THE GREAT BAZAAR

Chinese Votive Costumes

Text by Leo Haks

Photography by

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Page 81
Coat with dragon design.
Paper, crayon and woodblock print, 120 x 110 cm circa.
This is the upper garment of a costume mostly used for ancestors, made in Hong Kong and purchased there in 1975, when it was already considered out of date and no longer requested.

Facing page
Coat for a female recipient, 1930s. Detail.
Hand-painted paper, collage and appliqué, 140 x 190 cm.
The white background, and design of birds and flowers, reveal that this costume was destined to a female recipient. As it is rather elaborate, and hence costly, it was used as an offering to the goddess of Mercy Kuan Yin, the Chinese equivalent of the Christian Virgin Mary. Festivals for this Goddess tend to attract the most devotees of all festivals, she being immensely popular and revered. At her birthday, these costumes were burned as offerings in the hundreds.

This page and pages 84-85
Coat for a female recipient, 1930s. Whole costume and detail.
Hand-painted paper, collage and appliqué, 140 x 190 cm.

The Tailor in the Sky
by Leo Haks

The notion of there being another world beyond the one we know has been held by popular Chinese culture for millennia. It is a world from whence we all come, and whence we shall all return. In the Chinese belief, this "other world" is not just metaphysical, but a real place with which we are able to communicate, even if with no little difficulty. In many respects, it is as when, in ancient times, there were no adequate transport and media facilities. However, communication with the inhabitants of the other world is possible, if the proper channels are adhered to.
In early times, Chinese emperors wanted to make sure they would take their earthly comforts and privileges with them to their next life and, consequently, they went to extraordinary lengths to establish their status in the other world. Initially, this was done through immense human and animal sacrifices and material offerings. Whole armies were sent to their death in order to protect the emperor in his new world; wives and concubines, servants and slaves, animals and earthly goods were all buried with the deceased. So extensive was this practice that when, some three thousand years ago, two emperors died shortly one after the other, the sacrifices made such a significant dent in the army that the safety of the nation was endangered. As a result, when in about 500 BC Confucius too condemned the practice, it was definitively abolished.
Pragmatic as the Chinese are, an alternative was soon found to send armies, wives, servants and goods with the departed to his next destination. This time it was in the form of life-sized terracotta statues which represented thousands of men. Graves took on huge proportions to accommodate the terracotta stuff, some being even larger than a football field.
As the cost of such elaborate offerings became prohibitive, the armies gradually became smaller in both the number and size of the statues, until the present day, when only those articles that the deceased really need are sent to the other world. Besides food and drink, clothes are essential to well-being, and it is to them that this article is dedicated.
Even more than in Western culture, traditional Chinese culture attributed great importance to dress, to the extent of leaving little to the individual's own taste or preferences. This was especially true when formal and semi-formal dress was concerned, in which case patterns and shapes revealed the social status of the owner. A concrete example of the social significance vested by clothes is the Mandarin square, an embroidered emblem that both men and women incorporated into their dress and wore on the chest, with different symbolic designs according to their military or civilian rank.
Costumes were therefore indispensable for the deceased person and, across the centuries, have become a feature of rituals and festivities relating to the other world. On the birthday of a deity or

Pages 86-87
Coat for a female recipient, 1930 circa. Detail.
Hand-painted paper, collage and gold leaf appliqué, 102 x 88 cm.
The Mandarin square with a silver pheasant reveals that the lady for whom this costume was intended was a civilian official of the fifth rank.

This page
Coat with dragon design.
Paper, crayon and woodblock print, 120 x 110 cm circa.
Upper garment of a costume for ancestors.

Facing page
Undercoat for a female recipient, 1930s. Detail.
Hand-painted paper and collage, 108 x 152 cm circa.
The phoenix pattern on this garment for ancestors reveals that it was meant for ladies. Even if this example was sold as an undercoat, it seems quite possible that it was used as an evening garment.

anniversary of the death of an ancestor, devotees or family members made special outfits and brought them to the temple or cemetery as an offering to the god or relative, who would then be "properly dressed" for the ensuing year.
Since textile clothes are costly and difficult to transport to the other world, these costumes have long been made of paper. At the auspicious moment, depending on the use, they are burned and reduced to ashes. The medium of fire is used as a vehicle to transfer the earthly paper costumes and transform them into silk or other textile in the other world, where they will be gratefully received and worn. Similar offerings are made on other specific occasions, such as asking for a family member to be healed from sickness; for guidance in the making of important decisions and at other times when special "help" would be welcome.
The most elaborate and even spectacular use of paper costumes occurs during a special period, the seventh month in the Chinese Lunar Calendar, when the ghosts of ancestors come back to earth to seek replenishments for the coming year, including costumes and, to a greater extent, food and drink. Extra offerings of oranges, tea, cakes, even spirits, are placed on domestic family altars. After one or two days these may be replaced with fresh supplies, because the story has it that they lose their taste, as the spirits consume the taste, and not the offering itself.
Spirits who are not lucky enough to have descendants on earth to look after them during this month roam the streets in search of food and so are known as the Hungry Ghosts; hence the month of the same name. So as not to incur the anger of these roaming creatures, many people leave them offerings of tea and oranges, as well as cakes and sometimes paper costumes on the sidewalk. In return, the spirits, if not providing benefits, at least refrain from creating difficulties for their benefactors. The highlight of this festival, also known as the Magnolia festival, is the fifteenth day of the seventh moon.
The chief spirit, who governs all that happens during this period, is Kuei Wang, or King of the Devils. It is his task to keep the spirits from getting out of control. For all his grotesque looks, Kuei Wang is an interpretation of Kuan Yin, the goddess of Mercy, the Buddhist equivalent of the Christian Virgin Mary. The effigy of Kuei Wang is burnt at the end of the festival and sent back to the other world; contemporaneously, it is transferred again to Kuan Yin in this world. A small statue of Kuan Yin is placed on Kuei Wang's hat for the duration of the festival. Just before the burning of the big statue, the Kuan Yin statue is removed and conserved.
The paper costumes can be very elaborate indeed in both size and design, some measuring as much as four metres by four. Generally, the most beautiful specimens are reserved for gods rather than ancestors. As a rule, the costumes are made from a number of pieces of paper which are painted in workshops in China; they invariably

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Pages 90-91
Ch'i-fu coat for a prince or other high-rank person, 1930 circa. Detail.
Hand-painted paper, collage and gold leaf appliqué, 200 x 200 cm.
Ch'i-fu coats were worn at the Manchu imperial courts. The coat is covered with images (ch'i-fu) from Buddhist mythological iconography, designs of mythical animals (like dragons and bats), and flowers like chrysanthemums. A complete iconographic description of this costume would take an entire book to explain.

Pages 92-93
Coat for male gods and ancestors, 1950 circa. Detail.
Paper, 170 x 170 cm.
It was practically impossible to have costumes for every occasion, so there were types, as this one, meant for a more general use. Standard in design and iconography, they only differ in the background colour. The intended recipient is indicated by the accessories linked to each costume, such as the headdress, belt and boots.

consist of a front and back upper coat, two pieces for sleeves and another two for the lower skirt (six pieces in all). Traditionally, the paper was made from rice husks, at least in earlier days, as are the costumes illustrated in this article, and so they are very susceptible to attack by insects. The more elaborate costumes have extra items pasted onto them, a sort of appliqué, and, where needed, extra pieces of paper to obtain the desired shape. Shape and iconography reveal the rank and sex of the one they are intended for: white costumes are invariably meant for female recipients, as are those with bird and flower designs; the most elaborate of them are generally referred to as Kuan Yin costumes, because they are usually offered to the goddess of the same name. Dragons or tiger-like creatures on the front are meant for male recipients.

The buying of costumes, in specific "paper shops", is an event in itself. First of all, the appropriate typology is selected for the occasion. Then, the shopkeeper assembles the pieces into a complete garment, on to which the purchaser may request additional decorations to be incorporated on spaces left plain for paper cut-outs of symbols of the Zodiac, Buddhist holy symbols, fruit, flowers, fish an so on.

Cotton wool is sometimes

attached to the front of the garment to represent clouds and create a more heavenly atmosphere; in rarer instances, three dimensional objects are pasted to the costume. To complete the whole, a hat and boots are often selected. Finally, to make the costume ready for transport to the ceremony, the devotees attach a strip of paper to the front, stating their name and the amount of money paid, via the paper shop, for the upkeep of the temple.
When the festival is over, the devotees usually take their costumes down from the wall of the temple, fold them carefully, and burn them in a ferocious fire as an offering to their god. At festivals I attended in Singapore, over four hundred such costumes were burnt at a single time: a spectacular and moving event.
Unfortunately, there is little written documentation available in English on this fascinating subject, and even in Chinese there is a dearth of information on the custom.
When China adopted the communist regime in 1949, many of the ancient traditions fell into disuse, and were subsequently banned during the Cultural Revolution. Vestiges of religious practices were destroyed and the crafts associated with them were lost. For this reason there are very few craftsmen today who make the elaborate

These pages
Skirt for costume on pages 86-87, 1930 circa.
Hand-painted paper, collage and gold leaf appliqué, 108 x 270 cm.
The dark blue strips in the upper and lower part of the decoration were left plain to allow the purchaser to add decorations – paper cut-outs of flowers, fruit, Zodiac and Buddhist symbols etc. – according to his/her taste.

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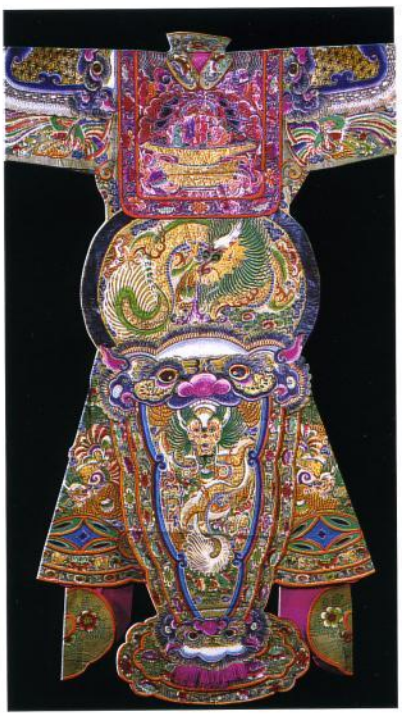

This page and pages 96-97
Costumes for the Heavenly Marshals, 1930s.
Hand-painted paper, collage and gold leaf appliqué, 200 x 250 cm.
The Marshals of the four cardinal points were the guardians of the world. The very elaborate designs – the same for the four garments – attest to the important rank of their owners. Only background colours are different, namely white, blue, yellow and red.

costumes portrayed in these pages. All the pieces shown in this article date from 1930 to 1960 and were collected in Singapore from 1973 to 1979. Since then, paper costumes have greatly changed: printed rather than hand-painted pieces have come into fashion, and some are barely larger than a standard A4 sheet of paper. Devotees, now acutely aware of the need to be "modern", would not like to be accused of making an offering to an ancestor or favourite deity of something old-fashioned or outdated. They may well realise the superior nature of the handcrafted pieces, but they purchase the modern printed versions. This anomaly has made it possible to collect these fine pieces, because they were simply left on the shelves. As nearly all these wonderful costumes were found in Singapore, purchasing them has meant to save them from the combined attack of insects and climate and ensured their preservation for posterity.
Now, thirty years later, the shop owner from whom many of these pieces were bought told me that he was pleased these costumes had been collected as a historical reference, but he qualified this statement by adding that, "however, the collector must be aware that these costumes were most certainly not made for that purpose". The combination of the reluctance of the Chinese to sell these items for secular use, and the tendency of many museum curators to consider them as a form of folk art, not worthy of collecting, has made these pieces so rare as to be almost unique, especially as a collection.

Leo Haks