

## Section 4. Peonies and Lanterns: Badges for Festivals and Ceremonies

### Introduction

The Chinese year was filled with festivals and special occasions. Each had its own language of symbolic imagery.

According to historical sources, in the **Jin** (1115–1234) and **Yuan** (1280–1367) dynasties palace courtiers wore embroidered insignia for certain festivals. It was during the **Ming** dynasty (1368–1644), however, that the imperial court lavishly celebrated all annual festivals with special badges. These events broke the monotony of daily palace life. Because badges were expensive (and often woven into the robe), designs on badges might include imagery associated with two festivals that occurred within a short time of each other, thus making it appropriate for both events. Under **Qing** rule (1644–1911), celebration of these Chinese holidays was deemed inappropriate for the non-Chinese **Manchu** overlords.

With the exception of New Year, other festivals were celebrated by **Han** (native) Chinese officials only in the privacy of their homes or with the local population. Firecrackers welcomed ancestors back to earth, special foods were prepared such as moon cakes for the Mid-Autumn Moon Festival, fanciful lanterns were displayed, and offerings at family altars and exchanges of gifts of seasonal foods were some of the ways festivals were celebrated. At the New Year, courtiers and rank holders paid their respects to the emperor.

At birthday celebrations, rank badges played a significant role. In the Ming period, the emperor's birthday required court officials to wear special badges with symbolic wishes for longevity that could only be offered to the Son of Heaven. Among the elite, a robe with the *shou* character (longevity) and either a real or faux badge was worn on one's sixtieth birthday (a particularly auspicious day) and then saved for burial.

Marriage was another occasion when rank badges were worn. If the groom held a rank, he and his bride would wear the appropriate badge. Rank birds were sometimes paired on bridal coats to symbolize marital happiness and wishes for success and prosperity.



1. Hanging for the Lantern Festival  
China, Qing dynasty, 1860-80  
Silk and metallic thread embroidery  
Pacific Asia Museum, Gift of Alyce and T.J. Smith, 1997.66.90

An expensive hanging like this one would have been used in the home of a wealthy Han Chinese family to celebrate the Lantern Festival, fifteen days after the lunar New Year (varies from January 21 to February 20). The five-petal plum flowers on the branch symbolize the **Five Blessings**: longevity, health, wealth, virtue, and a peaceful death.



2. Man's Semi-Formal Court Robe (*jifu*)

China, Qing dynasty, late 19<sup>th</sup> century

Silk and metallic thread embroidery

Pacific Asia Museum, Gift of Mrs. Mildred Hewes from the

Collection of Zula F. Brown, 1976.8.8

In China there are two Lantern Festivals—one at the lunar New Year in the winter and at the Moon Festival in mid-August. Because this robe is a gauze summer robe with a lantern design, it is likely that it was worn for a private celebration of the August festival. Unlike the native **Ming** dynasty, the **Qing**, who were **Manchurian**, did not observe purely Chinese festivals at court.



3. Festival Badge with Dragon and Gourd-Shaped Lantern

China, Ming dynasty, Wanli period, 1573-1620

Silk and metallic thread embroidery

Lent by Chris Hall, Hong Kong

**Ming** courtiers wore robes with double gourd and dragon badges for the first day of the first lunar month (New Year). A robe with a badge with a gourd-shaped lantern could also have been worn for the Lantern Festival on the fifteenth day of the same month. The swastika (*wan*), a widespread and ancient symbol, combined with the character for longevity (*shou*) form a wish for “ten thousand longevities.”



4. One of a Pair of Festival Badges with Tigers and the Five Poisons

China, Ming dynasty, Wanli period, 1573-1620

Silk and metallic thread embroidery

Lent by Chris Hall, Hong Kong

During the **Ming** dynasty, courtiers wore robes with badges showing tigers, Artemesia (mugwort), and the **Five Poisons**—the centipede, scorpion, toad, lizard, and snake—from the first to thirteenth day of the fifth lunar month (May-June). This was in celebration of the Dragon Boat Festival (*Duanwu* Festival) and the Summer Solstice (approximately June 22), both occurring during this time period.



5. Festival Badge with Pomegranate and the Five Poisons

China, Ming dynasty, Wanli period, 1573-1620

Silk and metallic thread embroidery

Lent by Chris Hall, Hong Kong

A large gold pomegranate is surrounded by the **Five Poisons** as well as Artemesia and sweet flag (*Calamus*), medicinal plants believed to counter the diseases caused by the Five Poisons. These venoms were considered most dangerous on the fifth day of the fifth month, which varied from May 28 to June 25). The pomegranate and three-legged toad also symbolize a wish for wealth and many sons.



6. Festival Badge with the Cowherd and Celestial Weaving Maiden  
China, Ming dynasty, Wanli period, 1573-1620  
Silk and metallic thread embroidery  
Lent by Chris Hall, Hong Kong

This badge for the front of a woman's robe depicts the **Celestial Weaving Maiden** and her two heavenly attendants on one side of a river and the **Cowherd** and their two children on the other. This festival takes place on the seventh day of the seventh lunar month when the couple is reunited for a day by a bridge of magpies, and unmarried women pray for a happy marriage.



7. Festival Badge with Celestial Figures and Rabbits  
China, Ming dynasty, Wanli period, 1573-1620  
Silk and metallic thread embroidery  
Lent by Chris Hall, Hong Kong

Probably a companion to the Cowherd and Celestial Weaving Maiden badge the central figure here is Chang'e, the Moon Goddess, with rabbits scampering in front of her. The rabbit is believed to pound the Elixir of Life on the moon and is therefore associated with the Mid-Autumn Moon Festival (*Zhongqiu*) on the fifteenth day of the eighth lunar month. Pairing the two badges on the front and back of the same silk robe meant the garment could be worn for both festivals.



8. Festival Badge with the Moon Rabbit  
China, late Ming dynasty, 1620-1644  
Silk brocade  
Lent by Chris Hall, Hong Kong

With a white ("moon") rabbit facing the full moon, this badge was made for a courtier to wear on the Mid-Autumn Moon Festival. The magpie on the upper right and the chrysanthemum (symbol of autumn) convey the wish "May the entire family be happy."



9. Festival Badge with Dragon and Chrysanthemums  
China, Ming dynasty, Wanli period, 1573-1620  
Silk and metallic thread embroidery  
Lent by Chris Hall, Hong Kong

The five chrysanthemums surrounding this "walking" dragon indicate that this badge was worn at court for the Chrysanthemum Festival (*Chongyang*) on the ninth day of the ninth lunar month. On that day chrysanthemums were brought into the palaces and put on display while celebrants drank chrysanthemum wine.



10. Birthday Badge with Deer and *Shou* Character  
China, Ming dynasty, Wanli period, 1573-1620  
Silk and metallic thread embroidery  
Lent by Chris Hall, Hong Kong

Taken together, the swastika, *shou* character, and deer can be read as “ten thousand years of long life, wealth and good fortune.” This combination of wishes could only be offered to the emperor. Therefore it is likely this badge was worn on the occasion of the emperor’s birthday.



11. Festival Badge with Phoenixes and Goats  
China, Ming dynasty, Wanli period, 1573-1620  
Silk and metallic thread embroidery  
Lent by Chris Hall, Hong Kong

Three goats stand on red mounds that may be the sun. The sounds for “goat” and “sun” are both *yang*, making the phrase: “Three goats heralding spring (*sanyang kaitai*). Three goats also mean “The New Year brings a change of fortune.” Nine phoenixes are an auspicious number. Taken together these badges were probably from a robe worn by a female member of the imperial family for the New Year celebrations.



12. Festival Badges with *Shou* Characters and Plum Blossoms  
China, Ming dynasty, Wanli period, 1573-1620  
Silk and metallic thread embroidery  
Lent by Chris Hall, Hong Kong

The flowering plum trees signify winter: these trees are one of the Three Friends of Winter: pine, bamboo, and plum. The *shou* character is a longevity symbol. It is likely this badge was worn at the Winter Solstice Festival, in the twelfth lunar month. The seam down the front indicates the badge was once on a woman’s robe with a center front opening (men’s robes in the **Ming** period fastened on the side).



13. Birthday Badge with *Shou* Character  
China, Ming dynasty, 16<sup>th</sup> century  
Silk and metallic thread embroidery  
Lent by Chris Hall, Hong Kong

The large gold *shou* characters (meaning longevity); large *lingzhi* fungus (symbol of immortality); flowers of the four seasons: peony (spring), lotus (summer), chrysanthemum (autumn) and plum blossom (winter); and two swastikas (10,000) combine to form a blessing throughout the year for longevity and immortality multiplied ten thousand-fold. In sum, birthday wishes suitable only for the emperor.





14. Woman's Wedding Jacket  
China, Qing dynasty, c.1900  
Silk and metallic thread embroidery on silk satin  
Pacific Asia Museum, Museum Purchase, 1977.53.1

Birds emblematic of the civil ranks were so closely associated with status and good fortune that they became auspicious motifs on their own. On this lavish wedding jacket paired rank birds in the circular medallions convey wishes for marital happiness and prosperity. Because this robe is not the traditional red of Chinese bridal robes, it could have been made for the second wife of a wealthy merchant or even a civil official.



15. Woman's Wedding Jacket  
China, Qing dynasty, c. 1840-50  
Silk and metallic thread embroidery on silk satin  
Pacific Asia Museum, Estate of Ruth Prime, 1991.30.15

This bride's jacket, worn over a pleated skirt, has front and back rank badges with a mandarin duck, symbol of a seventh-rank civil official. A bride would wear the rank badge associated either with her father or, if he had a rank, her new husband.



16. Woman's Semi-Formal Ceremonial Vest (*xia pei*)  
China, Qing dynasty, c.1900  
Silk and metallic thread embroidery on silk satin  
Pacific Asia Museum, Gift of Karin Aspegren Eckelmeyer, 1996.11.2

**Qing** regulations describe dress only for women of the Manchu ruling elite. However, an accepted code according to occasion and class applied to Han (native Chinese) women: for semi-official ceremonial occasions wives wore a sleeveless vest (*xia pei*) over a jacket and skirt. The badge on the vest corresponded to the husband's rank, in this case the seventh (goose). Six rank birds are arrayed in pairs on either side of the vest, although some are partially obscured by the badge, which may be a later replacement.



17. Woman's Burial Jacket (*bai shou yi*)  
China, Qing dynasty, c.1910  
Metallic thread embroidery on silk satin  
Pacific Asia Museum, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Stephen J. Lent,  
1982.23.1

Called *bai shou yi* ("one hundred longevity character garment") because of the *shou* character ("longevity") embroidered on it, this robe was costly. Sometimes *bai shou yi* were given by an offspring to a female relative to wear at her sixtieth birthday and then save for burial. The badge on the front is fanciful and is only to convey status after death. Men with rank would be buried in their official clothing.