws attention to the significance of the 1912 date of the exhibition of two paintings by John Mansfield Crealock (1871–1959), *The Yellow Sofa* and *The Red Sofa* (Fig. 6.2). They were shown in the same exhibition at the British Royal Academy and form a matching pair in terms of composition and content. However, *The Yellow Sofa* shows a woman dressed in a Chinese robe, while *The Red Sofa* depicts a woman seated at one end of a sofa with a Chinese gown draped across the other, forming ‘the twin “others” of the feminine and the Orient’ (Wilson, 1999: 237).

Empty clothing is redolent of change and memory, denoting the absence of the former wearer so strongly that their body still has as powerful presence (Ash, 1999: 135–6, 141–2), pressed into the curves of the fabric, leaving stains and perhaps even odours. The sight and smell of old clothing in a second-hand shop conjures up a disconcertingly visceral awareness of the legions of people that have gone before, and is compellingly used in museum holocaust exhibits such as that at the Jewish Museum Berlin, to appeal to the visitor at the level of instinct; a punch in the chest that seems to bypass the higher parts of the brain and undercuts even the power of photographs to animate the dead. It could be further proposed, then, that this twin ‘other’ – the empty gown laid out at the other end of the sofa – did indeed function as another person, a Chinese mandarin, who is always present through the status of the gown as a souvenir and through the mnemonic qualities of the cloth artefact in transit. More than just a *memoria technica*, the vacated garment made Chinese mandarins tangibly real and yet emphatically not present, belonging to the past.

In *The Yellow Sofa*, a Chinese woman’s robe is worn over a black dress, in the manner of an evening coat or stylish over-garment. The robe is decorated with colourful butterflies on a purple ground and trimmed with a black border. It is worn unfastened, and as it trails loosely across the front of the woman’s body a vibrant and contrasting yellow lining becomes visible, matching the



6.2 John Mansfield Crealock, *The Red Sofa*, 1912, oil on canvas



lustrous yellow upholstery of the sofa; the long, wide sleeves have been turned back to expose the woman's wrists and hands. Appropriated into a Western scene, this unfastened and loosely hanging robe is a supplemental garment that could be taken off at any time without fear of impropriety. Alexandra Warwick and Dani Cavallero have proposed that to make a show of discarded clothes is to emphasize that clothing is a 'social mark' with which the wearer interacts, rather than an 'intrinsic identity', indivisible from the body (1998: 186). An ostentatious yet informal draping of Chinese robes across furniture, and the wearing of robes unfastened in almost all of the paintings discussed in this essay, play into this notion of emphatic self-fashioning in which the Western female wearer of the robe does not pass as Chinese or become a mandarin; the Chinese robe is incorporated into her available set of social identities.

The transformation of wearer from absent mandarin to modern Western woman, with its concurrent changes in time and space, was woven into the transformations that occurred in the robes themselves. First, in terms of the act of wearing, in China, robes were depicted worn fully fastened, whereas in the West they were being shown unfastened as an optional additional layer unless a form of Chinese masquerade was intended (Cheang, 2008). Second, the robe portrayed in the *Red Sofa* looks as if it might have been altered at the cuffs, and also possibly at the neck and waistline (Wilson, 2008). Such modifications, coupled with the loose manner of wearing the robes, can sometimes make it difficult to say with absolute certainty whether a robe seen in a picture really is Chinese in origin, and complicates the notion of how to categorise such garments. However, whether changes were made by the artists as they painted, or by the women that used these robes as dressing-gowns and evening coats, the transition between cultures and a multivalency within cultures was enabled by the easy flexibility of cloth. The re-tailoring of Chinese garments could be done at home, at the dressmaker's or by a retailer, to follow the lines of Western fashions more closely, namely narrow sleeves cut straight across, a low neckline and a waist. Yet, the very fact that Chinese robes were not closely shaped to the human body may have been a deciding factor in their frequent use within interior decoration.

Writing about the kimono, a garment originally derived from Chinese dress but developed according to Japanese preferences, Young Yang Chung observes: 'Unlike Western clothing, which is conceived three-dimensionally and conforms to the shape of the human body in cut and construction, the kimono is a flat, unstructured garment, and its broad expanses of fabric are as suited for artistic embellishment as a canvas or screen' (Chung, 2005: 394). Similarly, the flat, kimono-like construction of the Chinese robe creates a broad and level garment with flat surfaces; a sheet of cloth that lends itself on a conceptual and practical level to reshaping and application to surfaces in the home as well as to the body.

### Disassembling the mandarin's robe: cloth and colonial subjectivities

Possibly the most socially elevated and public role that Chinese robes achieved in Britain was in 1924, when Queen Mary (1867–1953), consort of George V (1865–1936), was photographed at a London cinema wearing a brocade Chinese robe, restyled by the addition of a furry collar and cuffs, and possibly other less obvious re-tailoring.<sup>6</sup> Mary had had her gown recut and embellished to become an evening coat that matched her usual style of dressing in all but pattern. Furthermore, she used Chinese robes to create cushion covers for furniture in Buckingham Palace between 1911 and 1923, and as a source of embroidery motifs that were appliquéd to the Palace curtains (Healey, 1997: 232; Smith, 1931: 228; Woodward, 1927: 160).

Whether Mary should be considered a style leader, a follower of fashion or indeed beyond fashion is hard to assess in this context. However, she was certainly far from unique in using Chinese robes for clothing and interior decoration. In 1894, the London store of Liberty's was advertising 'Mandarin vestments' that had been 'adapted for furniture purposes', and throughout the 1910s, 1920s and 1930s, department stores sold a range of goods that incorporated old pieces of Chinese embroidery into objects as varied as ink blotters, fire screens, cigarette cases and purses. The source and actual age of these embroideries was never made clear, but they are indicative of a general interest in the reuse of Chinese embroideries, applied to curtains and to small decorative and useful objects.

When considering how the constructional specificities of Chinese garments lent themselves to an interchange between bodies and rooms and between China and the West, sleeve bands provide an additional topic of interest. Sleeve bands were contrasting strips of embroidery applied to the cuffs of garments to form an extra layer of decoration. These bands were collected in the West and are a type of Chinese embroidery that usually came detached from a garment as a flat strip of silk, unshaped to the body, but yet maintaining a conceptual relationship to clothing by the term 'sleeve band'. Home decoration advice often advised the use of sleeve bands in the making of cushions, where 'an element of the fantastic may be introduced with good results' (Budden, 1931: 53; Minter, 1927: 81–2). They were also used for decorating the mantelpiece (Minter, 1927: 84), and were a convenient shape for the decorative edging for fashionable garments, especially those with an Oriental flavour. In 1907, the *New York Times* fashion correspondent wrote:

Chinese and other Oriental embroideries, done in several shades of one color or a mixture of colors on silk bands, are to be more or less used on many of the handsome reception and calling costumes in the late Autumn .... These bands have been in use for some time, and have, indeed, been the most appropriate trimming in connection with the Mandarin sleeves. ('Potpourri', 1907: X6)

## "LIBERTY" YULE-TIDE GIFTS.

[Eastern Embroideries.]

No. 2. Embroidered Blotting Books. Mounted with antique Chinese, Japanese, Indian, and Turkish embroidery. In a variety of designs and colourings. Prices from 10/6 to 21/- — UNIQUE GIFTS.

No. 1. Japanese Kimono (or Native Robe). In Silk, Satin, and Silk-Crêpe. Beautifully embroidered in characteristic designs. Charming as Tea Gowns and Fancy Costumes. Prices from £3 10s. to £10 10s.

No. 3. Chinese Embroidered Cushion. Covered with Chinese embroidered sleeve linings. Also in fine "specimen" pieces of antique embroidery. Prices from 30/- to 35/-.

No. 4. Chinese Mandarin's Robe. These Robes are some of the most beautiful examples of Chinese needlework. In various colours. In the original shape, are suitable for Fancy Costumes, or in smaller sizes adapted for Tea Gowns and evening wear. Prices from 50/- to 20 Guineas.

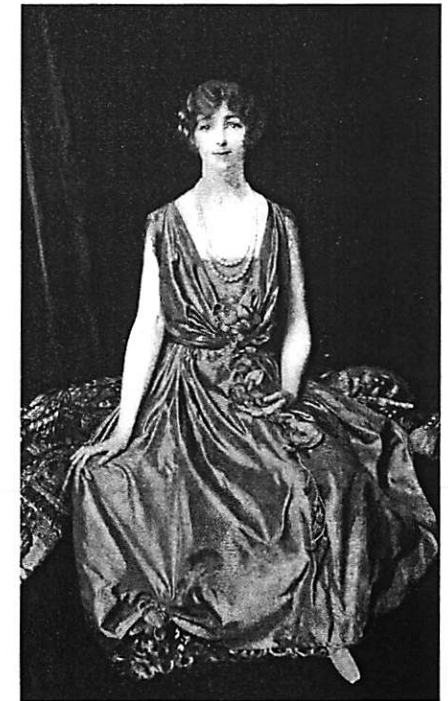
6.3 Chinese embroidered textiles in a Liberty's gift catalogue. Liberty, 'Liberty' Yule-Tide Gifts, London: Liberty, 1898

Sleeve bands, readily available from Western retailers for as little as 1s 11d (William Whiteley Ltd, 1885: 458), were a much cheaper source of embroidery than 'Mandarin' gowns and were less loaded with notions of old Chinese imperial etiquette.

Rank badges constitute a further category of Chinese embroidery pieces that had an association with Chinese robes. These large embroidered squares, showing a bird or an animal, were attached to the front and back of Qing bureaucratic dress to denote rank. A page from Liberty's Yule-Tide Gifts catalogue of 1898 shows line drawings of a cushion made from sleeve bands below a blotting book mounted with a rank badge (Fig. 6.3). These are flanked by an image of a woman wearing a Japanese kimono, and an empty 'Chinese Mandarin's robe' that looks to have had its sleeves and hem shortened. Thus, rank badges were also being adapted in the West alongside robes and sleeve bands as fitting decorations for the body and for the home, providing specimens of Eastern embroidery that created unique and visually pleasing artefacts that could be used in the expression of taste, refinement, sophistication and individuality.

Robes are clearly cloth objects intended to cover the body, whilst sleeve bands and rank badges comprise separate items of decoration that can be appended to a robe. In Western interiors, all three objects spilled out into the space surrounding Western bodies through processes of dismemberment and/or reinvention. The mandarin, a totemic figure in the selling of Chinese robes and in the Western mythologising of China, was dismembered and reassembled in the Western home in a different order, according to local needs. Whether refigured in the *robe d'intérieur* or evening coat, or incorporated into a range of articles that operate in a spatial and conceptual relation to the body – the cushion, the glove box, the handbag, the make-up case – these were processes of cultural appropriation in which the transformational nature of cloth objects enabled transitions in the identity of the user.

In 1925, the year after Queen Mary paraded her Chinese robe at the cinema, British artist Frank Cadogan Cowper (1877–1958) exhibited a portrait of the newly married Lady Hildebrand Harmsworth (*née* Elen Billenstein, 1904–2005), who is shown sitting on a garment that also appears to be a Chinese robe (Fig. 6.4). In contrast to the other images discussed in this essay, Harmsworth does not wear this robe; neither is it given its own space on the sofa, like the haunted mandarin robe of Crealock's *Red Sofa*. With one arm very prominently visible, this robe is reminiscent of a pelt – the tiger skin trophy of Victorian and Edwardian imperial hunting grounds. Harmsworth sits in throne-like luxury, on the squashed, skinned and defeated symbolic body of a former emperor of China.<sup>7</sup> Possession of an entire mandarin robe presents a picture of rarified social status through access to the authentically unusual and valuable, and hints at the incorporation of China's former rulers into a British, upper-class feminine identity at the level of embodiment. At the same time, this garment is not worn, and perhaps is not wearable without adjustment. The power of the robe to embody a Chinese presence is made through the ready association of sleeves, neck holes and hemlines with arms, necks and torsos, and this effect must



6.4 Frank Cadogan Cowper, *Lady Hildebrand Harmsworth*, oil on canvas, exhibited London Royal Academy 1925



be lessened as robes are cut up and abstracted by diminishing the resonance with their original corporeal relations.

Domestic displays of Eastern goods have been explored as a location of imperial agency for women, in which home and nation were constructed in relation to imperial discourse (Yoshihara, 2003; Hoganson, 2002; Chaudhuri, 1992). James L. Hevia has argued that in the latter half of the nineteenth century, the possession of looted objects from China, especially those relating to the defeated Chinese court, played a role in the constitution of Western imperial identities that involved China. It could therefore be proposed that the use of mandarin robes in fashion and interior décor played a part in the continuous formation of modern imperial subjectivities. The unravelling of the cathectic cloth object, the courtly mandarin robe, in response to a new location in time and space, was a necessary part of its use in the formation of imperial identities that were in a constant process of becoming. In drawing this essay to a close, therefore, it seems imperative to re-examine those questions of subjectivity and cloth with which we began, where textiles mediate between self and society, interior and exterior, body and room, in some very special ways. In particular, to what degree can we relate a psychoanalytical theory on the origins of individual subjectivity through transitional comfort objects to social trends in the uses of Chinese robes, and to the relationships between fashion, interior design and modern identity?

The transitional objects of Winnicott's theory require a capacity to use objects as a part of the maturation process that may seem analogous to colonial reach, cultural appropriation and the development of colonial identities; transitional objects necessitate an understanding of objects as separate from the self, suggesting a parallel with the dialectical formation of the self through other, and imperial selves through imperial others; transitional objects are imbued with a vitality that is often textural and they are involved in auto-erotic activities such as thumb sucking (Winnicott, 1971: 4–5), conjuring up the luxurious tactility of embroidered silk robes used on and about women's bodies; transitional objects only become 'external', separate and hence usable by the infant through an unconscious (conceptual) process of 'destruction' (ibid.: 9–10, 89–90) that tantalisingly correlates with the material destruction of Chinese garments in the realisation of Western imperialistic identities through fashion and the domestic interior. However, it is important not to make too literal a reading of these psychoanalytical frameworks – in terms of colonial discourses, how does one reconcile a textual construction of identity and difference in a theoretical space where 'the body is always simultaneously (if conflictually) inscribed in both the economy of pleasure and desire and the economy of discourse, domination and power' (Bhabha, 1994: 67), and a *textural* construction of subjectivities through cloth?

Within postcolonial studies, the influential work of Frantz Fanon, Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has drawn together psychoanalysis and colonial histories to produce an understanding of otherness, the other/Other and processes of 'othering' as fundamental to colonial identities. The Lacanian understanding of the self in relation to an other/Other is brought to bear upon subjectivities that are formed under colonial pressures and power relations, where an awareness of 'different modes of theoretical discourse – psychoanalytical and historical' (Bhabha, 1994: 73) is essential for an analysis of identity within colonial discourse. Anne McClintock has argued that a 'purely psychoanalytical approach ... is hampered by its reliance on individual aetiologies (exemplified by the genre of the case study) from fully explaining the emergence at certain historical periods of a variety of cultural fetish fashions ...' (McClintock, 1995: 192). Wider social symbols cannot be given a 'single originary explanation in the psychic development of the individual', and yet, following Fanon, McClintock finds that the psychodynamics of imperialism and national identity can be understood as neither separable from, nor interchangeable with, the psychodynamics of individual identity (ibid.: 192, 361).

If the otherness that is so central to a sense of self is an internalisation of discourses structured around difference such as gender, race, nationality and colonialism, the role of Chinese robes within the formation of Western feminine subjectivities is indivisible from the wider discursive formations of nation, race and gender. This is not the same as a simple substitution of early-twentieth-century Western feminine identities for Winnicott's developing infant; it is to consider 'the dynamics of culture' and 'the centrality of the unconscious' (Donald, 1991: 3); it is to explore the way in which cloth mediates between selfhood and society in a manner that enables and manifests change and evokes a constant remaking of subjectivity, in this case under imperialistic conditions.

## Conclusion

The term 'transitional' is highly suggestive when applied to the Chinese robes in circulation in the West during the early twentieth century. The transit of robes from Chinese to European cultures was sustained through a variety of transformations in the forms and uses of these robes, their associated sleeve bands and rank badges. This capacity for transformation is an essential part of the condition of transitionality, where Chinese gowns were worn unfastened, were arranged over furniture, were re-cut, or were cut up and applied to clothing and upholstery alike. A further arc of transit is described in the movement of the Chinese robe between bodies and rooms, dresses and furnishings. China was entering the lexicon of the

Western interior through representations of femininity and interior décor in intense and symbiotic combinations. Chinese robes mediated that space between the body and room, conceptually through the *robe d'intérieur* and in the transference of Chinese designs from one medium to another, and in material terms through the perception of Chinese robes as flat and almost more easily applied to domestic surfaces than to Western female bodies.

The conflation of woman and room, and woman and fashion, forms a third path for transitionality in which Chinese robes may be read as expressing an unusual, rarified, exotic or suspect element within Western femininity, whether this is perceived as 'true' personality or conscious social construction. Here, Winnicott's concept of the transitional object in the formation of individual subjectivity, and Attfield's observations on cloth and transformation, may be seen in relation to the psychopolitics of empire to provide a space for reflection on the role of Chinese robes within a shifting set of imperial relations. As Queen Mary wore an adapted Chinese coat and could sit upon Chinese embroideries as upholstery, so Western women's uses of Chinese clothing fanned out into the domestic spaces surrounding the body. However, to inhabit the Chinese robe or to use robes transfigured as a household objects speaks also of a level of engagement in which China is chewed up, digested, and viscerally and psychically incorporated into Western culture, allowing changes in both Chinese and Western modernities to be negotiated, expressed or accommodated.

Robes in China were designed to hang loosely, concealing the body and could, therefore, be appropriated into Western fashions relating to states of undress, physical freedom and privacy as dressing-gowns and tea-gowns, where the choice and design of textiles worn on the body was reliant on a location in interior spaces that were coded as private. In the transgression of boundaries (geographical and social), the more public wearing of remodelled robes that corresponded with and *exposed* the lines of the body, and the wearing of robes unfastened, revealed the fashioned figure and another modern self, whether agency lay with the female wearer, or the male artist who, in representing women, interiors and Chinese robes, constructed his sense of self in the twin others of femininity and the Orient. In the formation of modern subjectivities, the oscillation between the material objects of fashion as an overspill of the interior 'true' self and as a projection of the constructed self could be exploited through the Chinese robe's alien exoticism in terms of time and space, and its ambiguous positioning between body and room. Western uses of Chinese robes exemplified the permeability of the boundaries between fashion, interior design and identity, whilst illuminating the gender and imperial politics involved in the drawing and crossing of the lines between fashion on the body and fashion on the furniture.

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## Notes

1. See for example evening gown, *Chimère*, designed by Paquin with a dragon and clouds in a Chinese style which was exhibited at the Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes in Paris in 1925 (Victoria and Albert Museum T.50-1948), 1920s pyjamas with Chinese dragons (Brighton Museum C002882) and an evening coat owned by Anne Armstrong Jones, the daughter of Maud Messel, designed by Reville with dragon motifs c.1923 (Brighton Museum C004021).
2. The shawl is not a traditional Chinese garment, but it seems that Latin American shawls were decorated with Chinese embroidery in China as early as the late eighteenth century, becoming so popular in Spain that they became part of a Spanish identity (Wilson 1999: 239–41). They were, however, known as Chinese shawls.
3. Vince dedicated her book to, and may well have been a student of, the pioneering female decorator Agnes Garrett, sister of the leading British suffragette Millicent Garrett and the first female British doctor Elizabeth Garrett (Cohen, 2006: 105–9).
4. To take just one example, early-twentieth-century debates around the admission of women to the Royal Geographical Society in Britain concerned women's ability to be scientific enough, and included remarks that female fellows would demand a piano at meetings for entertainment (Blunt, 1994: 148–52).
5. There is a direct parallel here with eighteenth-century condemnations of chinoiserie as an irrational feminine craze.
6. Chinese winter robes were sometimes fur lined, and could have a fur trimming (Chung, 2005: 149); however, the styling was very different to the coat worn by Mary.
7. See also Craig Clunas on the symbolic importance of the Emperor's throne (Clunas, 1991).