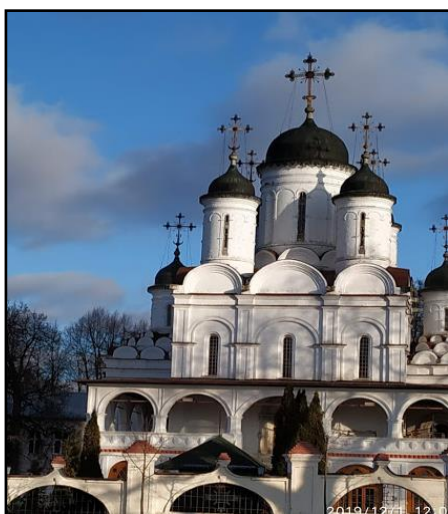


By Oksana Kokhno

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Church of the Saviour's Transfiguration, Vyazyomy, Moscow. Photo by Oksana Kokhno

More than half my life has been spent away from the place I used to call home: the place and the country where my parents still live, where I was born, graduated university, and from where I moved to a very different country and culture and completed my education. But deep in my childhood memory stayed the feeling of places immersed in history and art: fine art museums; avant-garde exhibitions; classical music concerts; luxurious aristocratic mansions (or their ruins) of statesmen, writers, and historians of the past; as well as ancient cities of Rus', as my home country used to be called centuries ago.

We have been living in Singapore for almost eight years, coming here by choice, not by chance, and discovering the world of Asia by visiting places, travelling around, and exploring art in the Asian Civilisations Museum as well as other museums. First as a visitor, for the past three years as volunteer docent, I am constantly absorbing more culture and art. I also need my museum for the feeling of inner comfort and tranquility; for excitement in the face of the unknown. I remember these emotions when I was little, and these memories transform for me this museum and this part of the world into home.

The very last day before the Circuit Breaker commenced, I rushed into the newly opened galleries of the ACM. Almost blinded by the golden shine of the glorious Jewellery Gallery collection, with only a pitiful quarter of an hour left, I couldn't afford to miss the Fashion and Textile Gallery, not after falling in love and guiding the *Guo Pei: Chinese Art & Design* exhibition. So I ran in to recognise the splendour of the Qing imperial robes, to notice the tasteful mix



Oksana in Dali Theatre-Museum, Figueres, Spain

of Western and Han Chinese traditions in early 20th-century outfits, but unable to walk away from irresistible *qipaos*.



Fashion and Textiles Gallery at ACM

Busy choosing and trying on, in my imagination, these Shanghai feminine and feminist dresses, I realised something kept calling my attention, something completely unexpected. It almost made me homesick. Running through the chest-line and the sleeve cuffs of an elegantly grey, 1910–20 *qipao* were Cyrillic letters. Brought over 10 centuries ago by two Byzantium envoys and Christian missionaries to the Slavic speaking part of the world, Cyrillic also served as the basis for

the writing system of Russian, my mother tongue.

Would this *qipao* look plain without Cyrillic? To answer, I explored many hidden details.

Its name, literally, "banner robe", rooted in the origins of the Qing dynasty: major military units the Eight banners were loyal throughout the Qing rule. Qing were the nomadic Manchurians, who came from not so far away in the northeast to rule China and make it their home. Manchu dress set a long-lasting trend in Chinese fashion, conserving convenient features of horse-riding outfits: narrow sleeves, slits on both sides of the bodice, and the high collar, an evolution of a saddle-shaped one which protected the rider's face.

In this oldest-in-the-gallery *qipao*, the high collar contrasts strikingly with the fattened chest line. In the 10th-century Song dynasty, compliant to virtue of the Neo-Confucian philosophy, ladies drastically raised the chest-line of their garments to cover cleavage, and added high collars to cover the neck. And still, this *qipao* seems to oppose any pretension of the Song



Qipao. China, 1910s or 1920s. Silk. On loan from the Chris Hall Collection

stance on female inferiority. Not out of modesty, this dress mirrors the men's long robe, *changshan*, of the same period. In times of the Experimental Republic in China, urban women put on men's dress to challenge men with the democratic idea of equality.

This *qipao* also makes a declaration of modernity: the smoky grey colour is simple elegance, smooth and glossy sophistication in the Style Moderne (art deco) taking off in Europe and the US in the 1920s. The abstract decoration, hand-embroidered, on the slits is another stylish feature. I marvelled at the perfectly executed embroidery and exotic symbols and letters of Cyrillic, while thinking of how this *qipao* must have made a woman in this dress stand out, look educated, and at the same time curious of the world around her.



Cyrillic letters and other symbols embroidered on a *qipao*

This emblematic phenomenon of international fashion of early 20th century kept on changing its shape, length, and patterns, following the life and politics of Shanghai, the fashion capital of China. I believe the *qipao* became symbolic of cosmopolitan culture, for me, at least. Maybe, it is the spirit of cosmopolitan culture that also makes me feel comfortable away from home, to feel at home while away?