

millennium B.C. and used woven cloth as the basis of garment constructions. In the forested areas to the north, clothing material was provided by animal skins acquired by hunting or trapping. Both traditions reflect the notion of economy and the optimum use of available raw material. As the physical dimensions of skin and cloth differ, approaches to garment constructions vary. Skin dimensions are limited to the size of the animal. Although irregular in shape, skins have a definite symmetry and grain which can be exploited to fashion garments from them. Woven cloth is generally of unlimited length but of a fixed width determined by the type of weaving equipment employed. The rectilinear properties of cloth result in the straight seams and geometric shapes of cloth constructions.

Whenever the raw materials of one culture are adopted by another culture to make garments, concessions are the inevitable result. Often, construction principles of the original tradition are so strongly entrenched in a life style or culture that principles of economy are sacrificed for matters of style. The garments of horseriding herders evolved from the skin traditions developed by the forest-dwelling hunting and fishing nomads of the north. Whether through conquest or commerce, contact with the cloth traditions of the southern agrarian peoples affected northern garment construction. When woven cloth was introduced with all its limitations and variables, garment construction on the steppe underwent some radical changes, but the memory of the skin tradition was never entirely eradicated. Even when life styles and cultures underwent fundamental transformation, such as took place when the Manchu moved from the steppe to the palaces of the Forbidden City, the old clothing traditions continued to be honoured.

At the time of conquest the Manchu possessed a costume which had evolved from their nomadic life style. Manchu costume is closely related to the basic costume of horseriding herdsmen living on or adjacent to the eastern part of the Eurasian steppe. Function, raw materials, concerns for protection from exposure, and ease of manoeuvrability were the chief determinants of garment shapes.

Whether long or short, the horseman's coat was designed for movement and a life outdoors. Closely fitting the upper body with long, tight sleeves and usually belted at the waist, the coat helped conserve body heat, while giving free arm movement for riding or for conducting military operations from horseback.



A Manchu warrior is depicted in one of fifty commemorative portraits honouring meritorious officers who pacified Tibet by imperial command. He wears clothing evolved from horseriding herders. Dated to 1760. 153 × 94.6 cm 925x84.4

Although made of blue silk velvet, neither the style nor the cut of this short sleeveless coat is based on cloth constructions. Its prototype is probably a two-skin garment. 1875-1900. 958x104



IN THE PRESENCE OF THE DRAGON THRONE

Ch'ing Dynasty Costume (1644-1911)
in the Royal Ontario Museum

by John E. Vollmer

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