

Featherwork in Early and Medieval China

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This paper is concerned with the early documented history of featherwork in China, as described in historical texts and literature up until the end of the Tang dynasty in 907 CE. Although featherwork from several Pacific islands and Latin America has recently been the subject of academic attention, the important Chinese tradition has been neglected. Drawing on studies of featherwork from other cultures, this paper divides these accounts by technical criterion into flexible base featherwork (clothing, curtains, hangings, and coverlets); rigid base featherwork (boxes, architectural detailing, jewelry, and screens); and most remarkably of all, deconstructionist featherwork, whereby the barbs of individual feathers were peeled apart and then spun with a silk core to create a feather thread, which was then woven into cloth. Featherwork was produced in vast quantities in early and medieval China to satisfy demand for these luxurious and brightly colored items, and exotic birds—kingfishers, parrots, pheasants, and so on—were traded across the empire to create these wonderful works of art.

In the early modern period, Europeans became aware of featherwork traditions from cultures around the Pacific Ocean, both in Latin America and on Pacific islands. At that time, objects decorated with feathers were regarded as fine works of art and hence were enormously prized; as a result, not only were art collectors inspired to spend vast sums of money acquiring them, but they were also considered as suitable diplomatic gifts to be exchanged across cultures between monarchs and other members of the ruling elite.¹ As a result, in the East Asian context, a number of feather artworks from Latin America in particular are known to have been presented to Chinese emperors (the present whereabouts of all these pieces are unknown), as well as to members of the Japanese ruling elite.² Later diplomatic visits by members of the Hawai’ian elite seeking help from the Qing dynasty government in preserving their independence are likely to have resulted in exposure to this featherworking tradition; however, items

1. In many cultures around the Pacific, featherwork was produced exclusively for the royal family. Such noble associations meant that it was considered an ideal gift for foreign monarchs or other dignitaries; see, e.g., Phyllis Herda and Billie Lythberg, “Featherwork and Divine Chieftanship in Tonga,” *The Journal of the Polynesian Society* 123.3 (2014): 277–300; Steven Hooper, *Pacific Encounters: Art and Divinity in Polynesia 1760–1860* (London: British Museum Press, 2006); and Margit Kern, “Cultured Materiality in Early Modern Art: Feather Mosaics in Sixteenth-Century Collections,” in *The Nomadic Object: The Challenge of the World for Early Modern Religious Art*, ed. Christine Göttler and Mia Mochizuki (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 319–41. The same considerations pertain to other featherworking traditions; see, e.g., Mariana Françaço, “Beyond the Kunstkammer: Brazilian Featherwork in Early Modern Europe,” in *The Global Lives of Things: The Material Culture of Connections in the Early Modern World*, ed. Anne Gerritsen and Giorgio Riello (New York: Routledge, 2015), 105–27.

2. Serge Gruzinski, “Mexican Feathers for the Emperor of China: Towards a Global History of the Arts,” in *Images Take Flight: Feather Art in Mexico and Europe, 1400–1700*, ed. Alessandra Russo, Gerhard Wolf, and Diana Fane (Munich: Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz, 2015), 191–99. A single early modern feather artwork from Latin America with a specifically Christian theme is held in the National Museum, Tokyo; see Alexandra Curvelo, “The Artistic Circulation between Japan, China and New-Spain in the 16th–17th Centuries,” *Bulletin of Portuguese-Japanese Studies* 16 (2008): 59–69, but numerous other examples, which are presumed not to have survived, are documented in early sources such as inventories.

from the Hawai'ian islands have yet to be identified in Chinese collections.³ Subsequently, due to changing attitudes about what constituted a work of art and an unwillingness to pay for the highest quality of craftsmanship, featherwork entered a nearly terminal decline across the Pacific region. With the revival of interest in indigenous art traditions in modern times, there has been significant research on featherwork derived from Latin America (specifically Mexico and Peru), as well as some Pacific islands, such as Hawai'i and New Zealand. The discovery that such items were used in cross-cultural exchange has resulted in speculation as to the impact that these items may have had in China during the Ming and Qing dynasties.⁴ Such speculation ignores the extremely long tradition of featherwork within Chinese culture, with records going back over 2,500 years. This paper is intended to provide an overview of the earliest manifestations of that tradition, as they appear in the texts dating to the pre-unification period (prior to 221 BCE) through to the medieval period, to the end of the Tang dynasty (618–907 CE).

Chinese records of featherwork will here be divided according to technical criteria. Modern scholars, working closely with experienced featherwork artists in various parts of the world, have developed a deep understanding of the complex techniques used to produce these artworks; however, early and medieval Chinese accounts of these objects are not sufficiently detailed to be able to determine how they were made. Therefore, the technical categorization here will be quite general, dividing these items into three types: flexible base, rigid base, and deconstructionist. In flexible base featherwork, as the name implies, feathers are attached to a surface that allows for movement, a technique whereby feathers can be used for the decoration of clothing or other items that require some flexibility, such as curtains, bedclothes, and so on. Studies of Hawai'ian featherwork, which is thought to have the most highly developed vocabulary on the subject, indicate a complex range of possibilities to achieve the attachment of feathers to a flexible base, ranging from *pipili* (gluing) to *nāki'i* (interweaving or stitching a thread to which bunches of feathers or individual plumes are attached at regular intervals to a textile background), *wili* (wrapping), and *humu* (stitching across the surface of the feather to hold it flat against a cloth base).⁵ In rigid base featherwork, the feathers were used to create decorative elements to be applied to furniture, architectural structures, or jewelry—here it is most likely that the feathers were glued (possibly to a paper or fiber base) before being trimmed into the required shape.⁶ Finally, in the case of deconstructionist featherwork, a tra-

3. Paul Van Dyke, "Macao, Hawaii, and Sino-American Trade: Some Historical Observations, Interactions, and Consequences," in *Macao and Sino-US Relations*, ed. Yufan Hao and Jianwei Wang (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2010), 71–96.

4. E.g., Alessandra Russo, "A Contemporary Art from New Spain," in *Images Take Flight*, 22–63, suggests that the arrival of foreign featherwork during the reign of the Ming Wanli Emperor 明萬曆 (r. 1572–1620) may have "revitalized a local artistic practice."

5. Marques Hanalei Marzan and Samuel M. 'Ohukani'ōhi'a Gon III, "The Aesthetics, Materials, and Construction of Hawaiian Featherwork," in *Royal Hawaiian Featherwork: Nā Hulu Ali'i*, ed. Leah Caldeira, Christina Hellmich, Adrienne L. Kaeppler, Betty Lou Kam, and Roger C. Rose (Honolulu: Univ. of Hawai'i Press, 2015), 26–37. An alternative interweaving technique is found in New Zealand kiwi feather cloaks, in which the shaft of each feather is bent into a hook shape, and then caught in flax thread weaving; see Katie Hartnup, Leon Kyunen, Rangi Te Kanawa, Lara Shepherd, Craig Millar, and David Lambert, "A Molecular Study of a Rare Maori Cloak," in *Archaeological Science under a Microscope: Studies in Residue and Ancient DNA Analysis in Honour of Thomas H. Loy*, ed. Michael Haslam, Gail Robertson, Alison Crowther, Sue Nugent, and Luke Kirkwood (Canberra: Australia National Univ. Press, 2009), 198–206.

6. For a discussion of modern Chinese featherwork techniques, see Han Cheng 韓澄, "Minjian chuantong jiyi chuancheng de meixue shijiao: Yi diancui gongyi wei li" 民間傳統技藝傳承的美學視角：以點翠工藝為例, *Neimenggu daxue yishu xueyuan xuebao* 2012.3: 58–63. Almost no research has yet been done on the way that present featherwork traditions relate to methods employed in premodern times.

dition that appears to be unique to China, individual barbs were peeled apart and then spun into thread, after which they were woven into cloth. The remarkable garments produced by this technique combined the beautiful coloring of the original feathers with the quality of waterproofing, making this cloth highly desirable for rainwear to be worn by members of the ruling elite.⁷

Although this paper makes use of comparisons between Chinese and other Pacific featherwork traditions, this is not intended to imply that there is any connection between them. With exceptional care and good luck, it has proved possible to preserve feather artworks for up to five centuries, but there are no written records concerning featherwork from the relevant cultures of the Pacific islands or in Latin America that significantly predate the earliest surviving examples.⁸ On the other hand Chinese records preserve accounts of featherwork that are thousands of years earlier, but where it is simply impossible that such delicate and fragile decorative works could have survived. Furthermore, although from the early modern period onward it is entirely possible that presentation of featherwork objects across the Pacific resulted in fruitful exchange between different traditions, during the course of the twentieth century truly vast quantities of featherwork were destroyed. Some of this was the result of accidental loss or poor care, but changing attitudes toward what constitutes acceptable materials for artworks to be made from have also caused neglect or destruction of featherwork, as has the perception that feather artworks showing (or perceived to show) cross-cultural influences are in some way inauthentic or inferior.⁹ As a result, many links in the chain connecting ancient and contemporary featherworking traditions may already have been lost, but this serves to render early Chinese descriptions of their own cultural heritage even more valuable.

1. FLEXIBLE BASE FEATHERWORK IN EARLY AND MEDIEVAL CHINESE TEXTS

The very earliest record of featherwork in the Chinese world—as opposed to the use of plumes, which was recorded much earlier—dates to the account given in the *Zuozhuan* 左傳 (Zuo's Tradition) of events in the year 530 BCE. This account described King Ling of Chu 楚靈王 (r. 541–529 BCE), whose title as monarch was not recognized by the Zhou kings of the Central States, out on campaign striking fear and awe into all who saw him dressed in his cloak of kingfisher feathers. The bright color of this garment must have rendered King Ling highly visible, and the enormous expense of acquiring the vast number of feathers required must also have struck all who saw him:

7. Such considerations are not unique to Chinese featherwork. For a remarkable Japanese pheasant feather cloak, created by gluing individual feathers against a hemp ground, see Soames Jenyns, "Feather Jacket (*Jimbaori*) of the Momoyama Period (1573–1638) Supposed to Have Belonged to Hideyoshi (1536–1598)," *British Museum Quarterly* 32.1–2 (1967): 48–52. Although the provenance to Hideyoshi is discounted in this paper, the piece is undoubtedly Japanese, and later Tokugawa-era feather *jimbaori* were made using a technique analogous to the Hawai'ian *nāki'i*.

8. The oldest surviving Asian featherwork is preserved in Japan; this will be discussed in more detail below. However, some very ancient featherwork (dating to as early as the second century BCE) has been preserved in desert sites in Peru; see Ann P. Rowe, *Costumes and Featherwork of the Lords of Chimor* (Washington, DC: Textile Museum, 1984); and Heidi King, ed., *Peruvian Featherworks: Art of the Pre-Columbian Era* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2012).

9. J. C. H. King, "Cloaked in Mystery: Feather Capes in the Western Imagination," *Museum Anthropology* 23.3 (2000): 93–96.

The Unratified Monarch of Chu went hunting in Zhoulai, and from there he traveled to Yingwei, whereupon he sent the Marquis of Tang, the Viscount of Pan, the Minister of War Du, the *xiaoyin* Wu, and the *lingyin* Xi to lead the army to lay siege to Xu, in order to strike fear into [the kingdom of] Wu. Afterwards the Unratified Monarch of Chu traveled to Ganxi, in order to be able to offer support. At that time it began to snow, and the monarch wore a leather hat, a feather robe from Qin, a cloak made of blue kingfisher feathers, leopard-skin boots, and he held a whip as he went out, with his servant Xifu in attendance. The *youyin* Zige came to see him that evening, and the king granted him an audience, removing his hat and cloak, and setting aside his whip [as a gesture of respect].

楚子狩于州來，次于穎尾，使蕩侯，潘子，司馬督，嚳尹午，陵尹喜帥師圍徐，以懼吳。楚子次于乾谿，以為之援。雨雪，王皮冠，秦復陶，翠被，豹舄，執鞭以出。僕析父從。右尹子革夕，王見之，去冠被舍鞭。¹⁰

The great age of this first description of featherwork has added to the difficulty of interpreting it. In particular, scholars of the *Zuozhuan* have long been divided over whether the *futao* 復陶 (a term here translated as “feather robe”) from Qin was in fact the same garment as the *cui* 翠被 (“cloak made from blue kingfisher feathers”). It is most likely that this description does in fact refer to two different garments, particularly since there are later accounts of Han dynasty emperors wearing kingfisher-feather cloaks.¹¹ A further difficulty lies in interpreting the rare term *futao*, which some scholars straightforwardly understand as meaning a feather robe (*yuyi* 羽衣), while others simply state that the meaning of this term is not known.¹² Furthermore, the text specifies that the royal cloak was made from *cui* 翠, which the *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字 (Explaining Graphs and Analyzing Characters) dictionary glosses as “a blue-feathered small bird” (*qingyu que* 青羽雀). This is contrasted with the *fei* 翡—“a red-feathered small bird” (*chiyu que* 赤羽雀).¹³ Although the term *feicui* is usually understood as a binome, meaning “kingfisher,” some modern scholars have suggested that two different species of kingfisher might be involved, most likely the common kingfisher (*Alcedo atthis*) and the ruddy kingfisher (*Halcyon coromanda*).¹⁴ It is therefore possible that some early and medieval Chinese writings intend to distinguish between contrasting red and blue feathers when they speak of objects ornamented with *feicui* featherwork.

Kingfishers were consistently treated as an exotic in the Central States in early China and throughout the medieval period. This may reflect overhunting: there are a number of early literary works that reflect on the persecution suffered by these beautiful little birds by those desiring to profit from their feathers; but it may also represent the fact that to this day, kingfisher species—including both the common and the ruddy kingfisher—are very restricted in

10. *Chunqiu Zuozhuan zhu* 春秋左傳注, annot. Yang Bojun 楊伯峻 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1981), 1338–39 [Zhao 12]. For an alternative translation of this passage, see Stephen Durrant, Wai-yee Li, and David Schaberg, *Zuo Tradition, Zuozhuan: Commentary on the “Spring and Autumn Annals”* (Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, 2016), 1481. They note that the precise meanings of the Chu titles *xiaoyin*, *lingyin*, and *yuoyin* are unknown. For a discussion of this feather cloak in the context of early literature on the exploitation of kingfishers, see Paul W. Kroll, “The Image of the Halcyon Kingfisher in Medieval Chinese Poetry,” *JAOS* 104 (1984): 237–51.

11. *Han shu* 漢書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962), 96B.3929, records a denunciation of the extravagance of the imperial palace that includes the following lines: “The Son of Heaven sat with his back to an embroidered screen, snuggled up in a kingfisher feather cloak, and reclined against a jade armrest, as he took his place at the center [of an ocean of luxury]” 天子負黼依，襲翠被，馮玉几，而處其中。

12. The earliest surviving commentary on the *Zuozhuan* glosses *futao* as meaning a feather robe; see Du Yu 杜預, *Chunqiu jingzhuàn jijie* 春秋經傳集解 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1997), 22.1358 n. 5 [Zhao 12].

13. *Shuowen jiezi zhu* 說文解字注, annot. Duan Yucai 段玉裁 (Nanjing: Fenghuang chubanshe, 2007), 4A.247 [“Yubu” 羽部].

14. See, e.g., Xu Jingtong 徐淨瞳, “Gudai wenxian zhong de feicui bianyi” 古代文獻中的翡翠辯疑, *Shaanxi ligong xueyuan xuebao* (*Shenhui kexueban*) 陝西理工學院學報 (社會科學版) 33.1 (2015): 69–73.

range in China, being located entirely in coastal provinces and particularly concentrated in the south.¹⁵ As a result, while the feather robe worn by King Ling of Chu is said to have come from Qin, the kingfisher-feather cloak is likely to have been a local product. There are other writings from the same region, such as the “Zhaohun” 招魂 (Summoning the Soul) from the *Chuci* 楚辭 (Songs of Chu), which demonstrate that kingfisher feathers were used to ornament both wall hangings and bed covers, creating a very bright color scheme:

Oh soul come back!	魂兮歸來!
Return to your old home . . .	反故居些 . . .
Here are polished stone chambers with kingfisher-feather [hangings]	砥室翠翹
Suspended from jade hooks.	掛曲瓊些
And bedspreads of kingfisher feathers [ornamented with] pearls	翡翠珠被
All dazzlingly bright.	爛齊光些 ¹⁶

Featherwork bed covers and wall hangings continued to be made throughout the early imperial era. The scale of bird hunting in this period should not be underestimated; feathers were required in vast quantities to ornament the clothing and decorate the palaces of members of the imperial house.¹⁷ For example, the *Sanfu huangtu* 三輔黃圖 (Yellow Plans of the Three Capital Regions) mentions that a Warm Room Hall (Wenshi dian 溫室殿) was constructed in the reign of Emperor Wu of the Han dynasty 漢武帝 (r. 141–87 BCE) within the Weiyang Palace 未央宮 complex—in the winter it was “warming” (*wenuan* 溫暖) thanks to the spices in the plaster.¹⁸ This text also quotes a description of this building attributed to the *Xijing zaji* 西京雜記 (Miscellaneous Records from the Western Capital), though this account is not found in the present transmitted text:

The Warm Room [Hall] has walls of pepper plaster, and is hung with embroidered [tapestries], with cassia-wood pillars, screens of precious stones, hangings of wild swans’ feathers, and the floor covered with carpets from Jibin [Cashmere].

溫室以椒塗壁，被之文繡，香桂為柱，設火齊屏風，鴻羽帳，規地以罽賓氍毹。¹⁹

It is the unusual reference to hangings made from swan feathers that makes this account of the Han dynasty palace exceptional, since curtains or other kinds of soft hangings ornamented with kingfisher feathers are commonly mentioned throughout early imperial and medieval literature, and seem to have been considered emblematic of the luxurious lifestyle enjoyed by the rich and privileged.²⁰ As a result, such items figure prominently in polemics against con-

15. For the range of kingfisher species in modern China: the common kingfisher, the ruddy kingfisher, the white-throated kingfisher (*Halcyon smyrnensis*), and the black-capped kingfisher (*Halcyon pileata*), see Mark Brazil, *Birds of East Asia: China, Taiwan, Korea, Japan, and Russia* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2009), 274–78. Although distribution ranges may have changed since early imperial times, it is highly suggestive that the literature consistently emphasizes that kingfishers were unfamiliar, exotic birds.

16. *Chuci buzhu* 楚辭補注, annot. Hong Xingzu 洪興祖 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1981), 9.202–4. Translation adapted from David Hawkes, *Ch’u Tz’u: The Songs of the South, An Ancient Chinese Anthology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), 105–6.

17. For a fascinating analysis of administrative and legal documents excavated at Liye 里耶 concerning the trade and tax in feathers during the Qin dynasty (221–206 BCE), see Wang Zijin 王子今, “Liye Qinjian buyu de xiaofei wenti” 里耶秦簡捕羽的消費問題, *Hunan daxue xuebao* (*Shehui kexueban*) 30.4 (2016): 27–31.

18. The textual history of the *Sanfu huangtu*, a Han dynasty text with some subsequent medieval interpolation, is described in He Qinggu 何清谷, “*Sanfu huangtu* de chengshu ji qi banben” 三輔黃圖的成書及其版本, *Wenbo* 1990.2: 28–32.

19. *Sanfu huangtu jiaoshi* 三輔黃圖校釋, annot. He Qinggu 何清谷 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2005), 3.180.

20. Ma Xiaoling 馬曉亮, “Handai cuiniaio tongshi yanjiu” 漢代翠鳥銅飾研究, *Kaogu* 2011.9: 82–88, discusses Han dynasty naturalistic bronze sculptures of kingfishers, which are found both independently and attached to “money trees.” Even when independent, these figures are associated with coins or other symbols of financial suc-

spicuous consumption and wasteful extravagance from at least the time of the Han dynasty. The *Huainanzi* 淮南子, for example, states: “As for the customs of a decadent age . . . there will be kingfisher-feather [decorations], rhinoceros horn and ivory, and elegant patterns and ornamentation to confuse [the people’s] eyes” 衰世之俗 . . . 乃有翡翠犀象，黼黻文章以亂其目. The *Lienü zhuan* 列女傳 (Biographies of Exemplary Women) records the remonstrance offered by Zhongli Chun 鍾離春 against the immoderate spending of King Xuan of Qi 齊宣王 (r. 319–301 BCE): “Your Jian Tower [rises up] five stories high, [ornamented with] gold and white jade, while gemstones [fill] the corridors, and kingfisher-feather and pearl [hangings] fill in the space for adornment, and so the myriad people are utterly exhausted” 漸臺五重，黃金白玉，琅玕籠疏，翡翠珠璣，幕絡連飾，萬民罷極.²¹ Furthermore, by the medieval period, such extravagances came to be openly satirized. For example, Shen Manyuan 沈滿愿 (fl. 510) would write of the feather hangings in a woman’s bedroom in her poem “Satire on a Lovely Lady” (“Xi xiaoniang shi” 戲蕭娘詩).²² In this poem, the elite young woman “modestly” hidden behind curtains turns out to be publicly flaunting her relationship with her lover:

<p>Here are hangings of pearls and blue kingfisher feathers Curtains of green silk gauze with gold-leaf [designs]. Because the wind has blown them aside momentarily I imagine I catch a glimpse of her gorgeous visage. At dawn she affixes a <i>buyao</i> hairpin [in her hair];²³ At dusk, she removes her gossamer silk gown. She has fallen in love with an elegant young man about town Such a fine romance, how could she be willing to keep it secret?</p>	<p>明珠翠羽帳 金薄綠綃帷 因風時暫舉 想像見芳姿 清晨插步搖 向晚解羅衣 託意風流子 佳情詎肯私²⁴</p>
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Medieval readers must have expected wealthy young women involved in liaisons with elegant young men about town to own feather hangings, otherwise this satirical reference to the stereotype would not work. Although kingfisher feathers seem to be most commonly referenced, texts of this period do mention robes and hangings produced from other feathers, including different species of pheasant. That these items were every bit as expensive and extravagant as those produced from kingfisher feathers can be seen from the accounts found in the *Jin shu* 晉書 (History of the Jin Dynasty), which records the presentation in the year 278 of a cloak made from feathers taken only from the heads of pheasants to Emperor Wu 晉武帝 (r. 266–290).²⁵ He was so horrified at the luxury this represented that he had the cloak burned—an incident that would be frequently mentioned with approval in later literature on

cess. This association may have affected cultural practices concerning kingfisher feathers more widely than has generally been appreciated hitherto.

21. *Huainanzi jishi* 淮南子集釋, annot. He Ning 何寧 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1998), 11.822 [“Qisu xun” 齊俗尋]; *Lienü zhuan buzhu* 列女傳補注, annot. Wang Zhaoyuan 王照圓 (Shanghai: Huadong shifan daxue chubanshe, 2012), 6.261 [“Biantong” 辯通].

22. The tern *xiaoniang* was originally used to satirize a cowardly man, referring specifically to Xiao Hong, King Jinghui of Linchuan 臨川靜惠王蕭宏 (473–526); see Li Yanshou 李延壽, *Nanshi* 南史 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975), 51.1275. However, it quickly achieved widespread popularity as a term for an attractive young woman.

23. The *buyao* or *en tremblant* hairpin featured a gold element, from which hung strings of pearls or jade beads, which swung with every move of the wearer; see Gao Meijin 高梅進, “Chunqiu Zhanguo ji Qin-Han funü shoushi chutan” 春秋戰國及秦漢婦女首飾初探, *Guanzi xuekan* 2015.3: 70–73; Sun Ji 孫機, “Buyao, buyaoguan yu yaoye shipian” 步搖步搖冠與搖葉飾片, *Wenwu* 1991.11: 55–64; and Zhang Yu’an 張玉安, “Han Wei Nanbeichao buyao yanjiu” 漢魏南北朝步搖研究, *Yishu tansuo* 26.2 (2012): 6–14.

24. *Yutai xinyong jianzhu* 玉臺新詠箋注, annot. Mu Kehong 穆克宏 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1999), 5.209. The final line has a variant reading: “How could she be able to keep it secret?” 詎可私.

25. *Jin shu* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), 3.69.

imperial abstemiousness.²⁶ That featherwork of this kind represented a gross extravagance can also be seen from the comment by Yuan Chen, King of Hejian 河間王元琛 (fl. 497–526), reported in the *Luoyang qielan ji* 洛陽伽藍記 (Record of the Monasteries of Luoyang):

Chen often said to other people: “Shi Chong [249–300] of the Jin dynasty was only a commoner, but he was able [to wear a cloak] of pheasant-head feathers and fox-belly fur, and had painted eggs [to eat] and carved firewood [to burn]; compared to him our Northern Wei emperors can hardly be considered extravagant, can they?”

琛常語人云：晉室石崇乃是庶姓，猶能雉頭狐掖，畫卯雕薪；況我大魏天王，不為華侈？²⁷

It is not clear whether such a cloak was made by removing the tiny feathers from the heads of pheasants and then gluing or tufting them onto a fabric ground, or by curing the skins and then stitching them together, but either technique would have posed significant challenges. Medieval writings on featherwork, as in this description, often give the impression that they were monochrome, with other colors added using different materials. By the use of feathers from a single species of bird, any variation in color would be the result of natural shading, and not through the use of feathers obtained from many different species: the practices that obtained the subtle effects of Mexican “feather painting” or “feather mosaics” were apparently not replicated in China.²⁸ This impression is, however, not necessarily correct, since there are some references to multicolored featherwork in medieval literature. For example, in the poem “In Imitation of ‘Hard is the Road’” (“Ni ‘Xinglu nan’” 擬行路難, no. 1) the poet, Bao Zhao 鮑照 (414–466), speaks of highly elaborate featherwork, here forming one element of the gilded cage in which the speaker is enclosed:

I toast my lord with a golden goblet of fine wine:
Here is a carved *qin*, in a tortoiseshell and jade case.
Feather hangings with a pattern of multicolored waterlilies,
And a brocade coverlet with a design of ornamental grapes.

奉君金卮之美酒
瑤瑁玉匣之雕琴
七綵芙蓉之羽帳
九華葡萄之錦衾²⁹

In addition, parade uniforms for the elite military units in the medieval period often featured multicolored featherwork. Throughout history, Chinese armies required vast amounts of feathers. Some of this was for weapons, since the fletchings of arrows were made with feathers; other uses were ornamental, such as plumes on helmets—though these feathers also served as a marker of rank.³⁰ Accounts of the appearance of the military in the Tang dynasty indicate that a full-dress occasion saw soldiers dressed in capes made from a wide variety of different bird feathers, and that with their feather-ornamented equipment, they would have been astonishingly brightly colored. The importance of military featherwork in the history

26. See, e.g., *Jinlouzi shuzheng jiaozhu* 金樓子疏證校注, annot. Chen Zhiping 陳志平 and Xiong Qingyuan 熊清元 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2014), 1.134. However, as noted at the time by the Confucian scholar Fan Hongzhi 范宏之, the destruction of this cloak was an empty gesture which achieved nothing; see *Jin shu* 91.2363.

27. *Luoyang qielan ji jiaoshi* 洛陽伽藍記校釋, annot. Zhou Zumo 周祖謀 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2010), 4.164–65. For an alternative translation, see Wang Yi-t'ung, *A Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Lo-yang* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1984), 192–93. Shi Chong was a by-word for extravagance, and numerous anecdotes on the subject have been preserved; see, e.g., *Shishuo xinyu huijiao jizhu* 世說新語彙校集注, annot. Zhu Zhuyu 朱鑄禹 (Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2002), 30.1.727–36 [“Taichi” 汰侈].

28. For a detailed discussion of the techniques involved based on information from the Florentine Codex, see Carolusa González Tirado, “The Tzauhtli Glue,” *Nuevo Mundo Mundos Nuevos* 2006 at <http://journals.openedition.org/nuevomundo/1674> (accessed April 14, 2020).

29. *Bao Mingyuan ji* 鮑明遠集 (Siku quanshu ed.), 8.1a.

30. The practice of using plumes to indicate military rank is attested in many ancient texts. It is also commemorated in the title of the ancient Daoist philosophical treatise, the *Heguanzi* 鶡冠子 (Book of the Pheasant Cap Master), associated with a third-century BCE figure named Pang Xuan 龐煖.

of this Chinese art form has not received nearly enough scholarly attention. However, to cite but one example of this kind of usage, the *Xin Tang shu* 新唐書 (New History of the Tang Dynasty) provides an astonishing description of the massed ranks of men who attended the annual New Year ceremonies at the palace in their magnificent featherwork cloaks:

The first line [carried] long spears, with six different colored feather cloaks. Metropolitan Guards were in red feather cloaks; the Awe-inspiring Palace Guards were in blue or black feather cloaks; the Militant Palace Guards were in cloaks of wild duck feathers; the Courageous Palace Guards were in cloaks of white feathers; and the Left and Right Palace Guards were in cloaks of yellow feathers, with jackets and hats with cloud patterns on a yellow ground.³¹ The second line [carried] ceremonial axes, with five-color standards, and jackets and hats with cloud patterns on a red ground. The third line [carried] large halberds, with little peacock-feather cloaks, and jackets and hats with cloud patterns on a black ground.³² The fourth line [carried] small spears, swords, and shields, and [wore] jackets and hats with cloud patterns on a white ground. The fifth line [carried] short spears, with long five-color parrot-feather cloaks, and jackets and hats with cloud patterns on a blue ground. The sixth line [carried] fine bows and arrows, with jackets and hats with four-colored cloud patterns on a red ground. The seventh line [carried] little halberds, with little five-color parrot-feather cloaks, and jackets and hats with cloud patterns on a yellow ground. The eighth line [carried] wickerwork shields in cinnabar and gold, with swords, and jackets and hats with cloud patterns on a red ground. The ninth line [carried] weapons, with chicken-feather cloaks, and jackets and hats with cloud patterns on a black ground. The tenth line [carried] fine bows and arrows, with jackets and hats with cloud patterns on a white ground. The eleventh line [carried] large pikes, with white plumes, and jackets and hats with cloud patterns on a blue ground. The twelfth line [carried] wickerwork shields in green and gold, with swords, and jackets and hats with four-color cloud patterns on a red ground.

第一行，長戟，六色氈，領軍衛赤氈；威衛青氈，黑氈；武衛鷺氈；驍衛白氈；左右衛黃氈，黃地雲花襖，冒。第二行，儀鎗，五色幡，赤地雲花襖，冒。第三行，大槩，小孔雀氈，黑地雲花襖，冒。第四行，小戟，刀，楯，白地雲花襖，冒。第五行，短戟，大五色鸚鵡毛氈，青地雲花襖，冒。第六行，細射弓箭，赤地四色雲花襖，冒。第七行，小槩，小五色鸚鵡毛氈，黃地雲花襖，冒。第八行，金花硃藤格楯，刀，赤地雲花襖，冒。第九行，戎，雞毛氈，黑地雲花襖，冒。第十行，細射弓箭，白地雲花襖，冒。第十一行，大鋌，白氈，青地雲花襖，冒。第十二行，金花綠藤格楯，刀，赤地四色雲花襖，冒。³³

In spite of the impression given in literature that featherwork was ubiquitous in the homes of the elite throughout the early imperial and medieval period, such objects were still considered highly exotic. In part this may have been due to the fact that feathers continued to be received from remote regions of the far south and from foreign kingdoms. The *Han shu* 漢書 (History of the Han Dynasty), for example, records the gift, arriving from the King of Nanyue, of “one pair of white jade discs, one thousand kingfisher bird [skins], ten rhinoceros horns, five hundred purple cowries, one container of cassia caterpillars, ten pairs of live kingfishers and two pairs of peacocks” 白璧一雙，翠鳥千，犀角十，紫貝五百，桂蠹一器，生翠四十雙，孔雀二雙。³⁴ The *Hou Han shu* 後漢書 (History of the Later Han

31. All these military units were elite regiments tasked with guarding the capital and protecting the imperial house. The translation of their titles is adapted from Charles O. Hucker, *A Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1985).

32. Edward H. Schafer, *The Vermilion Bird: T'ang Images of the South* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1967), 236–37, notes that references to peacocks in literature of this period are concerned with the green peafowl (*Pavo muticus*) and not the Indian peacock.

33. *Xin Tang shu* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975), 20A.483.

34. *Han shu* 95.3852. Cassia caterpillars (*guidu* 桂蠹) were a kind of larvae, perfumed by the food they ate, which, according to the Three Kingdoms-era scholar Su Lin 蘇林, were presented to the ancestral tombs and shrines

Dynasty) notes that in the southwest, an amazing variety of natural products were produced: “bronze, iron, lead, tin, gold, silver, seed pearls, amber, rock crystal, glass, seashells, pearls, peacocks, kingfishers, rhinoceroses, elephants, apes, and leopards” 銅，鐵，鉛，錫，金，銀，光珠，虎魄，水精，琉璃，軻蟲，蚌珠，孔雀，翡翠，犀，象，猩猩，貊獸。³⁵ On occasion the dynastic histories report southern monarchs happy to exchange luxury products like birds’ feathers and pearls for northern horses, which were crucial for military use.³⁶ The practice of demanding feathers as one among many luxury products in tribute or tax ensured that such items remained inextricably linked in the imagination of the elite with the jungles of the far south.

At the same time as featherwork was regarded as a luxury product, often made with feathers of exotic birds, there was also a long-standing tradition of wearing feather robes for religious practices, particularly those associated with Daoism. Not only were birds considered to act as messengers or agents of communication between the human realm and the land of immortals, but *yuren* 羽人, or “feathered immortals,” appear to have been ubiquitous in early Chinese religious art. These images have been the subject of intensive study into their iconography, particularly with respect to the early imperial period.³⁷ Many of the terms for Daoist clothing make reference to feathers. Their garb is properly termed “feather robes” (*yuyi* 羽衣), or “feather garments” (*yufu* 羽服 or *yuchang* 羽氅); or more specifically “crane garments” (*hechang* 鶴氅), “crane cloaks” (*heqiu* 鶴裘), and so on. This does not imply that featherwork was necessarily involved. However, throughout the early imperial and medieval period, people did sometimes wear feather cloaks or robes, particularly those made from crane feathers, in order to claim mystical powers or otherwise associate themselves with the Daoist eremitic tradition. This can be seen from a story preserved in the *Shishuo xinyu* 世說新語 (A New Account of Tales of the World):

Before Meng Chang became famous, he and his family lived at Jingkou. He once saw Wang Gong [d. 398 CE] riding in a high carriage, wearing a crane-feather cloak. At that time it was snowing lightly, and [Meng] Chang peered at him through a gap in the fence. He sighed and said: “Here is a man truly worthy to dwell amongst the immortals!”

孟昶未達時，家在京口。嘗見王恭乘高輿，被鶴氅裘。于時微雪；昶於籬間窺之。歎曰：此真神仙中人！³⁸

of the Han imperial house; see *ibid.*, 95.3853 n. 11. Kingfisher feathers seem to have been traded both as skins and as feather clumps pulled from the backs of live birds; see Kroll, “Image of the Halcyon Kingfisher,” 238. Given the tininess of kingfisher feathers, the figure of one thousand is unlikely to refer to individual feathers.

35. *Hou Han shu* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1965), 86.2849. The presentation of live birds was frequently treated not as a straightforward matter of tax or tribute, but as an auspicious omen—this goes back to the reported gift of white pheasants from the Yuechang 越裳 people at the beginning of the Zhou dynasty; see, e.g., *Han Shi waizhuan jishi* 韓詩外傳集釋, annot. Xu Weiyu 許維通 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2005), 5.180. In *Song shu* 宋書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), 29.827–78, the list of live birds presented to emperors from remote antiquity to the Liu-Song dynasty—mostly albino varieties but with a few parrots and golden pheasants (*Chrysolophus pictus*) added on at the end—is provided within the treatise on auspicious omens (“Furui zhi” 符瑞志).

36. *Sanguo zhi* 三國志 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1959), 47.1140.

37. See, e.g., Liang Yingmei 梁英梅, “Handai yuren xingxiang shitan” 漢代羽人形象試探, *Sichuan daxue xuebao* (*Zhexue shehui kexue ban*) 2004 (*zengkan* 增刊): 13–15; Yang Xiaohong 楊孝鴻, “Handai yuhua tuxiang de fazhan ji qi yuanyin” 漢代羽化圖像的發展及其原因, *Nandu xuetan* (*Renwen shehui kexue ban*) 24.2 (2004): 11–15; and Xi Gang 襲鋼, “Han huaxiangshi de yuren zaoxing shiyi” 漢畫像石的羽人造型釋疑, *Shehui kexue jikan* 2010.4: 250–54.

38. *Shishuo xinyu*, 16.6.541 [“Qixian” 企羨]. For an alternative translation of this passage, see Richard B. Mather, *Shih-shuo Hsin-yü: A New Account of Tales of the World* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 2002), 345.

The constant references to wearing feather garments in winter reminds us that these items would be not just brightly colored, but also light, warm, and waterproof. However, for some individuals, the mystic associations of featherwork were the primary motivation for acquiring such items. Such crane-feather cloaks are likely to have been made from comparatively long feathers, and as such, would have had more movement than garments made from tiny feathers such as those from kingfishers, ruffling in even the slightest breeze.³⁹ It is also striking that wearing feather robes or cloaks with religious connotations—that is, those made from crane feathers—was apparently never criticized as extravagant, unlike virtually all other kinds of Chinese featherwork. Such items are likely to have been very expensive to produce, and yet they could be presented as an essential element in an unworldly lifestyle, withdrawn from mundane cares.

2. RIGID BASE FEATHERWORK IN EARLY AND MEDIEVAL TEXTS

Rigid base featherwork is not unique to China, but unlike other traditions that make use of this form of ornamentation, Chinese records speak only of single bird species work. The earliest clear reference to rigid base featherwork in Chinese literature seems to date to the period immediately prior to the unification of China. It is found in the Legalist philosophical text, the *Han Feizi* 韓非子, which is attributed to Master Han Fei (ca. 280–233 BCE). In this account, it is clear that the feathers are part of an elaborate decorative scheme for a box. The emphasis here is on the kingfisher feathers as merely one element in the program, which would create a highly sophisticated multisensory experience for anyone handling this container:

There was a certain person from Chu, who sold his pearls in Zheng, who made boxes [for them] out of *mulan* wood, scented with cassia and Sichuan pepper, studded with pearls and jade, ornamented with fine jades, and decorated with kingfisher feathers. The people of Zheng bought his boxes but handed back his pearls [because they did not see them as desirable]. He could be said to be good at selling boxes, but he certainly could not be said to have been good at selling pearls. 楚人有賣其珠於鄭者，為木蘭之櫃，薰以桂椒，綴以珠玉，飾以玫瑰，輯以翡翠。鄭人買其櫃而還其珠。此可謂善賣櫃矣，未可謂善鬻珠也。⁴⁰

Kingfisher feathers seem to have continued to be used for ornamenting boxes and other containers well into the Han dynasty and beyond. The *Xijing zaji* 西京雜記 (Miscellaneous Records from the Western Capital), a text of highly miscellaneous contents that contains many interesting descriptions of the palaces of the Han imperial capital and their contents, records the vast expense of the featherwork boxes made to hold the imperial brush.⁴¹ In this account, the kingfisher-feather decorative elements seem to be attached to a stone base:

39. This movement can be compared to that which is such a notable feature of Maōri kiwi feather cloaks, which are made from long interwoven plumes; see Suzanne MacAulay and Kura Te Waru-Rewiri, “Maori Weaving: The Intertwining of Spirit, Action, and Metaphor,” *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings* 858 (2009): 195–204.

40. *Han Feizi jishi* 韓非子集釋, annot. Chen Qiyu 陳奇猷 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1958), 11.623 [“Waichushuo zuoshang” 外儲說左上].

41. The textual history of the *Xijing zaji* remains contentious; see William Nienhauser, “Once Again, the Authorship of the *Hsi-Ching Tsa-Chi* (Miscellanies of the Western Capital),” *JAOS* 98 (1978): 219–36. For alternative perspectives, see Lao Gan 勞幹, “Lun *Xijing zaji* zhi zuoshe ji chengshu shidai” 論西京雜記之作者及成書年代, *Zhongyang yanjiuyuan lishi yuyan yanjiusuo jikan* 33 (1962): 19–34; Cheng Zhangcan 程章燦, “*Xijing zaji* de zuozhe” 西京雜記的作者, *Zhongguo wenhua* 1994.2: 93–96; and Wang Shouliang 王守亮, “*Xijing zaji* zuozhe wenti shukao” 西京雜記作者問題述考, *Linyi daxue xuebao* 34.2 (2012): 56–58.

The handles of the brushes for the Son of Heaven are gem set at the end, while the tip is made from rabbit hair taken in the autumn; they are made by the government master craftsman Lu Hu. The box [in which such a brush is contained] is made from various precious stones, set with jade discs and kingfisher feathers, and both [items] are worth one hundred pieces of gold.

天子筆管，以錯寶為跗，毛皆以秋兔之毫；官師路扈為之。以雜寶為匣，廁以玉璧翠羽，皆直百金。⁴²

In this instance, the text does not specify the emperor or emperors concerned, and although the maker of the brushes is named, this individual is not recorded in any other text, making the tale impossible to contextualize in any specific reign. However, the vast price specified for both the box and the brush emphasize the enormous luxury surrounding Han dynasty emperors. The imputation of extravagance is even clearer in other early accounts of such featherwork, such as for example the description of the residence of Zhao *Zhaoyi* 趙昭儀 (d. 7 BCE), a senior consort of Emperor Cheng of the Han dynasty 漢成帝 (r. 33–7 BCE), as recorded in the *Han shu*. This imperial consort was, with her sister, Empress Zhao Feiyan 趙飛燕 (d. 1 BCE), raised from slavery to the highest rank within Emperor Cheng's harem. Here, colorful feathers seem to have been used as a form of architectural detailing, where a red, white, and gold decorative scheme is contrasted and offset by highlights of kingfisher blue:

She lived in the Zhaoyang Residence, where the central courtyard was [painted] vermilion, and the main hall was coated in many a layer of lacquer, while the doorways were all faced with copper, which was then covered with a layer of pure gold gilding.⁴³ The steps were made of white jade, while the close-studded wall timbers were decorated with gold rings, set with jade discs from Lantian, and ornamented with pearls and kingfisher feathers.⁴⁴ These were things never before seen in the Rear Palace.

居昭陽舍，其中庭彤朱，而殿上覲漆，切皆銅沓冒黃金塗。白玉階，壁帶往往為黃金釭，函藍田璧，明珠，翠羽飾之。自後宮未嘗有焉。⁴⁵

The *Xijing zaji* further states that to celebrate her sister's appointment as empress, Zhao *Zhaoyi* presented her with a vast array of lavish gifts, one of which was a “kingfisher-feather fan” (*cuiyu shan* 翠羽扇); also given in some accounts as a “pheasant-feather fan” (*zhaiyu shan* 翟羽扇).⁴⁶ Such an object is most likely to have been a rigid base, ornamented with a surface application of feathers. Since kingfishers are so small, to ornament even the tiniest fan would have required the feathers of many birds, and the skills required for making such an object—particularly one destined for use by the empress—would have been of the very highest. Plume fans were common throughout the medieval period, though references in literature are almost exclusively to white feathers being used for this purpose; when the bird from which the feathers were derived is specified, it is usually the crane or the wild swan.⁴⁷

42. *Xijing zaji quanyi*, annot. Cheng Lin 成林 and Cheng Zhangcan 程章燦 (Guiyang: Guizhou renmin chubanshe, 1993), 1.5.

43. According to the *Sanfu huangtu*, 3.163, the Zhaoyang Hall was one of the eight main buildings established within the Rear Palace, in the Weiyang Palace complex, during the reign of Emperor Wu of the Han dynasty. As noted by Chen Zhi 陳直, *Han shu xinzheng* 漢書新證 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2008), 441, a mirror has been excavated in Xi'an with an inscription indicating that it pertained to this residence.

44. Close studding is a construction technique whereby a timber framework, usually with many vertical rails, is set into the wall and left visible for decorative purposes. From the description here, that is what is intended.

45. *Han shu* 97B.3989. A virtually identical description of the Zhaoyang Hall is also found in the *Sanfu huangtu* 3.165.

46. *Xijing zaji* 1.40; see also *Jinxiu wanhuagu xuji* 錦繡萬花谷續集 (Siku quanshu ed.), 7.1b.

47. For examples of white plume fans mentioned in medieval literature, see the “Encomium on a White Feather Fan” (*Baiyu shan can* 白羽扇讚) by Xie Huilian 謝惠連 (407–433) of the Liu-Song dynasty, quoted in *Chuxue ji* 初學記 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2004), 25.605. For specific bird feathers, see, e.g., the Three Kingdoms-era

However, like other plume fans, a pheasant-feather fan would involve attaching large feathers to a handle—this is a much simpler form of featherwork in which the feathers themselves form the body of the fan.

The use of feathers in jewelry, another rigid base form of featherwork, was recorded from the Han dynasty onward.⁴⁸ One of the earliest references of this kind is found in the description of the jewels worn by female members of the imperial house when they visited the ancestral shrines, as recorded in the *Hou Han shu*. The Grand Dowager Empress and the Dowager Empress wore dark robes as they performed their ceremonial duties, but at the same time they were ornamented with very striking jewels:

[They wore] a headdress, with hairpins and earrings. Their earrings were earpools with pearl pendants. The spikes of the hairpins were made from tortoiseshell, one *chi* long, and on the end there was an ornamental head, with a sculpted phoenix on top, with its feathers made of kingfisher feathers, and pearls below, together with pendant decorations made of gold. There was a hairpin inserted to right and left, in order to secure the headdress firmly.

翦菴齒，簪珥。珥，耳璫垂珠也。簪以玳瑁為擘，長一尺，端為華勝。上為鳳皇爵，以翡翠為毛羽，下有白珠，垂黃金鑷。左右一橫簪之，以安齒結。⁴⁹

On such occasions, the empress was also present, wearing robes similar to her seniors, but with even more elaborate gems. Yet again, her jewelry featured small golden three-dimensional sculptures of creatures that were then ornamented further with applications of kingfisher feathers—this technique would show off the color of the feathers to best effect.⁵⁰ According to the *Hou Han shu*:

[The empress wore] a wig, with a *buyao*, hairpins, and earrings. The *buyao* had [a head in the shape of] a mountain peak made of gold, with strings of pearls forming ornamental fringes, and sculpted figures of the six beasts: bear, tiger, [and the auspicious mythical animals] the *chipi*, *tianlu*, *bixie*, and the giant ox from the Feng River at Nanshan. This is what the *Book of Songs* calls: “The wig and the pins with six ornaments.”⁵¹ All the sculpted animals had their “fur” made of kingfisher feathers. On the gold peak, white pearls formed meander patterns, with kingfisher-feather floral designs.

“Rhapsody on a Wild Swan-Feather Fan” (*Hongyu shan fu* 鴻羽扇賦) by Wu Min 吳閔 and “Rhapsody on a White Crane-Feather Fan” (*Bai heyu shan fu* 白鶴羽扇賦) by Zhou Xingsi 周興嗣 of the Liang dynasty (d. 521). See *Yiwen leiju* 藝文類聚 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2007), 69.1212–13; and Yan Kejun 嚴可均, ed., *Quan Liangwen* 全梁文, in *Quan shanggu Sandai Qin Han Liuchao wen* 全上古三代秦漢六朝文 (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1999), 58.631, respectively.

48. Older archaeological reports of excavations of Han tombs have periodically noted the discovery of *feicui* or “kingfisher” jewelry; see, e.g., Dong Xuezheng 董學增, “Yongji Xingxingshao shuiku shiguanmu ji yizhi diaocha” 永吉星星哨水庫石棺墓及遺址調查, *Kaogu* 1979.3: 145–50; Jilinsheng bowuguan wenwudui 吉林省博物館文物隊, “Jilin Da’an yuchang gudai mudi” 吉林大安漁場古代墓地, *Kaogu* 1975.6: 356–62; and Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan kaogu yanjiusuo 中國社會科學院考古研究所, *Mancheng Hanmu fajue baogao* 滿城漢墓發掘報告 (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1980), 98. In the latter case, a subsequent publication clarified that they meant green jade, not feathers; see Chang Suxia 常素霞, “Mancheng Hanmu chutu de xiang feicuishu yingwei xiang yushi” 滿城漢墓出土的鑲翡翠飾應為鑲玉飾, *Wenwu chunguo* 1990.1: 53.

49. *Hou Han shu* 30.3676.

50. In a similar vein, in the nineteenth century, when feather jewelry was enormously popular in the West, one technique was to make tiny naturalistic gold sculptures of birds and then fit them with feathers; hummingbird feathers were commonly used for necklaces and earrings of this type. See Charlotte Gere and Judy Rudoe, *Jewellery in the Age of Queen Victoria: A Mirror to the World* (London: British Museum Press, 2010), 226–31.

51. This quotation is derived from the ode “She will Grow Old Together with Her Lord” (“Junzi xie lao” 君子偕老); see *Mao shi zhengyi* 毛詩正義, annot. Kong Yingda 孔穎達 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1999), 3.183 [Mao no. 47]. This song describes the elaborate formal jewels and robes worn by an elite woman in the Zhou dynasty.

假結，步搖，簪珥。步搖以黃金為山題，貫白珠為桂枝相纏，一爵九華：熊，虎，赤鬮，天鹿，辟邪，南山豐大特六獸。詩所謂：副笄六珈者。諸爵獸皆以翡翠為毛羽。金題，白珠璫繞，以翡翠為華云。⁵²

Elite women continued to wear kingfisher-feather ornamented hairpins, and other jewels of the same kind, throughout the imperial era. Medieval descriptions of this kind of jewel abound; for example, in the “Rhapsody on the Goddess of the Luo River” (“Luoshen fu” 洛神賦) by Cao Zhi 曹植 (192–232), the goddess is said to “wear on her head jewels of gold and blue kingfisher feathers” 戴金翠之首飾.⁵³ Meanwhile in the “Rhapsody on the Daughter of Cai Bojie (Cai Wenji 蔡文姬, ca. 177–ca. 239 CE)” (“Cai Bojie nü fu” 蔡伯喈女賦) by Ding Yi 丁廙 (d. 220 CE), he writes of an intelligent, beautiful, and exceptionally talented woman “dressed in a light robe of gossamer red silk, and wearing on her head filigree ornaments of gold and kingfisher feathers” 曳丹羅之輕裳，戴金翠之華鈿.⁵⁴ The combination of kingfisher feathers and gold would carry such powerful connotations of luxury, beauty, wealth, and power that such jewels continued to be prized for more than two thousand years.

Although the survival of featherwork beyond a few centuries is normally considered impossible for such delicate biodegradable material, there are three remarkable extant screens—thus rigid base featherwork—preserved in the Shōsōin 正倉院 in Japan.⁵⁵ Although originally thought to be Chinese, they are now considered to be Japanese-made items in Chinese style, produced during the 750s. All three were made from feathers from the copper pheasant (*Syrmaticus soemmerringii*) and the green pheasant (*Phasianus versicolor*); both species endemic to Japan. Two consist of calligraphic inscriptions, duplicated in different script forms, with the seal script characters in feathers, and painted clerical script characters in paint. One of these screens has an orange paper ground; the other uses green paper. The third screen, which has been the subject of a great deal more academic interest than the calligraphic examples, shows a series of naturalistic scenes of women standing under trees, again carried out in feathers.⁵⁶ These screens provide a unique opportunity to view medieval East Asian featherwork, and allow the viewer to begin to imagine the way in which palace interiors of the period were feathered spaces.

3. DECONSTRUCTIONIST FEATHERWORK

The history of deconstructionist featherwork in China is the most difficult to trace, given that many accounts of “feather robes” or “feather coverlets” simply do not provide enough detail to be able to ascertain how they were made. Surviving examples of this kind of featherwork from the Ming and Qing dynasties, mostly produced using peacock feathers, show that the individual barbs were twisted around a silk core to produce a brightly colored, iridescent thread. This could then be used as an accent or highlight in woven brocades, or it

52. *Hou Han shu* 30.3676–77. Identical ornaments were also worn by some medieval empresses; see *Jin shu* 25.774; *Sui shu* 隋書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1973), 11.236–37.

53. *Liuchen zhu wen xuan* 六臣註文選, annot. Li Shan 李善 et al. (Taipei: Zhengzhong shuju, 1971), 19.256. For a complete translation of this piece, see David R. Knechtges, *Wen xuan or Selections of Refined Literature*, vol. 3: *Rhapsodies on Natural Phenomena, Birds and Animals, Aspirations and Feelings, Sorrowful Laments, Literature, Music, and Passions* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1996), 355–66.

54. The text of this rhapsody is preserved in *Yiwen leiju*, 30.542.

55. Yuzada Yuuke 米田雄介, “Kokka chinpō-chō’ ni mieru byōbu no seiritsu ni tsuite” ‘国家珍宝帳’ に見える屏風の成立について, *Shōsōin kiyō* 正倉院紀要 35 (2013): 140–17.

56. See, e.g., Kosugi Kazuo 小杉一雄, “Shinsen no hagoromo o ronjite torige ritsujo byōbu ni oyobu” 神仙の羽衣を論じて鳥毛立女屏風に及ぶ, *Bijutsu-shi kenkyū* 美術史研究 26 (1988): 1–22; and Abe Hiroshi 阿部弘, “Torige ritsujo byōbu shūri hōkoku” 鳥毛立女屏風修理報告, *Shōsōin nenpō* 正倉院年報 12 (1990): 1–17.

could be woven to produce an entire garment.⁵⁷ The production of feather-thread rainwear is well attested in late imperial literature, and extant examples attest to the superlative skill of those who produced such remarkable items.⁵⁸ However, attempting to convincingly match descriptions in early and medieval Chinese literature with this unusual and apparently unique technique of producing textiles is very difficult, not least because of the ambiguity of the vocabulary. For example, the *Jin shu* records the appearance of Xie Wan 謝萬 when he was summoned to an audience with Emperor Jianwen of the Jin 晉簡文帝 (r. 372). He appears to have been wearing a feathered garment, which may or may not have been woven:

Wan came forward wearing a white silk hat, and a cloak made from crane feathers [alternatively, “a cloak made from crane and golden pheasant feathers,” or “a woven cloak of crane feathers”], and wooden clogs.⁵⁹ When he had an audience [with the emperor], he spoke with his majesty for many consecutive days.

萬著白綸巾，鶴氅裘，履版而前。既見，與帝共談移日。⁶⁰

One of the earliest clear references to deconstructionist featherwork is found in the biography of Xiao Zhangmao, Crown Prince Wenhui of the Southern Qi dynasty 南齊文惠太子蕭長懋 (458–493). The Crown Prince, who seems to have been noted for his extravagance, is said to have designed a spectacular garment for himself, woven from peacock feathers. Even in the laconic terms in which these events are described in the dynastic history, the splendor of this robe is clear. Furthermore, from the fact that such a specific account is given of its production, this technique can be assumed to be unfamiliar to medieval readers, and may indeed have been first created at around this time:

[The Crown Prince] was good at creating treasures: he had peacock feathers woven together to make a cloak. Its glowing colors, gold and green, were finer even than those on a pheasant’s head.

善製珍玩之物：織孔雀毛爲裘。光彩金翠，過於雉頭矣。⁶¹

57. Many older catalogues of imperial textiles ignore the presence of peacock-feather thread; however, some recently produced publications do document the extensive use of this yarn in the Ming and Qing; see, e.g., John Vollmer and Jacqueline Simcox, *Emblems of Empire: Selections from the Mactaggart Art Collection* (Alberta: Univ. of Alberta Press, 2010). However, not all “feather yarn” was in fact made from feathers; see Wang Yunli 王允麗, “Qingdai fangzhi mianliao: Yumaosha de zhiwu jiegou yanjiu” 清代紡織面料：羽毛紗的織物結構研究, *Zhongguo wenwu kexue yanjiu* 2014.1: 80–82. This paper describes a feather yarn substitute made during the Qing dynasty for imperial use from a cheaper and less difficult to weave mixed silk-and-cashmere thread.

58. The *Honglou meng* 紅樓夢 (Dream of the Red Chamber) mentions a woven peacock-feather coat given to the hero. The delicate nature of the garment is amply conveyed by the scene in which a maidservant is exhausted by the effort of darning a tiny hole; see Cao Xueqin 曹雪芹, Gao E 高鶚, *Honglou meng* (Taipei: Lianjing chubanshe, 1996), 52.709–10. For a remarkable bright-red spun feather yarn raincoat as worn by the Kangxi Emperor 清康熙 (r. 1661–1722), see Zhang Qiong 張琼 et al., *Qingdai gongting fushi* 清代宮廷服飾 (Hong Kong: Shangwu yinshuguan, 2005), 88. According to contemporary records, it took ninety-two days to weave a single coat in this yarn; see Peng Juying 彭聚營, “*Honglou meng* zhong de ling luo chou duan” 紅樓夢中的綾羅綢緞, *Dang’an yu jianshe* 2015.5: 49–51.

59. The issue here comes down to the meaning of the word *chang* 氅. This can refer to birds’ feathers in general or to garments made from said feathers; or, as a loanword, it means a specific species of bird (*chang* 鷩 or golden pheasant). Qiuling Cao, Lin Wang, and Wenying Li, “Special Animal Fibers in Chinese Ancient Textiles,” *Advanced Materials Research* 332–334 (2011): 108–11, argue that in this instance it should be considered a woven garment. However, on the basis of contemporary usage, it seems more likely that it is being used to mean simply feathers, as given in the primary translation here.

60. *Jin shu* 79.2086.

61. *Nan Qi shu* 南齊書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1972), 21.401.

It may be surprising to read that the Crown Prince was personally involved at some level in the creation of his cloak, and the temptation is to regard this as polite fiction. However, given how rare and expensive beautiful bird feathers were, members of the ruling elite might well have been required to at least authorize production of featherwork items. In other cultures, members of the ruling elite were also directly involved in the production of featherwork for exactly the same reason, as can be seen from a Mexican feather artwork known as the *Mass of St. Gregory*. This remarkable piece bears an inscription stating that it was produced as a gift for Pope Paul III by Diego de Alvarado Huanitzin in 1539—he was the nephew of Moctezuma II, and first governor of Tenochtitlan after the conquest.⁶² This highly experimental work represents an attempt to convey a Christian subject, familiarized to the Mexican audience by European woodcuts, in traditional Aztec feather mosaic style, with different feathers glued to paper and then cut into appropriate elements to be assembled into a finely shaded “feather painting.” Given the extortionate price of the necessary feathers, and the fact that an entirely new kind of work had to be carried out with them, the personal involvement of a member of the ruling elite is not unreasonable. Exactly the same considerations apply to the famous feather skirts commissioned by the Anle Princess 安樂公主 (684–710) during the Tang dynasty. Without direct patronage from a senior member of the imperial house, the expense of producing such objects is unlikely to have been contemplated:

The Anle Princess ordered the Imperial Manufactory to use feathers from many different birds to weave the fabric for two skirts. Looking straight on it was one color; looking at it sideways it was another color; looking at it in the sunshine it was yet another color; and in the shade it was a different color again. Furthermore, the shapes of each different kind of bird could be seen. She gave one of them to [her mother] Empress Wei [d. 710] . . . After she made these feather skirts, many nobles and rich families imitated this [fashion], and the feathers and fur from the rare birds and exotic beasts of the Yangtze delta and Ling[nan] regions were collected almost to the point of extinction.

安樂公主使尚方合百鳥毛織二裙。正視爲一色，傍視爲一色，日中爲一色，影中爲一色，而百鳥之狀皆見。以其一獻韋后 . . . 自作毛裙，貴臣富家多效之，江，嶺奇禽異獸毛羽采之殆盡。⁶³

Such a description suggests that the spinners and weavers of the Imperial Manufactory had made full use of the possibilities afforded to them to show their skill in producing feather-thread textiles. The account of this amazing pair of garments, particularly the changing colors as the viewer observed in different lights and angles, suggests that they had produced a “shot” fabric, using different color feathers for the warp and weft. Given that any shot fabric will produce an interesting changeable and iridescent effect, the use of feather threads, with a natural sheen, would significantly heighten the colorful impression of such a garment. Although deconstructionist featherwork continued to be produced for use by the rich and noble, a fabric of such staggering technical complexity and appalling expense may well never have been reproduced.

62. For studies of this remarkable piece, now in the Musée de Jacobins, Auch, see, e.g., Marita Martínez del Río de Redo, “Featherwork during the Viceroyalty,” in *Art of Featherwork in Mexico*, ed. Theresa Castelló Yturvide (Mexico City: Fomento Cultural Banamex, 1993), 103–39; and Pascal Mongne, “La Messe de Saint Grégoire du Musée de Jacobins d’Auch: Une mosaïque de plumes mexicaine du XVII^e siècle,” *Revue de Louvre* 44.5–6 (1994): 38–47.

63. *Xin Tang shu*, 34.878. This translation is based on that given by Edward H. Schafer, *The Golden Peaches of Samarkand: A Study of Tang Exotics* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1963), 114, though for some reason he is under the impression that the princess made the skirts herself, in spite of the clear reference to the Imperial Manufactory in the original text.

CONCLUSION

In early and medieval China, the ruling elite sometimes wore brightly colored feathered robes, and they lived in mansions adorned with hangings ornamented with yet more plumes. When they lay down to sleep, it was underneath coverlets of kingfisher feathers encrusted with pearls, and their privacy was ensured in their bedchambers by feather-covered curtains. In winter, they were kept warm and dry every time they went outdoors thanks to their feather cloaks and coats. In living surrounded by feathers they were in theory no different from many other cultures across the Pacific region; however, in practice, featherwork seems to have been exceptionally widely consumed within the Chinese world. Highly prized feathers from exotic birds were transported vast distances to satisfy demand, and the most extravagant customers would insist on only using feathers from one particular part of the bird. Although the mass production of cloaks for the military must have involved techniques requiring comparatively limited skill like gluing, other early and medieval Chinese featherwork was clearly produced by highly skilled workers, who could take many months, if not years, to produce a single piece in such a fragile medium.⁶⁴ The fact that so many featherwork items were produced, in both government and private workshops, indicates that a vast number of people must have been employed in this industry. However, as the understanding that persons of high social standing in China wore feathers has faded, knowledge about this important East Asian featherworking tradition has been lost.

In antiquity, it is likely that featherwork was considered a royal craft in the Chinese world; the earliest surviving account is that of King Ling of Chu wearing his kingfisher feather cape on a snowy day in 530 BCE. The most elaborate and expensive items are likely always to have been kept for imperial use. However, over time, more and more people acquired feather garments and ornaments, until by the Tang dynasty, the army would parade through the palace on festival days dressed in feather cloaks: red, white, yellow, blue, black, and multicolored, as well as those produced from the feathers of wild ducks, peacocks, parrots, and chickens. By ignoring these accounts of Chinese featherwork, scholars have lost the sense of how brightly colored the world of the early imperial and medieval elite really was. Men and women, whether outside in the sunlight or lit by lamps, glittered and shone in their dazzling robes composed from rare and exotic feathers, flashing an iridescent gleam with every movement. Although the masterpieces produced by Chinese featherworkers have not survived, we can appreciate something of their skill through the descriptions preserved in historical and literary accounts.

64. To provide some basis for comparison, it took one professional Hawai'ian featherworker thirteen months to produce a single full-length cape using the traditional *nāki'i* interweaving technique; see Betty Lou Kam, "The Aloha of Sharing a Hawaiian Art," in *Royal Hawaiian Featherwork*, 124–31.