

From the Land of the Immortals: Chinese Taoist Robes and Textiles

January 13, 2012-April 22, 2012

This exhibition highlights a group of painstakingly worked 18th- and 19th-century silk priest robes and textiles made in China for practitioners of the Taoist religion. The robes on display were worn by Grand Masters, the leaders of Taoist communities, for the performance of Grand Rituals, elaborate public ceremonies associated with honoring gods or with funerary rites.

Taoism, China's primary indigenous religion and philosophy of life, took shape in the late pre-imperial period (5th to 3rd centuries BCE) and remains influential in Chinese culture today. With origins rooted in earlier nature cults and health practices, Taoism is concerned with both the position of humanity in the cosmos and the attainment of longevity and immortality, physical or otherwise.

The focus of Taoism is the Tao (dao). Translated literally, Tao means "the way"; by extension it may be interpreted as "the principle" that orders the cosmos. But since the Tao is by definition not meant to be explained, any explanation is misleading. Words cannot match the Tao. The Daodejing, the sacred text of Taoism, begins with the statement, "the Tao that can be discussed is not the eternal Tao." Over the centuries practitioners have nonetheless developed a complex symbolic language that gives concrete form to the metaphysical abstractions of the religion's tenets. Whether performing Grand Rituals or one of a variety of private rituals to improve the health of individuals or to exorcise evil spirits, Taoist priests (daoshi) garbed in ceremonial robes appear as one with the cosmos and therefore as powerful spiritual intermediaries acting on the part of their community.

Coinciding with Brown University's "Year of China" program, this exhibition is complemented by a concurrent show of Taoist paintings at Brown's Haffenreffer Museum.

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Symbolism in Taoist Robes

Taoist priests commonly wear two types of robes: the poncho-like jiangyi (robe of descent, referring to either the descent of the priest from the altar or of the spirits to the altar) and the sleeved daopao (Taoist robe). The cosmic symbolism generally found in the upper central back section of the robes—which includes elements such as the sun and moon, constellations, mountains and water—is similar in both types, but the jiangyi is a sign of higher priestly rank.

Taoist robes mirror the cosmos onto the figure of the officiating priest. The shape of the jiangyi symbolizes the earth, which in Chinese cosmology is seen as square. When the priest opens his arms, the square silhouette of the robe becomes fully apparent and its motifs symbolizing the heavens visible. Thus in donning the robe the priest embodies the conjunction of heaven and earth.

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Look for the following motifs in each of the robes on view. Other common symbols are discussed in the labels for the individual robes.

Sun

The sun holds a bird—originally a three-legged crow and sometimes a rooster—in reference to a Chinese myth that describes the sun as carried across the sky by a black crow.

Moon

The moon bears a white rabbit intent on pounding the elixir of immortality under a cassia tree. The white rabbit is a symbol of long life and fertility.

Three Heavens

The Three Heavens are three circles or roundels containing small pagodas set between the sun and the moon. They represent the abodes of the Three Purities (Sanqing), the most important Taoist deities. The members of this Taoist triad are known as Jade purity (Yuqing), Highest Purity (Shangqing), and Supreme Purity (Taiqing). They are also called Yuanshi Tianzun, Lingbao Tianzun, and Daode Tianzun, namely the Heavenly Worthies of Primordial Beginning, Numinous Treasure, and Way and its Power.

Sacred (Golden) Tower and Flying Cranes

Below the sun, moon, and Three Heavens is an image of a multi-storey tower surrounded by flying cranes. This tower symbolizes the Gate or Palace of Heaven, home to the Jade Emperor. The white cranes are emblems of long life and by extension of immortality.

Stars and Constellations

As symbols of the cosmos, stars are central to Taoist imagery. Most important are the North Star, the pivot of the world, and the Big Dipper (Beidou), which by virtue of its rotation around the pole is considered the clock of the cosmos. Other prominent star formations are the 28 lunar stations, asterisms used in antiquity to mark the movements of the moon.

True Forms of the Five Sacred Peaks (Wu yue)

Below the tower and the constellations, sometimes scattered in different directions, are five symbols resembling archaic Chinese characters that refer to the five sacred mountains of Taoism and to the earthly world. The mountains in turn represent the five traditional directions of east, west, north, south, and center.

Mountain Peaks and Cosmic Waters

The schematic representation of waves at the bottom of Taoist robes represents the cosmic waters. The mountain peaks rising from the waves connote the world axis or, in some cases, the islands of immortality floating on the eastern sea.

CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

Chinese

Daopao (Taoist priest's robe), 1800s

Silk, gilt paper, metallic-wrapped yarn; satin weave, embroidered
Gift of Mrs. Wallace Hoge 1990.082.3

This robe differs in structure and significance from the others in this exhibition. Unlike the poncho-like jiangyi that was worn by Grand Masters, the daopao (道袍) is a sleeved robe for middle-rank Taoist priests. Its form is ancient, and today it is rarely found in museum collections, probably because it was mistakenly perceived as a more ordinary garment. Daopao are usually simpler than the Grand Master robes. This one, however, appears to have the same imagery (patch with sun, moon, heavens of Three Purities, constellations around the golden tower) as the jiangyi. This daopao is still lined with the original hemp fabric customary for Taoist robes. A name (Yan Lang, 言朗, possibly that of the maker or the owner) is inscribed with ink on the inside lining.



Chinese; Qing

Jiangyi (robe of descent), 1800s

Silk, gilt paper, metallic yarn; satin weave, embroidered, satin stitch, couching

Gift of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich 35.415

In addition to the square patch traditionally associated with Taoist jiangyi robes, this robe features colorful butterflies (symbols of change and transformation as well as of love) and flowers (lotus or peonies) and is trimmed with black borders embroidered with yarn made of gold wrapped around a silk core.



The character Shou (longevity) appears at the back of the neck, and the Eight Trigrams fill the side borders. These ancient Chinese symbols are borrowed from the Yijing (I-Ching or Book of Changes), a divinatory text used in Taoist cosmology to illustrate fundamental elements of reality by different combinations of continuous (yang) and broken (yin) lines. At bottom are a variety of auspicious symbols, including eternity knots, dragons, and tigers.

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Chinese

Jiangyi (robe of descent), 1800s

Silk, gilt paper, metallic-wrapped yarn; compound weave, embroidered

Gift of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich 35.416

This robe of descent is distinguished by the elaborate lattice pattern formed by gold-wrapped yarn embroidered on the blue-figured silk ground fabric. Out of this golden network spring colorful embroidered renditions of the palaces of the Three Purities, sun and moon, fivestoried tower, constellations, symbols of the five sacred mountains, cranes, and phoenixes. On the front center flaps are embroidered a dragon (wearer left) and a tiger (wearer right). These two animals are associated with the eastern and the western directions, respectively, and probably refer to two large circumpolar constellations, known as the Green Dragon and the White Tiger, which marked the rising and setting of the sun. The bottom band shows images of the turtle and the snake (which together mark the north) alongside other dragons and horses that float above the green waves. The symbol for the southern direction (a red bird) is not visible here, but may have been marked by the priest's headdress.



Chinese

Jiangyi (robe of descent), 1800s

Silk, gilt paper, metallic-wrapped yarn; satin weave, embroidered

Gift of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich 35.417

This yellow jiangyi is heavily decorated with embroidered symbols. In addition to the standard square patch of Taoist cosmology (sun, moon, Three Purities, stars, tower, and mountains), five dragons occupy prominent positions at the center and four corners of the robe, probably symbolizing the five Chinese directions (east, west, north, south, and center). The dragon in the center is shown frontally flanked by two phoenixes. The others, shown in profile, fly amid auspicious symbols, including cranes, bats, clouds, and flames. Below are abstract renderings of five mountains amid water, possibly a reference to the five islands of immortality, the residences of Taoist immortals that were said to float in the Bohai Sea, off China's eastern coast. The red border is decorated with peonies alternating with shou (longevity) characters at both sides. The bottom border features the symbols of the Eight Trigrams of the Yijing (I-Ching or Book of Changes) interspersed with lotuses floating on cosmic waters.



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Chinese

Chair cover, early 1900s

Silk; compound weave

Gift of Marshall H. Gould 46.189A

These red woven silk chair covers would have draped over yoke-back armchairs, making them both more comfortable and symbolically significant. Each cover is organized into four registers, decorated with different symbols on a background of clouds, bats, and fretwork. At top two cranes fly beside the sacred mountain emerging from the waters. This image appears reversed because it would have been draped over the back of the chair. The next register features a four-clawed mang dragon holding a flaming pearl—a symbol of the world, knowledge, and power—in its coil and floating over mountains and waves. This central image is situated at the height of a sitter's chest. The seat is decorated with a lotus medallion, an appropriate symbol in this position as the lotus form was often used as a seat for Buddhas or deities. The final panel, which would have hung at leg height, shows the sacred tower over the waters flanked by two dragon-horses.



Chinese

Chair cover, early 1900s

Silk; compound weave

Gift of Marshall H. Gould 46.189B

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Chinese

Table frontal, late 1800s - early 1900s

Silk, metallic-wrapped yarn; satin weave, embroidered

Gift of Marshall H. Gould 46.191A

This red satin cloth with vibrant gold-wrapped yarn embroidery is filled with auspicious imagery and would have been used as a frontal for an altar table. Though the iconography suggests a Taoist context, this frontal may have been used for ancestral rituals as well.



Two roundels framed by peach branches contain two cranes each. The birds hold counting sticks in their beaks and fly toward a pavilion by the sea. This scene refers to the tale of Taoist sages who counted their age in terms of epochs, not years, and would add a counting stick to a pile to mark each epoch of man. The pavilion represents a Taoist paradise, while the peach branches and cranes represent longevity.

Above, six smaller roundels alternately depict the “three happinesses” (peach, pomegranate, and Buddha’s hand citron) or a bat with a ruyi scepter (which together symbolize the sentiment “May you have every joy and happiness as you wish”). Below are symbols of the mountain and the cosmic waters with floating dragon fish.

Chinese

Altar frontal, late 1800s-early 1900s

Silk, metallic-wrapped yarn; satin weave, embroidered

Bequest of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich 55.225

In this altarpiece five dragons float over mountains and waters, which together symbolize the celestial landscape. These five-clawed dragons, known as long, decorate objects reserved for the imperial house, as opposed to the four-clawed mang dragons designed for lesser aristocrats. The central dragon, shown frontally, holds the flaming pearl (longzhu), a symbol of the power of the dragon, wisdom, knowledge, and the world. The five dragons are surrounded by bats and clouds, as well as by the Eight Taoist Attributes that symbolize the Eight Immortals of Taoism—sword, flute, fan, lotus/double gourd/crutch, castanets, flower basket, bamboo tube, and rods. At bottom, the Eight Precious Things of Buddhism—conch shell, wheel of the law, vase, parasol, two golden fish, lotus, banner of victory, and eternal knot—float amid the waves surrounding the sacred mountain.

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Chinese

Hanging scroll, early 1800s

Silk, metallic-wrapped yarn; tapestry weave, hand painted
Bequest of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich 55.232

This large, meticulously woven hanging textile scroll most likely represents a gathering of immortals to celebrate the birthdays of the Three Stars (sanxing), Shou Xing, Fu Xing, and Lu Xing. A staple of Taoist iconography, also referred to with the Chinese characters Shou 壽 (longevity), Fu 福 (happiness), and Lu 祿 (reward), the Three Stars represent these objectives, which were important especially at the most popular level of Taoist belief.

This auspicious theme, often associated with birthdays, became popular during the late Ming period. Given its size and the quality of the fine silk tapestry weave, this piece probably hung in a palace hall or a wealthy temple. The elaborate scene is likely inspired by a popular drama, the Qunxian qingshou Pantao hui (Gathering Immortals Celebrate Longevity at the Flat Peaches Festival), by the Ming-period dramatist Zhou Youdun.

[Detail 1] The Queen Mother of the West flies on the back of a phoenix attended by two Jade Maidens. This beloved female Taoist immortal resided on Mount Kunlun, where she presided over the fabled garden where the peaches of immortality grew.

[Detail 2] The Three Stars (Shou Xing, Fu Xing, and Lu Xing) are shown at the top of the terrace greeting the Queen Mother of the west. Shou Xing, also known as Old Man Star, resembles the traditional image of the father of Taoism, Laozi. He is generally represented as an old man with a large bald head presenting a large peach, a symbol of long life, to the Queen Mother of the West. Fu Xing is dressed as a court official and carries a ruyi scepter (literally translated "as you wish" the ruyi is a symbol of power and fortune); Lu Xing holds a tray with a bronze ritual vessel.

[Detail 3] Below the Queen Mother of the West, a young woman carrying flower and peaches steers a strange boat, perhaps fashioned out of an ancient peach tree.

[Detail 4] Below the Three Stars are other immortal beings, including the Eight Immortals, Taoist holies famed for having achieved the goal of long life. A group of three stand on the stairs that lead to the terrace: Zhongli Qian, a disheveled scholar with a large, bare belly; Lü Dongbin, an elegant official; and Li Tieguai, the immortal who had to adopt the body of a crippled beggar.



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[Detail 5] On a natural bridge at the center of the scroll are He Xiangyu, an immortal woman holding a pot of peaches and flowers; Lan Caihe, a young and sexually ambiguous creature holding a flower; Cao Guojiu, the protector of actors with his castanets; and Han Xiangzi, a young boy who plays the flute.

[Detail 6] The immortal Zhang Guolao is an old man who rides a magic mule and holds a paper bag within which he sometimes stores the mule.

[Detail 7] At the bottom of the scroll are other Taoist holies who entertain themselves with various objects and creatures, including a magic mushroom, a deer, and a toad. Among them, we can recognize Dongfang Shuo, the old man who stole a branch of peaches of immortality from the Queen Mother of the West, and Liu Hai, the owner of a prodigious three-legged toad.

Chinese

Daoist priest's robe, 1800s

Silk, metallic yarn, tapestry weave

Bequest of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich 55.242

In this robe, most of the pattern is rendered by a technique known in China as kesi (slit tapestry weave). Though the piece is executed in simple plain weave, the rendering of this elaborate imagery in fine silk thread required constant changes of color to create tiny cells of different colors. Scattered across the back of this robe amidst auspicious symbols of clouds and cranes are fourteen male figures, with another four depicted on the front of the robe. These men represent the Eighteen Luohan (Sanskrit: Arhat), Buddhist practitioners that have reached a degree of enlightenment. The presence of Buddhist icons shows how some Taoist sects adopted a syncretic iconography. The bottom border of the robe is decorated with an image of Mount Kunlun, the residence of the Queen Mother of the West. The mountain is surrounded by waves of water above which float auspicious animals (deer, dragon) and symbols (coins, scrolls). The front of the robe is mostly plain except for the shoulder area decorated with the four Luohan, cranes along the edges, water and animals at bottom, and dragons and cranes on the collar flaps.

