Textiles with a Dual Heritage

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Working for a number of years with the Civilizations in Contact Project at Cambridge University, I became fascinated by textiles that are the product of these contacts and which have, if you like, two parents or elements from different parts of the world.

This could be design, in the case of a very moving child’s cap from Afghanistan, embroidered with military helicopters, probably Russian [fig. 1]. Did the boy ask for that pattern? More likely, it was embroidered by a mother hoping to protect her child, as more traditional textiles feature snakes and scorpions. Planes are occasionally found on North African kelims, dating from World War II. They are also found on an indigo and white cotton ikat, probably for a yukata [fig. 2].

Another example, this time stretching across millennia as well as miles, is the motif of two peacocks drinking at a fountain, symbolising the representation of immortality—drinking at a fountain, representing the waters of life, in common with the palaeo-Christian sarcophagi in the area and modern use into folk art and embroidery. Collection and photograph by author.

A base of Totonicapán on white embroidered muslin [fig. 5]. A similar on-white embroidered muslin [fig. 5]. A similar example used a chikankari sari, probably from Lucknow. As an additional twist, according to one theory, this type of work is thought to have originated in Shiraz, imported into India by the Mughals.

Or, again, a 17th century kimono with panels of Indian chintz, introduced to Japan by the Portuguese and usually too costly to be used for anything but small bags and purses. The Japanese soon learned to imitate these cotton fabrics—sara-sa—although the designs could never be mistaken for the Indian originals. A comparable example might be the Russian cottons exported in vast quantities to Central Asia and used as linings for robes, furnishings, etc. Eventually, they were produced there, mainly in Uzbekistan, although imports continued, later from farther afield (i.e., Japan and China).

I became especially interested in this question of dual heritage when working on the development and travels of the embroidered silk Chinese shawls, commonly known in English as Canton shawls, because of the region where they were made (now Guangzhou). They are known in Spanish as manto de Manila, because Manila is where they were trans-shiped. Shawls were a standard item across Europe for centuries, worn for warmth or for decoration, but in the early 19th century Chinese shawls began to appear in great numbers—especially, but not exclusively, in the Hispanic world, where they became an element in the national dress of various regions. In China, however, the square fringed shawl has never been a standard article of clothing, although stoles were worn at an earlier period, as seen in paintings from the Tang dynasty (618–906). The Canton shawl is therefore itself an East-West hybrid. Since part of the appeal of these shawls was their exoticism, although they were commissioned by Western merchants (the Spanish author Perez Galdos has a wonderful and accurate description of the trade in his novel Fortunata y Jacinta), the designs were almost always Chinese. Some of the earliest examples, however, have clearly Western motifs, especially a nosegay tied up with a ribbon. This was a very fashionable pattern around 1800, which made its way not only to...
China, but also to the Ottoman Empire, where it begins to appear in domestic embroideries, probably copied from imported French silks. The vast majority of the motifs, however, were the kind the embroideresses would have been used to working on their own clothes, or pieces they were commissioned to make for local use. Each element would have had a meaning, usually prophylactic or wishing ‘good luck’ – as is the case with almost all traditional weaving and embroidery. Outside China, the symbolism was, of course, not recognised or was reinterpreted: the peony became a rose; trails of wisteria were read as garlands in fabrics from the Middle East.

The vogue for Chinese embroidery was part of the classic Chinese repertoire. This style included drawn thread, cutwork, etc. – not for export in the 20th century. Such stitches were used in tablecloths and blouses, not for export in the 20th century. Such stitches were used in tablecloths and blouses, not for export in the 20th century. Such stitches, is said to have been introduced into the Philippines by European nuns in the 17th century, as they were found among the Phil and dates to the late 17th century, but is almost certainly of Chinese workmanship. Whether it was commissioned for the Cathedral, or whether it was simply acquired as a luxury object to be offered to the Church is unclear, but unlike certain vestments which have a mixture of Chinese and Christian motifs – or one in Oxford made from a dragon robe, but with Christian additions – this hanging has no obvious Christian iconography. It was not only Europe that was charmed by Chinese embroideries. The Paro community of the West Coast of India, especially in Mumbai, were important traders with wide ranging contacts and they commissioned embroidered saris – gara – from China. These were rare luxury items and very few had survived, but it is possible that this contact also influenced the shawls. There are a small number of very high-quality pieces embroidered with flowers, which are clearly copied from Mughal designs, with a citation that is definitely not Chinese [Fig. 7]. Were these from workshops that produced gara? Or were they copied from the Indian chintz that were popular in Macao and even found their way to Japan? We do not know. Saris embroidered in China were out of most people’s price range, but there was an alternative: embroidered ribbons – kors – could be added to the sari border and palu [Fig. 8]. Generally Chinese in style, but sometimes with popular Indian motifs, such as peacocks, they were exported in large quantity and often sold by Chinese peddlers. There is another twist to the story, however. The Indians, as has frequently been noted, are excellent craftsmen and skilled抄数者, so it is not surprising that before long imitations of these ribbons were being produced in India, particularly at Surat. It is actually very hard to tell originals and imitations apart. The way that stitches are worked and the threads are started and finished off varied from country to country. In this way the wrong side of the material can provide a clue as to the origin, even if the right side is a perfect imitation. Ribbons have always been popular mechanisms, but the ones produced for a market for the New World and used for church vestments. Some of these silks, in turn, were influenced by imports from Persia long before, once again adding another layer to the story. The Canton shawl, which began as a luxury accessory, became part of the Hispanic version of the national dress in Central and South America, where visitors were often amazed at the purchasing power of working-class and even rural women. In Mexico, the embroideries influenced the spectacular China poblanos costumes, while in Guatemala, brightly coloured flowers, particularly popular in Chichicastenango weavings, undoubtedly owe something to the shawls. Following the shawls to a different area of the world, the European tradition they were worn around the shoulders or over the head, often for warmth, or sometimes decoratively around the neck. However, when no obvious Christian iconography appeared, this time with Ottoman aesthetics, this shawl was to be worn again as a head covering. It could be added to the sari border and palu [Fig. 9]. ’s are usually pastel “sugar almond” colours. A good example is a 1920s shawl from Tetuan, which was to be worn again as a head covering. It is a 1920s shawl from Tetuan, which was to be worn again as a head covering. It could be added to the sari border and palu [Fig. 9].

These are just a few of the innumerable examples of cultural contact demonstrated by textiles that have two sources of origin or, if you prefer, two ‘parents’ of different nationalities. A word of warning about designs on the market: the designs were transmitted in the ways we have described, companies producing embroidery thread, such as DMC in France, complicated the situation from the early 20th century onwards by giving away patterns or books of patterns to their clients. This resulted in the same designs appearing on cushions in England, the ritual towels known as huipiles in the Americas, Palestinian dresses, and woven huipiles in Guatemala. The patterns of transmission had permanently changed. Later in the century, the picture was further complicated by well-meaning NGOs encouraging embroiderers to abandon their traditional patterns and colour schemes in order to produce items felt to be more saleable.

Caroline Stone was educated at Cambridge (UK) and Kyoto University (Japan). She has worked as an adviser on North African embroideries and Canton shawls and has organised exhibitions in both Spain and Cambridge.

Notes


