

## TALES TOLD IN EMBROIDERY

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### **Abstract:**

**A Manchu-style robe in the Kent State University Museum costume collection includes embroidered images based on characters in the novel *A Dream of Red Mansions*. The story chronicles twelve women of the Jia family.**

### **Contents:**

**Kent State University Museum, *A Dream of Red Mansions*, Jia Family, Cao Xueqin, Manchu-style Chinese Robe, Embroidery**

### **Introduction**

Embroidered images based on characters in the 18<sup>th</sup> century Chinese novel *A Dream of Red Mansions*, by Cao Xueqin, can be found on the sleeve, collar, and hem bands of a Han woman's informal Manchu-style robe in the Kent State University Museum collection. The embroidered images are identified by attributes expressed in the novel.



*Figure 1: The front view of the Han woman's Manchu-style informal robe.*

### ***A Dream of Red Mansions***

*A Dream of Red Mansions*, sometimes translated as *The Twelve Beauties of Jinling*, or, alternately, *The Story of the Stone*, has long been considered China's greatest realistic novel. For historians it is the single most illuminating account of Chinese life in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century and is thought to be autobiographical in part. The author describes in detail not only personal

relationships, but also the food served, the medicines taken, and the clothing worn. Cao Xueqin died in 1764 and 80 chapters of the novel existed only in manuscript until 1792 when it was first printed. The last forty chapters of the novel are attributed to Gao E and Cheng Weiyuan who prepared the first printed editions, perhaps according to notes left by Cao Xueqin.

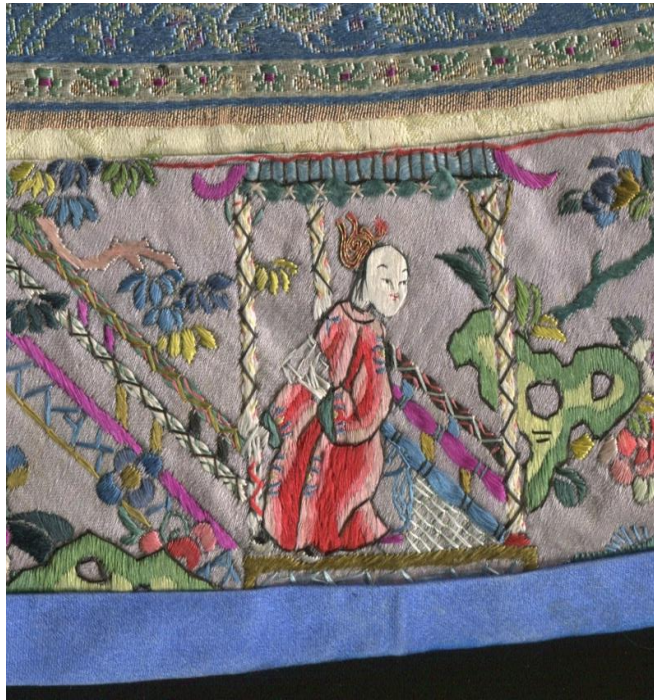
It is the story of the rise and fall of a great family and their servants, and it places particular emphasis on the fates of the principal female characters. The story concerns the youngest members of the Jia family, many of whom live as an extended family group of cousins in the luxurious pavilions of a beautiful garden. Bao-Yu (*Precious Jade*), the grandson and heir, is the focus of the action. Born with the “Jade of Spiritual Understanding” in his mouth, the “stone” of the alternate translation of the title, he has never conformed to the expectations of his parents, but is pampered and adored by his Grandmother Jia. He is the only boy cousin living in the garden among the young serving women and beautiful young female relatives. Bao-Yu cares for all the girls, but falls deeply in love with one of his cousins, Dai-Yu. However, another cousin, Bao-Chai, is ultimately chosen by the family to be his bride.

*A Dream of Red Mansions* refers to a dream Bao-Yu has in the fifth chapter of the novel where he finds himself in a place of “brilliant vermillion rooms, floors paved with gold, windows bright as snow and palaces of jade.” Here he meets the Fairy of Disenchantment who shows him a glimpse of the “registers” that contain riddles of the fates of the girls in his own household. The First Register contains the fates of the twelve highest born girls, *The Twelve Beauties of Jingling*: Lin Dai-Yu (*Blue-black Jade*); Xue Bao-Chai (*Precious Virtue* or *Jeweled Hair Pin*); Jia Yuan-Chun (*First Spring*); Jia Tan-Chun (*Seeking Spring*); Shi Xiangyun (*Xiang River Clouds*); Miaoyu (*Clever Jade*); Jia Yingchun (*Welcoming Spring*); Jia Xichun (*Treasuring Spring*); Wang Xi-Feng (*Splendid Phoenix*); Jia Qiaojie (child of Wang Xi-Feng and Jia Lian); Li Wan (*Plum Blossom/White Silk*); Qin Keqing (*Two-in-One*).



Figure 2: Jia Yuan-Chun (*First Spring*) depicted on the collar band on the center front of the robe.





*Figure 3: Jia Yuan-Chun (First Spring) seated in one of the garden pavilions depicted on the bottom band of the robe at the center front.*

Jia Yuan-Chun is Bao-Yu's older sister. Chosen as a concubine by the Emperor, she lives in the Imperial Palace. Court etiquette usually forbade the royal concubines visits with their families, but the Emperor magnanimously allows each of his concubines one twenty-four hour visit home. It is to prepare for this visit that the elaborate garden is built at the Jia mansion. After Yuan-Chun returns to the Imperial Palace, the Jias decide that the young cousins should live in the garden pavilions. Yuan-Chun's royal status, a great honor for the family, is indicated by the red robe and elaborate headdress she wears in these images. The death of Yuan-Chun marks an important point on the Jia family's downfall as they subsequently lost the association and thus the protection of the Imperial Court.



*Figure 4: Lin Dai-Yu (Blue-black Jade) depicted on the center back of the robe on the collar band.*

Lin Dai-Yu is the only child of Grandmother Jia's only daughter. After her mother's death, Dai-Yu was sent to live with the Rongguo branch of the Jia family. Sensitive and talented by nature, her misfortune has brought on delicate health coupled with a rebellious temperament that is easily provoked. These traits cause many misunderstandings with Bao-Yu, who likewise is too uncertain to

express his love directly. In this image she is shown carrying a hoe over her shoulder with a small bag attached. One of the touching moments in the novel occurs when Bao-Yu sees Dai-Yu in the garden collecting fallen blossoms in a silken bag and digging a hole with a hoe to give the petals a proper burial. With the family's decision to marry Bao-Yu to Bao-Chai, Dai-Yu dies on Bao-Yu's wedding day.



*Figure 5: One of the cousins playing the qin depicted on the front of the right sleeve band. Music is another pleasure enjoyed in the garden, and in one scene Dai-Yu, an accomplished poet and musician, plays the qin.*



*Figure 6: Xue Bao-Chai (Precious Virtue) depicted to the right of the center front on the hem band.*

Bao-Chai is the only daughter of Bao-Yu's mother's sister.

When Bao-Chai and her mother join the Jia household, Bao-Yu immediately warms to her. She is not as clever as Dai-Yu, nor as talented, but she is generous, kind, sensible, and understanding. She has a spontaneous spirit of fun. This image of Bao-Chai depicts the moment in the novel when she

is walking in the garden and sees several butterflies darting about. She stops and chases them, exalting in the beauty surrounding her. Her name, translated as *Precious Virtue*, implies a filial daughter and a faithful wife: the model of the Confucian norm. She has a golden locket given to her by a Buddhist monk with an inscription that complements the inscription on Bao-Yu's jade, thus implying their future marriage. Shortly after their wedding, however, Bao-Yu leaves to become a monk and Bao-Chai is left alone for the rest of her life.





*Figure 7: Jia Tan-Chun (Quest Spring) is shown fishing in a stream in the garden on the top of the right sleeve band.*

Tan-Chun is usually associated with kite flying, which she does with the other girls on a breezy spring day in the garden. In another scene in the novel, she and her maid go fishing with three other girl cousins and she hooks a fish with much difficulty. The daughter of one of the Jia concubines, and Bao-Yu's half sister, she is a good manager and respected for her skills, but she is spirited and rebellious. She helps to

organize a poetry-writing club for the girls living in the garden pavilions. Her fate is to be married to a man who holds a military post in a distant province where she will have no hope of seeing her family again.



*Figure 8: This image may represent another member of Jia Tan-Chun's fishing party. It is on the back right corner of the robe.*



*Figure 9:* The figure in the red robe and green headdress may represent Wang Xi-Feng (*Splendid Phoenix*). The figure in the green robe may represent the servant, Ping'er (*Peace*). These figures are found on the front closure band.

Wang Xi-Feng is married to another of Grandmother Jia's grandsons. Even though she is very young, about 18, she efficiently manages the affairs of the Rongguo household. She is as capable as she is greedy and cruel in the use of her power. As the family fortunes fall, she is caught by her own cunning and loses her health, her grip on power, and her life.





*Figure 10:* This image may represent Li Wan (*Plum Blossom/White Silk*). It is on the bottom left of the center front. Li Wan is the young widow of Bao-Yu's older brother. She organizes a boating party following a luncheon given by Grandmother Jia. Boating was one of the many pleasures to be enjoyed in the garden. Li Wan is a devoted mother and her studious son represents the Confucian ideal in contrast to Bao-Yu. Her son does well on the Imperial Exams and brings honor to her, for she spent her youth and energy upholding the strict standards of behavior that enabled him to succeed.



*Figure 11:* This figure may also represent Li Wan since Li means plum and there is a plum and a plum blossom near her.





*Figure 12:* This figure is found on both sleeve bands and may stand for any one of the faithful servants assigned to the aristocratic characters in the novel. For example, Ping'er, sometimes translated as *Peace* or *Patience*, is a subtle and clever servant who manages to steer her way between her cunning and cruel mistress, Wang Xi-Feng, and Xi-Feng's philandering husband. As the family fortunes wane and Xi-Feng dies, Ping'er saves Xi-Feng's child from being sold as a concubine by secretly taking her to the country.



*Figures 13 and 14:* These two reclining figures are not identified. If you have an idea of whom they might represent, please let me know at [jdruesed@kent.edu](mailto:jdruesed@kent.edu)

## Conclusion

*A Dream of Red Mansions* or *The Dream of the Red Chamber* is a fascinating glimpse of China in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. It captures the essence of life and culture at all socio-economic levels, and thus gives insight into the past as well as the present.

**Photographs courtesy of Kent State University Museum**