

# INTRODUCTION

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In a land that boasts of an ancient, rich and varied textile and costume tradition, the Parsis—a community descended from Zoroastrian migrants who fled from Iran and landed on the Indian coast in the eighth century—developed, during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a style of dress visibly distinct from that of other Indian groups among whom they lived. This period was the high noon of the British Empire in India, as it was, too, for the small, but avowedly cosmopolitan, well educated, outward looking and commercially successful Parsi community. During this time, and up until the mid-twentieth century, Parsi clothing was distinguished by an identifiably different style for both genders, including upper and lower garments, headgear and footwear, with embroidery remaining a hallmark of their women's clothing.



Chinese embroiderer

Courtesy: Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford, no.2003.4

The most distinctive item of Parsi women's clothing from the third quarter of the nineteenth century was undoubtedly the *gara*, a sari embroidered with exotic Chinese patterns—pagodas, pavilions, bridges, peonies, bamboos, peacocks and phoenixes—executed mainly in monochromatic white on brightly coloured silks. The obviously 'foreign' pictorial patterns were unlike anything produced in India, and they betokened an exotic and distant source, suggesting wealth and privilege. Chinese-style embroidery was also used on other items of clothing such as *jhablas* (tunics) and *ijars* (pyjamas). Worn initially by upper-class Parsi ladies, over time the demand for these embroidered garments spread to other layers of Parsi society. The high prices that these textiles commanded, the distance between India and China and the time taken for Chinese itinerant tradesmen to fulfill orders seasonally, inevitably resulted in imitation and reinvention by local craftsmen in and around Surat and Bombay. In time the embroidery style was pursued as a hobby by Parsi housewives in their leisure time. Significantly, the Chinese-inspired embroidered textiles,

whether made in China or India, were until recently worn exclusively by the Parsi community, hence they are referred to as 'Parsi' embroidery.

It should have been a relatively simple task to gather information about a group of textiles that preeminently represent a nineteenth-century phenomenon. It proved not to be so. It would have been reasonable to expect, for instance, that *garas* were imported into India in large numbers when Parsi involvement in the China trade was at its peak between 1830 and 1865. However, conclusively-dated

examples from this period could not be traced. Surprisingly little information was available about when and where *garas* were made, and how exactly they were commissioned and procured. How did a taste for Chinese design develop across the Parsi community? Was it entirely a by-product of the lucrative China trade in cotton and opium that Parsi merchants had successfully established in collaboration with the English East India Company? Or was it, rather, the influence of the 'oriental' craze that swept through Britain and Europe from about 1870, that gave birth to the pagodas in Kew Gardens and the Brighton Pavilion, and saw oriental goods flooding Liberty's and other London stores? Parallels found in the choice of materials, themes and motifs between Parsi embroideries and other embroideries made in China for Western markets suggest that both may be part of the same genre of late nineteenth or early twentieth century Chinese export embroideries. This is not surprising. The Parsis were the first Western-educated Indian community and during the course of the nineteenth century had developed a predilection for all things British. Their attraction for Chinese silks and embroidery for women's clothing essentially reflected prevailing British fashions and tastes for oriental textiles; and their commercial stations in China, Macao and Hongkong provided easy access to these goods.

For the purpose of the present study it has not been possible to undertake a detailed technical analysis of the materials, dyes or specific stitches or include information on embroidery workshops in China. It is hoped that this catalogue, drawn from the TAPI collection, will serve as an initial exploration of the distinctive group of embroidered silk textiles worn by Parsi women and children in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, paving the way for further research.

*(Colonial rather than current place names in India and China have been retained for contextual suitability.)*



Page from a 19th century  
Chinese pattern book on rice paper  
Courtesy: Don Cohn, New York