What labels on textiles can tell us about society

October 21 2014, by Dagmar Schäfer

From the middle to the end of the Qing dynasty in the 18th century, labels were woven into the selvage at the beginning of the silk bale. Inscriptions with the name of the responsible managing director, in this case, Wang Yutai, attested the silk "top quality, decorated with real gold thread." Credit: MPI for the History of Science

Throughout Chinese history, dynastic states used labels on textiles to

spread information on the maker, the commissioner, the owner or the date and site of production. Silks produced in state-owned manufacture of the Qing carried the so-called reign-marks which globalized trade today uses as a means to confer "Chinese-ness" of its arts and crafts.

But labels on textiles can tell us much more. First, the place where the labels are knitted in is changing. Trademarks on eighteenth century Manchester's cotton textiles were placed on the end selvages, verifying standards of length and width. Functional inscriptions on Chinese silk textiles were at the head selvage of the bolt, indicating to a quota system, in which the weaver, working with commissioned raw materials (i.e. given to the weavers in advance), committed to state purposes with the first shuttle-run. Throughout the 300 years of Ming rule for example, the techniques of inscription changed, reflecting a growing concern to attach such information saver to the artifact. While first silk was stamped or the name written in ink, by the late Qing weavers wove information on production, finance or funds directly in the chef-de-piece. Shifts in techniques reveal changing modes of trust and responsibilities and indicate new forms of labor and production techniques.

Such changes often resulted from institutional reorganization and the varying roles of silks in everyday life and as ritual item, tributary ware, and commodity. Across trades merchants and craftsmen of the late Ming referenced imperial symbolism to invoke trust in the quality of their wares and, at the same time began to creatively adapt such symbolism to advertise their skills and wares. Markings on artifacts challenge the role of written rules as the standard or only historical format available to states to control material culture in the market or as an expression of individual rights.

Textiles can therefore tell us a great deal also about the changes in society. These pieces reveal how new trades were built up. While the ancestors of the Huang Sheng clan may have produced most of their silk

garments in their own private workshops or purchased it from private workshops run by other locale elite households, by the time Madame Huang Shen was buried in 1235, the situation had dramatically changed, because the state began to take over silk manufacture in the region. The Song state was well aware of the silk trade in Quanzhou and already regularly dispatched officials to skim the regional market for exceptional pieces. Soon the Song rulers decided to economize and set up a local office to collect silks as annual tax ware. In a next step, officials handed out raw or reeled silk contracting weavers to produce on demand. Finally by the twelfth century the Song established the first pillars of a state-owned manufacturing system of local workshop that specialized in one or the other (already established local) production lines. In this way the state benefited from a regional clustering of expertise and resources and eventually also contributed to it.

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