RECONSTRUCTING LATE QING HAN CHINESE WOMEN'S DRESS THROUGH MAKING AND WEARING

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Keywords

Chinese Fashion, Chinese Dress, Qing Dynasty, Embodied Turn, Garment Reconstruction

Abstract

This paper argues for reconstruction of historical clothing as a viable dress history methodology. The object of recreation is a late Qing Han Chinese woman's ensemble based on museum artifacts. This includes a commonly-worn type of jacket called the *dajinshan* and a pleated *mamian* skirt. After observing extant objects, the author is able to make and wear the clothes herself, in the process gaining tacit knowledge of the methods used to construct the garments, as well as the embodied experiences that the wearer might have felt. This experimental history approach builds upon the material turn and the embodied turn, and can be used to complement more traditional dress history research methods. The author's reconstruction and wearing of late Qing dress seeks to recover some of the embodied experiences of women of the past, such as how clothes affect one's posture, and how the decorations on the clothes present on a three-dimensional body.

Introduction

Reconstruction of historical garments is a practice that has only recently gained increased scholarly attention in the field of dress history. This paper argues that by reconstructing a complete late Qing Han Chinese woman's ensemble, we could provide valuable insight into the embodied knowledge of both the craftsmen who made these garments and the women who wore them, adding to the traditionally favoured object or documentary-based methods of analysis.

In museums and exhibition catalogues, Chinese dress is invariably shown in the flat, whether framed or hung on display in a t-shape. However, even if these garments are cut and patterned flat, they still become three-dimensional once they are on the body. Displaying these garments flat not only removes the garments from the context in which they were worn, it also exaggerates the differences between 'modern' Western dress and what Chinese people wore before 1911.

Therefore, in this paper, I hope to explore what an ensemble from the late Qing dynasty (1860–1911) would look like when worn by a living, moving person, through close observation of extant garments, reconstructing a replica, and wearing the replica.

Following the material turn of the late twentieth century, scholars in the humanities and social sciences have started to pay more attention to objects, previously the domain of anthropologists and archaeologists (Hicks and Beaudry, 2010). This has inspired a surge of interest in material objects such as textiles and everyday sewing supplies (Beaudry, 2006).

Early pioneers of dress history such as Janet Arnold (1972) and Nora Waugh (1954) closely examined historical clothing, recording construction details and patterning of the garments, and their research continues to be invaluable resources for conservationists, dress historians, and costume enthusiasts alike. Recent research has taken that a step further, with what Hilary Davidson (2019) terms the "embodied turn": researchers using the process of making and wearing to accrue embodied knowledge, both of the roles that bodies played in making things, and of the embodied experiences that one gains when wearing the actual garments. This approach can be used to duplicate existing historical garments that are too fragile to be worn, enabling one to test hypotheses about the figure of the original wearer in a garment of questioned provenance (Davidson, 2015, pp. 198–223); or it may be used as 'experimental history,' where recreation of no-longer-extant garments based on textual context can produce crucial insight into the embodied experiences of their erstwhile wearers (Bendall, 2019, pp. 363–399).

Such needs for reconstruction partially stem from the incomplete nature of surviving historical texts, particularly those concerning women. In her book about footbinding, Dorothy Ko (2005) details the difficulty in accurately reconstructing women's own voices, due to the imbalance in literacy between the sexes and bias towards the writings of the literati elite. Although by the late Qing, more women had the opportunity to be educated (Lee, 1995, pp. 345–367), the number of autobiographical writings of women is still relatively small.

In this paper, I argue that the process of making and wearing historical Chinese garments can help us understand how these flat garments are transposed into three-dimensionality on the body, providing crucial insight into the embodied experience of makers and wearers in the past.

The Dajinshan and Mamianqun

Before we start our reconstruction of historical clothing, we have to first understand the historical context of these clothes and what they looked like, which will be accomplished through surveying relevant historical texts and surviving garments in museums. In the late Qing dynasty, the most common outer garment worn by Han women was a knee-length jacket sometimes called the *dajinshan*, paired with a pleated skirt or trousers (Sun, 2008). We based our reconstruction on one such *dajinshan* and *mamian* skirt in the collection of the Chinese Textiles and Clothing Culture Center (CTCCC) in Fu Jen Catholic University:

> 1. Turquoise Satin Piped Fur-trimmed Wide-sleeved *Dajinshan* （天青緞地素花緄邊出鋒寬袖大襟衫, hereafter referred to as the turquoise *dajinshan*）, ref. no 0006310000, dated circa. 1870s.

2. Pink Satin Seed-stitched *Mamian* Skirt（粉紫緞地打籽繡喜上眉梢馬面裙, hereafter referred to as the pink *mamian* skirt）, ref. no 0005590000, dated 1860-1890s.

The 'Dajinshan'

The *dajinshan* is similar to the Manchu *changyi* in that both are right-opening tops with short stand collars that fasten with frog buttons. However, the *dajinshan* is shorter in length and always paired with a skirt or trousers while the Manchu *changyi* is usually at least ankle length (Sun, 2008). The *dajinshan* could be lined or unlined, and could be made out of cotton, linen, ramie, silk, or wool.

Figure 1. Turquoise satin piped fur-trimmed wide-sleeved dajinshan, front, CTCCC collection

The turquoise *dajinshan* in the CTCCC collection (Figure 1) is made of unlined monochrome silk satin damask, trimmed with narrow fur trim. However, stitch marks on the inside, as well as unfinished seams and protruding paper backing around the facings, strongly suggest that this garment was originally lined. The neckline, hem, and sleeves are bordered with black satin, and the jacket is decorated with two kinds of patterned ribbons and two types of braids. The sleeveband is decorated with appliqué made from painted silk satin, a technique known as *duiling* (堆綾). The jacket fastens with metal buttons on satin loops.

There is a great deal of visual evidence of this kind of *dajinshan* being worn in the late Qing dynasty. In the *Dianshizhai* pictorial, an illustrated newspaper that ran from 1884 to 1898, almost all of the women pictured in it are wearing this kind of wide-sleeved *dajinshan*, albeit most of them less lavishly decorated. In photographs from the era, such as those taken by British photographer John Thomson (1873), most Han Chinese women are wearing this kind of *dajinshan*. The presence of a large number of extant *dajinshan* from this period (Wang, 2015) also point to it being a popular item of clothing, which is why we chose to recreate it.

The 'Mamian' Skirt

Pleated skirts have been present in Chinese women's clothing since at least the Tang dynasty, but *mamian* skirts with flat fronts and backs and pleated sides came into style during the Ming dynasty, where they continued in popularity until the late Qing dynasty (Sun, 2008).

Compared with Ming *mamian* skirts, the Qing versions steadily grew more ornate, and by the late Qing, a version with sewn-down pleats, called the *yulin* (fish-scale) *mamian* skirt, had appeared (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Pink satin seed-stitched *mamian* skirt, CTCCC collection

The front and back panels of *mamian* skirts was prime for decoration. Woven ribbons, embroidery, or *duiling* appliqué could all be used, and sometimes the pleated areas would even be embroidered in advance (Haig and Shelton, 2006), even though some of the embroidery would then be hidden in the pleats. A crucial feature of *mamian* skirts is its double panel structure; two identical panels are overlapped and sewn onto one waistband, or sometimes onto two separate waistbands that are then fastened with frog closures. The skirt is wrapped around the waist and tied with ribbon ties. The front and back flat panels are the *mamian* namesake, which are usually bordered with solid-colored satin, as is the hem of the pleated area. The pink *mamian* skirt from the CTCCC (Figure 2) has fully stitched-down fish-scale pleats, unlike some examples in which the pleats are only partially secured in the top half of the skirt.

Reconstruction

The purpose of reconstruction in this paper is twofold: to learn about the techniques used in making these clothes, and to understand the embodied experiences of women in the past by wearing these clothes ourselves.

Before reconstruction, we engaged in the process of 'slow looking', examining details on the extant garments (Mida and Kim, 2015). This revealed small details such as the *duiling* being machine stitched. During reconstruction, we learned how to use historical techniques such as 上漿 (*shang jiang*), starching the fabric with paste. And once the replica was complete, it could be worn, allowing us to test hypotheses regarding the structure and drape of the garments on a person. The replica could also be used for display and educational purposes; it could be put on

display more often, saving the fragile original garments from deterioration. In this paper, I hope to use our reconstruction to understand how a late Qing woman's ensemble affected her body shape and posture.

Materials

The first step to making a replica is to source appropriate materials. Examination of the turquoise *dajinshan* (see Figure 18) revealed that the main fabric is a monochrome silk satin damask. The center front and back seams are cut on the fabric's selvedge, which features gold coloured threads. Under the sleevebands, we found that the turquoise satin is folded under, with the original selvedge intact; this means the original satin damask is around 75 cm in width. Many examples of Qing silk satin damask from the 1890s are also around this size (Kuhn et al., 2012).

The silk fabric we used was sourced from a seller on Taobao selling deadstock Korean silks, and is of a similar satin damask weave, although it is only 55 cm wide. We used the same fabric for both *dajinshan* and *mamian* skirt as there are surviving sets made in the same fabric (Wang, 2015), although they did not always have to match (Lai and Hung, 2011). Plain black silk satin was sourced in Taipei.

The decorative ribbons on the *dajinshan* (Figure 3) are made of silk jacquard. The bright pink colors suggest they are dyed with synthetic dye (Chatterton, 2002). The ribbons are incredibly lightweight, softer and thinner than modern silk ribbon. The closest match to the 45-mm wide butterfly ribbon we found was a vintage French-produced ribbon from the 1940s, made of pure silk, albeit woven on a grosgrain ground. The thinner pink ribbon is 12 mm wide, but no similar silk ribbon was found, so we used a synthetic modern ribbon of the same width. Apart from the patterned ribbons, two kinds of 4 mm braid are used on the *dajinshan* (Figure 3), resembling examples woven by hand, like those in the Museum of Fiber Arts in Taichung (Gao, 1996). For this, we used twill tape in a similar color and texture (Figure 4).

Figure 3. Detail of trims on turquoise *dajinshan* from the CTCCC

Figure 4. Detail of trims used on our reconstruction *dajinshan*

The ribbons we used were thicker and harder to manipulate than the original examples, adding more stiffness around the trimmed areas in our replica. It was also more difficult to steam the ribbon flat around curves. The six layers of trim did however help reinforce and stabilize the silk satin, particularly around the neckline and along the side opening.

Pattern and Cut

Detailed measurements were taken from the extant garments, from which we made paper patterns. The design of the *duiling* appliqué on the sleeves was redrawn in a vector program from photos of the sleeveband, then split into layers according to the original construction sequence.

The *dajinshan* is cut on the flat, and the right front underlap reaches almost to the hem, in a style which is called 五幅齊長 (*wu fu qi chang*), referring to the five lengths of cloth that make up the front, back, and underlap (Cheng, 2006). As pattern diagrams for *dajinshan* already exist (Cheng, 2006), it will not be detailed here.

The *mamian* skirt is made from two identical skirt panels that feature a flat front, the *mamian*, and a pleated section sewn to it (Figure 5). The skirt is made from silk satin damask, while the wide, folded waistband is made from off-white cotton. The pleats of the skirt are stitched down in a trapezoid shape (Figure 6).

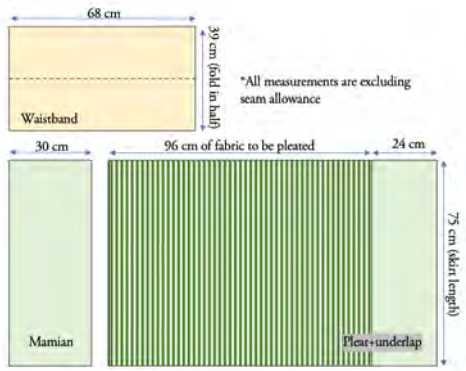

Figure 5. Fabric layout of one *mamian* skirt panel

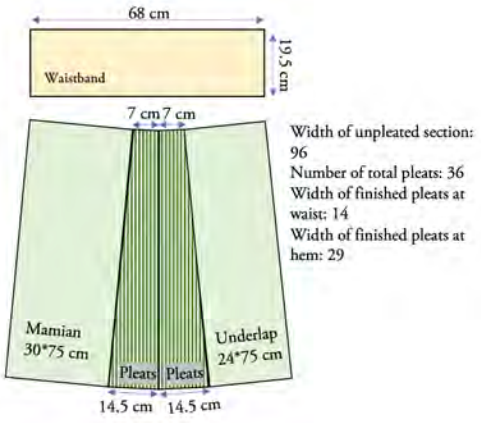

Figure 6. Finished layout of one skirt panel

Individual pleats are stitched down into a trapezoid shape, with every pleat deeper at the top (waist edge) then at the bottom (hem edge). Figure 7 provides a guide to calculating the intake of the pleats.

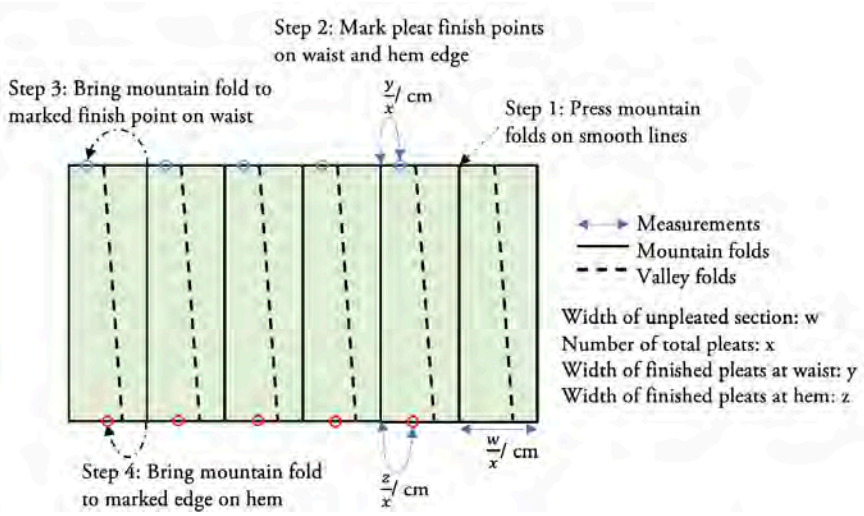

Figure 7. Pleat intake calculation guide

To make the pleats, I first marked the widths of the whole pleat in parallel lines across the panel with a ruler. Dividing the width of the unpleated section (w) by the total number of pleats (x) gives us the width of each individual pleat ($\frac{w}{x}$ cm). Next, I marked the finish points of the pleats along the waist and hem, which can be calculated by dividing the width of the finished pleated section (y at waist edge and z at hem edge) by the number of total pleats (x). Each pleat is ironed and sewn before moving on to the next, by first ironing the mountain fold, then bringing it to the finish point of each pleat, and then ironing again, forming a valley fold inside the pleat.

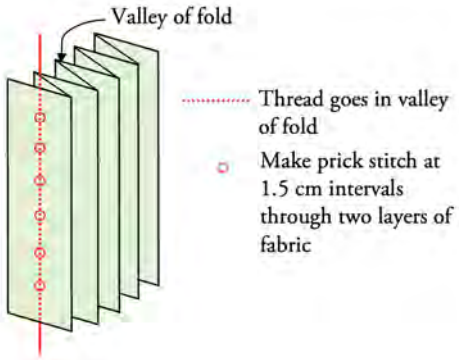

Figure 8. Pleat stitching diagram, wrong side facing us

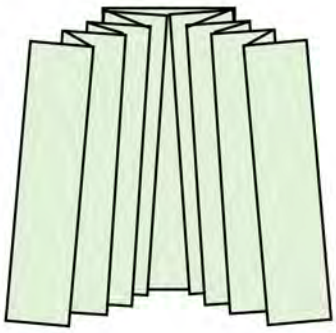

Figure 9. Finished pleat diagram (right side up), with box pleat at center

Each pleat is sewn into place before the next pleat is ironed. The thread passes through the valley of the fold, pricking through to the wrong side in 1.5 cm intervals (Figure 8). When done (Figure 9), the bulk of the thread is hidden in the valley folds, and only small prick stitches can be seen on the wrong side (Figure 10). On the right side, there is no visible stitching, but if the pleats are stretched, small prick stitches can be seen holding the fish-scale pleats together (Figure 11).

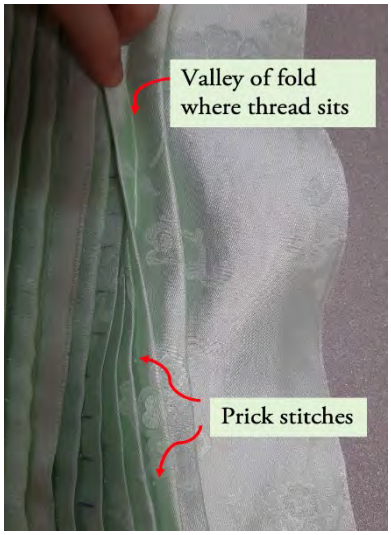

Figure 10. Wrong side of pleated panel, showing stitches

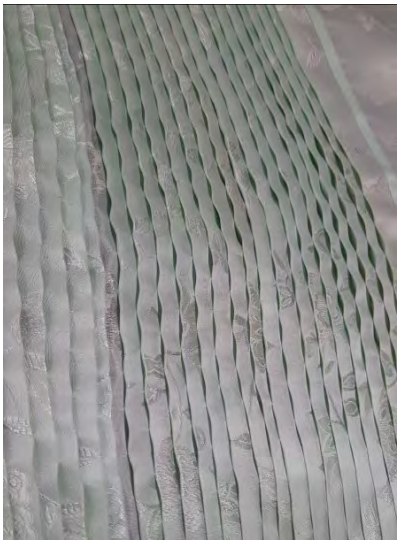

Figure 11. Right side of pleated panel, stretched, showing fish-scale effect

The pleating formula can be adjusted according to the desired sweep of the finished skirt, and the density of the pleats. After the pleats are done and the pleated panel is sewn to the *mamian*, the waistband can be attached.

Construction

Observation of the turquoise *dajinshan* revealed that, aside from the *duiling* on the sleeveband, every seam is stitched by hand. The center front and back seams are done in running stitch, and all the ribbon trims are attached with running stitches that are short on the right side and longer on the reverse. The cutout *wayun* (挖雲) design on the front overlap is done by slipstitching the folded-over edges of the black satin to the main fabric.

We used the same technique to make the *wayun* cutout and *duiling* appliqué. Despite being present on a number of late nineteenth century Chinese garments, such as a blue *dajinshan* in the Beijing Institute of Fashion Technology, *duiling* has not been studied much by scholars either in China or abroad. Therefore, we had to rely on a small amount of modern sources and trial and error to piece together how to do it.

First, we starched the silk satin with paste (漿糊 *jianghu*), of the sort used for making qipao (Fung, 2013). Next we traced the designs onto the satin with card templates, and cut out the satin with seam allowance. Because our satin was thinner than the original one, we cut another layer of the design from plain-weave cotton and glued it to the wrong side of the silk to add thickness. The card template was then placed onto the piece and seam allowances pressed over the card. In modern *duiling*, the card is left inside the silk, as they are often intended to be decorative art pieces, and not meant to be worn (Jia, 2006). However, the *duiling* on the extant *dajinshan* is supple, so after ironing the seam allowances, the card was carefully removed. After prepping each piece, they are topstitched onto the black satin sleeveband with a sewing machine with a 0.4 mm stitch length. Lastly, the pieces were painted over with Chinese pigments, and small embroidered embellishments are added (Figure 14).

Figure 12. Wetting starched silk with brush

Figure 13. Template for *duiling* pieces

Figure 14. Detail of finished *duiling*

Among the techniques we tested for ironing down the seam allowance, wetting the seam allowance with a small brush dipped in water worked best, as it made the silk malleable (Figure 12). Upon further reflection, another traditional Chinese tailoring technique, the water line (水線, *shuixian*), could have been used in this step. In traditional qipao tailoring, the tailor passes a cotton thread between his lips, wetting it with saliva, then presses the thread onto the fabric (Fung, 2013). The moisture helps the fabric fold cleanly on that line. Skilled users may be able to 'walk' the line along the curves of the design, which would be quicker.

The pink *mamian* skirt in the CTCCC is also entirely hand-stitched. Black satin fabric is sewn to the hem of the skirt around the three sides of the *mamian*, with raw edges enclosed inside. The pleats are secured by sewing each pleat down (see Figure 8), with the waistband attached last. Six pairs of fabric frog closures are stitched to the waistbands, so the two complete skirt panels can be connected.

Two 1.2 cm wide fabric loops are attached to one side each of the waistbands, through which twill tape is tied. This forms the closure for the skirt.

The Embodiment of Wearing

In her article about reconstructing historical clothing as a tool for research, Bendall (2019) posits that the 'reflective rationality' (testing the design both during and after the reconstruction process) one gains from the process of making and adjusting a historical garment not only raises but also answers questions about the skill of garment-making that may have been otherwise forgotten. After the reconstructions are complete, we can test the clothing on a subject, investigating the sensory effects of the ensemble. Direct sources on sensory experiences of Chinese women in the late Qing dynasty are rare, and would necessitate further investigation outside the scope of this project. Our preliminary findings regarding the reflective rationality we gleaned from this project are as follows.

Traditional Chinese Sewing Techniques

Apart from direct observation of extant garments, our main source of instruction about construction of traditional Chinese clothing came from qipao-making manuals (Fung, 2013). This included how to make starch paste for stiffening the fabric, bias fabric strips for the loop buttons, and how to use traditional techniques such as chalk lines and water lines. These techniques have mostly been passed down by qipao tailors who apprenticed in the 1950–60s. In the absence of tailoring manuals from the late Qing dynasty, we have chosen to combine material evidence with these techniques. Surviving artefacts, such as a late nineteenth century chalk line pouch in the Glenn Roberts Collection (Chatterton, 2002), support the idea that these qipao techniques were closely descended from earlier late Qing practices. Chalk lines could mark both straight and curved lines, although straight lines are quicker to mark, making it ideal for making straight-cut pre-twentieth century Chinese clothes. Previously, I noted that water lines may have been used to turn under the seam allowances in the silk *duiling* pieces. Further investigation into the origin of qipao tailoring techniques could unveil interesting connections to earlier construction techniques.

The details of how fish-scale *mamian* skirt pleats are sewn (Figure 8) have, to my knowledge, not been published elsewhere before this. The spaced-out prick-stitches holding the pleats together gives it elasticity, similar to that of English smocking. This would make the skirt more comfortable to wear, particularly as the CTCCC pink *mamian* skirt has a finished hip measurement of only about 90 cm (the maximum waist measurement the skirt fits is about 75 cm). Another benefit of these stitches is that they can keep the pleats fixed in place. Unlike synthetic fabrics which can be pleated and heat-set permanently, natural fibres like the silk of the extant skirt will lose their folds over time. They will have to be re-pleated and ironed after wear if not secured. The last benefit may be purely aesthetic; the stitches give the skirt its name, the lustrous silk resembling glittering fish-scales when the skirt is in motion.

How Clothing Affected the Figure and Posture

When the *dajinshan* and *mamian* skirt is put on over period-correct undergarments (a *dudou* belly band, under-trousers, and short leggings), the figure of the wearer is almost entirely obscured.

Figure 15. Reconstruction of *dajinshan* and *mamian* worn by the author

Figure 16. Turquoise satin piped fur-trimmed wide-sleeved *dajinshan*, back view

The parts of the body highlighted by late Qing clothing are, therefore, the exposed parts: the face, hands, and feet (Figure 15). Arms and necks were meant to be covered—when the Empress Dowager Cixi was presented with an oil painting of Princess Der Ling in Western clothes, she was appalled, admonishing her for baring her arms and neck (Der Ling, 1911).

The turquoise *dajinshan* in the CTCCC (Figure 1) we studied has a bust circumference of around 160 cm, double that of the author's when she tried on the ensemble, giving it a large amount of ease. The wide sleeves also widen the torso, but as the gaze slides down, the narrower skirt draws one's focus to the tiny bound feet, further emphasized by the tight leggings covering the ankles (Figure 18). The length of the sleeves just reaches the wrist; following Cixi's commentary above, she exclaims, "Here we don't even expose our wrists when in the company of gentlemen," (Der Ling, 1911), showing that wrists were supposed to be covered. Yet the many bangles often worn by women at that time still drew one's attention to the hands.

Figure 17. The reconstructed *dajinshan* and *mamian* skirt displayed on a mannequin

Figure 18. The reconstructed *dajinshan* and *mamian* skirt worn by the author (left)

Wearing the completed ensemble and moving around in it allowed us to test how different postures affected the look of the garments. Displayed on a mannequin with shoulders thrown back, the back of the *dajinshan* had more folds (Figure 17), but when the author wore it with rounded slouched shoulders, the upper back area of the *dajinshan* was smoother (Figure 18). During the Qing dynasty, Chinese women were not encouraged to stand ramrod straight with chins lifted high; it was considered indecent (Jiao, 2017). Women were supposed to slouch and look down, and only men could stand straight and puff up their chests. It seems that the cut of the *dajinshan*, with its cut-on sleeves, favors the slouched deportment of a respectable late Qing lady. Posture also affects the visibility of the sleeveband (see Figure 15). The bulk of the *duiling* embellishment on the sleevebands are on the back, only displayed to their fullest effect when the hands are folded in front. Many photographic and artistic portraits of seated women picture their hands folded together in their lap (Bertholet and Stokmans, 2011), and this preferred resting posture may be why the fronts of the sleevebands are usually sparsely decorated unlike the fully embellished back.

Another instance of clothing influencing posture is the structure of the *mamian* skirt, which, since it is made of two panels, overlaps at the front and back. Despite the wide yardage making up the skirt (300*80 cm), the fishscale pleats narrow its sweep, and if one takes long strides, the overlap opens, exposing the underclothes. The skirt therefore reminds the user to take smaller, more careful steps, in line with how women with bound feet were purported to sway as they walked (Ko, 2005). If one were only wearing trousers, like many women pictured in the *Dianshizhai* pictorial, movement would be much less restricted; more than once, the *Dianshizhai* pictorial featured women running and fighting in trousers (Yip, 2012, pp. 487–542). When skirts were worn, and when trousers were acceptable, are interesting questions about how clothing delineates formal versus informal occasions that would be worth looking into.

Conclusion

Reconstructing historical Chinese garments in an academic setting has shown that both the making and wearing process of reconstruction are valuable research tools that allow the researcher to gain tacit understanding of the skills required to make past garments, as well as recover certain embodied experiences of women in the past.

The quest to find supporting documentation for the layers of women's clothing has also led to interesting sources such as pictorials and photos, while close observation of the extant garments our reconstructions were based on revealed construction details that have otherwise never been published, such as how the stitches securing the *mamian* skirt pleats serve not only to keep the folds in place but also to provide elasticity. These construction methods also link the past technique of tailors in the late Qing dynasty to the contemporary—but slowly withering—tailors still making qipao in the traditional manner.

Although many Chinese garments may be cut on the flat, we find they still inevitably become three-dimensional on the body. Wearing the ensemble revealed that certain postures or mannerisms required of the wearer to adhere to late Qing social norms, such as slouching and demurely clasping one's hands, were actually accentuated or reinforced by clothing. Focusing on the materiality of these historical garments enables scholars to evaluate the veracity of textual sources from the era which may not have been written by the actual people who wore it, bridging the gap between historical sources and tacit embodied knowledge that has been lost to time.

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