This paper examines a late Qing woman’s jacket embroidered with eight well-known Suzhou garden and temple sites. Such an object makes little sense within the conventional historiography of Chinese dress, long dominated by regulated garments like dragon robes and rank badges, and consequently, concerned with themes of imperial status and official rank. Yet this curious jacket permits an exploration of the impact of handicraft commercialization and widening material consumption upon late Qing women’s fashions, and the degree to which these developments expanded the potential of female material culture as a forum for cultural production.

Rachel Silberstein is a historian of Chinese material culture, in particular dress and textiles. She recently completed a PhD in Oriental Studies at the University of Oxford with a thesis examining the influence of fashion and commercialization upon late Qing women’s dress. Her interest in Chinese textiles began in the textiles market of Xi’an, where she spent two years teaching and studying at Xi’an Foreign Languages University. Returning to the UK, she received an MA in Chinese language and linguistics at the School of Oriental and African Studies, prior to beginning doctoral studies at Oxford in 2007. In 2012, she was awarded the Gervers Fellowship at the Royal Ontario Museum to study their collection of Chinese vernacular embroideries.