A section from a pair of sleeve bands from a woman's wedding jacket, showing the dragon embroidered in couched gold thread on a cream silk ground. China. Mid-nineteenth century.

Unless otherwise noted, all objects from the collection of and all photographs courtesy of the author.

Chinese Dragons:

Embroidered Symbols *of* Power *and* Protection

VALERY GARRETT

GOOD-NATURED AND BENIGN yet powerful and dynamic, the dragon has been an object of worship in China for thousands of years. Unlike those malevolent dragons in the West that had to be conquered and slain, the Chinese dragon was a sacred creature revered by all.

It was believed to appear in the heavens before the birth of an emperor and was seen as a symbol of masculine vigor and fertility. When it spoke, its voice boomed out like thunder, while its breath brought forth fire or rain, substances vital to a country that relied mainly on agriculture for its livelihood. Ultimately, this supernatural beast came to represent China itself and appeared on official clothing, coins of the realm, and the national flag. Even today, its image is seen on everything from stone sculpture to souvenirs.

The Chinese dragon is a composite of parts from other creatures. It has the head of a camel, the horns of a deer, the eyes of a hare, and the neck of a snake. Its scales resemble those of a carp, its claws are an eagle's, and its paws, a tiger's. Long, curling whiskers sprout from either side of its mouth. The dragon often is depicted chasing the flaming pearl, a Buddhist emblem representing enlightenment. This symbolizes the emperor's search for divine truth to benefit the great Chinese empire.

Because the dragon was regarded as a symbol of imperial authority, the emperor sat upon a throne carved with dragons clad in voluminous robes emblazoned with nine exquisitely embroidered dragons, each with outstretched feet, each bearing five clawed toes. Only the emperor, the heir apparent, high-ranking princes, and certain worthy noblemen or officials designated by the emperor could wear such robes. Lower-ranking noblemen and court officials wore robes with nine or eight four-clawed dragons. Toward the end of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911), when traditions were breaking down and many laws disregarded, robes depicting five-clawed dragons came to be worn by all ranks; to be seen wearing the four-clawed dragon was unthinkable.

Only the emperor could wear a bright yellow robe although imperial princes could wear other shades of yellow; noblemen and mandarins, the government officials, wore blue or blue-black. With the introduction of aniline dyes into China about 1870, such vivid and hitherto

unknown colors as shocking pink, lime green, turquoise, and orange joined older, softer vegetal-dyed saffron yellows and indigo blues.

The concept of yin and yang, complementary positive and negative forces in nature that are believed to maintain a balance in the universe, is illustrated on dragon robes. The dragon, and by extension, the emperor, was considered the embodiment of yang, which symbolizes power and masculinity. The eighty-one yang scales on a dragon's body are a product of nine times nine; nine is considered the most powerful yang number. Five, the number of claws on each paw of dragons on the emperor's robe, is another yang number; in contrast, the dragons on the robes of men of lower ranks had four claws, a yin number.

An emperor's dragon robe. China. Late nineteenth century. The ninth dragon is hidden on the front inside flap.

Dragons also appeared on the clothing of lesser mortals. A bride's red silk wedding jacket might boast as many as ten four-clawed dragons. The number of dragons, the intricacy and amount of embroidery, and the extravagant use of fabric indicated the wealth and prestige of the bride's family. Narrow bands of silk embroidery depicting the dragon and phoenix also decorate the edge of the sleeves of jackets together with pleated skirts embroidered on its front and back flat panels with the same motifs worn on important occasions after the wedding. The dragon (yang) and phoenix (yin) together represent the emperor and empress and, by association, the groom and his bride on their wedding day.

Dragon embroidery wasn't restricted to wedding attire. Even young children wore hats, collars, jackets, and shoes embroidered with four-clawed dragons to frighten away evil spirits and to foster success.

Needleworkers during the Qing dynasty embroidered the dragons using stitches familiar to embroiderers today: satin, long-and-short, and counted-stitch on gauze. Peking knot, known in Chinese as *dazi* (making seeds), was especially popular. Westerners sometimes called it blind or forbidden stitch, believing that making the tiny even stitches eventually ruined the embroiderers' eyesight. Beginning in the 1920s, when many women went out to work as secretaries and teachers and families had fewer servants, the quicker an article could be embroidered, the more popular it was. Cross-stitch, quick to stitch, became

Child's collar with the design of two four-clawed dragons chasing the flaming pearl embroidered in satin stitch. China. Late nineteenth century.

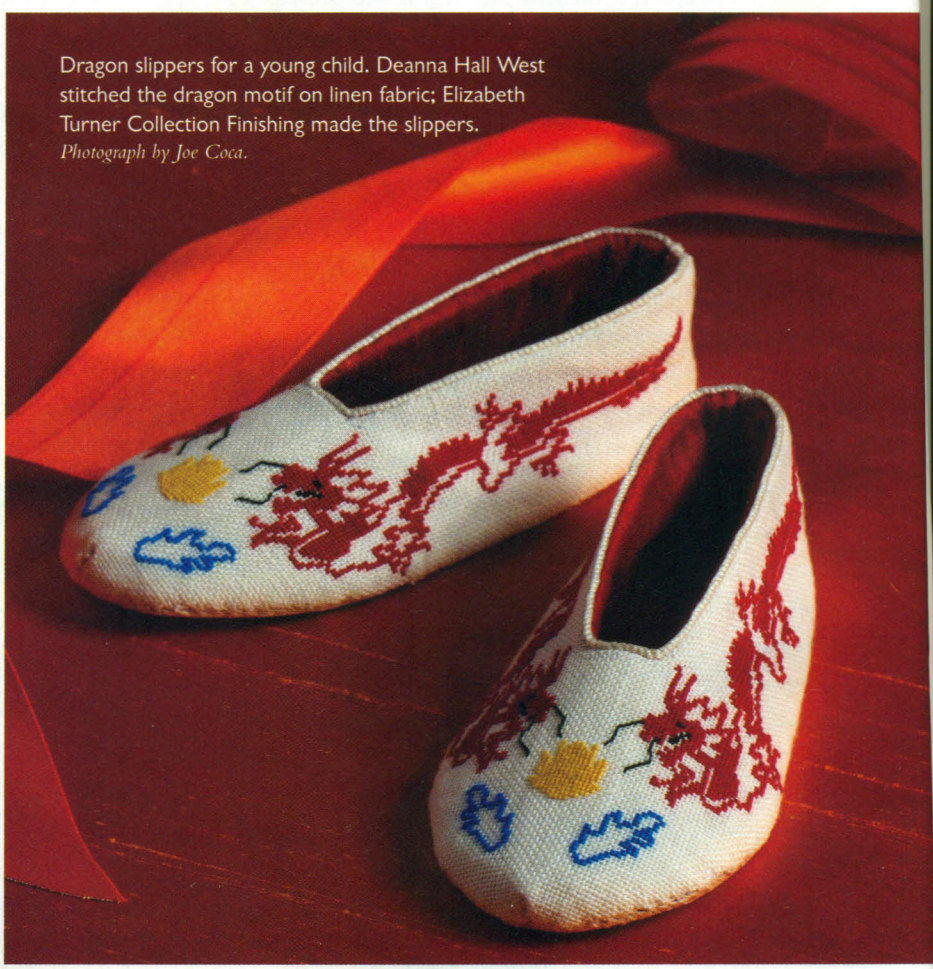
Child's jacket worn for first-birthday celebrations showing the twelve animals of the zodiac. The dragon is in the center. China. Early twentieth century.

fashionable. The pattern for a pair of women's slippers with a cross-stitch design of a dragon from an embroidery book of that period published in Shanghai was adapted for the project that follows this article.

Although some minority groups continue the tradition of embroidering the dragon onto children's clothing, for many Chinese, the dragon has significance chiefly as one of the twelve auspicious animals of the Chinese zodiac. The Chinese believe that the animal of the year in which a person is born is hidden in his heart and thus has a strong influence on his life. People born in the Year of the Dragon (2000, 1988, 1976, 1964, 1952, 1940, 1928, 1916) are regarded as strong, honest, energetic, and, quite understandably perhaps, often having a large ego as well! ❖

ABOUT THE AUTHOR. *Valery Garrett is the author of many books on Chinese traditional dress and embroidery; her latest,* Chinese Dress from the Qing Dynasty to the Present *(North Clarendon, Vermont, and Singapore: Tuttle, 2007), has more than 500 color illustrations.*

Dragon Slippers *to* Stitch *for a* Child



Dragon slippers for a young child. Deanna Hall West stitched the dragon motif on linen fabric; Elizabeth Turner Collection Finishing made the slippers. *Photograph by Joe Coca.*

We adapted the chart for a pair of women's slippers from an embroidery book circa 1920 published in Shanghai, which Valery Garrett mentions in her article "Chinese Dragons: Embroidered Symbols of Power and Protection" (preceding this project) for these colorful slippers for a child. As Valery points out in her article, small children in China have worn shoes embellished with dragons for centuries. The dragon not only offered protection from evil spirits, it also imbued a host of other beneficial characteristics.

Deanna Hall West, *PieceWork*'s needlework technical editor, worked the motif on 32-count linen

MATERIALS

Wichelt Belfast Linen, 32-count, 100% linen fabric, 2 pieces of #360952 Cream, 9 x 11 inches (22.9 x 27.9 cm) each
Presencia Finca Mouline Embroidery Floss, 100% Egyptian cotton 6-strand thread, 8.7 yards (8 m)/skein, 1 skein each of #0007 Black, #1902 Red, #1140 Light Tangerine, #3822 Dark Electric Blue
John James Needles, tapestry, size 26, petite and betweens, size 9
Lining fabric, to match linen color, ¼ yard (0.2 m)
Iron-on interfacing, lightweight, 2 pieces, 9 x 11 inches (22.9 x 27.9 cm) each
Sewing thread, ecru and medium tan

Finished size of slipper: 1¼ inches (3.2 cm) tall and 5½ inches (14.0 cm) long; to fit a two- to three-year old

fabric. We had the slippers professionally finished, but instructions for making your own are below. The slippers will be a perfect gift for a child—both the recipient and his or her parents will be thrilled!

INSTRUCTIONS

Zigzag by machine or overcast by hand the raw edges of the linen. Center and stitch the motif on one linen piece, using 1 strand of floss and following the chart; stitch over 1 fabric thread, completing each cross-stitch individually. Repeat for remaining linen piece.

To make the slippers: Using a short running stitch, the tapestry needle, and the medium tan sewing thread, outline the slipper shape (Figure 1) on each linen piece. Using manufacturer's instructions, fuse interfacing to the back of each design fabric; cut out. Using the design fabric as a pattern, cut out two lining pieces; cut out four sole pieces (see pattern)—two from the linen and two from the lining fabric. Fuse interfacing to one left- and one right-facing sole piece.

Using the ecru thread, machine sew the short ends of one design fabric together. Repeat for remaining design fabric and the two lining pieces. Press seams open. With right sides together, sew one design fabric to one lining fabric around the inner seam allowance. Clip acute angles near the front of the slipper. Turn right sides out and press. Repeat for second slipper. Using the between needle, baste raw edges together for each slipper top. With wrong sides together, baste one interfaced sole piece to a sole lining piece. Repeat for remaining sole pieces. Baste and sew one design piece to one sole piece, matching centering lines at front and back of each slipper. Repeat for remaining pieces. Remove all bastings.

Machine zigzag raw seam allowances. Turn each slipper right side out and press.

Key

#1902—Red
#1140—Light Tangerine
#3822—Dark Electric Blue
#0007—Black

Chart may be photocopied for personal use. Electronic color chart by Marc Owens.

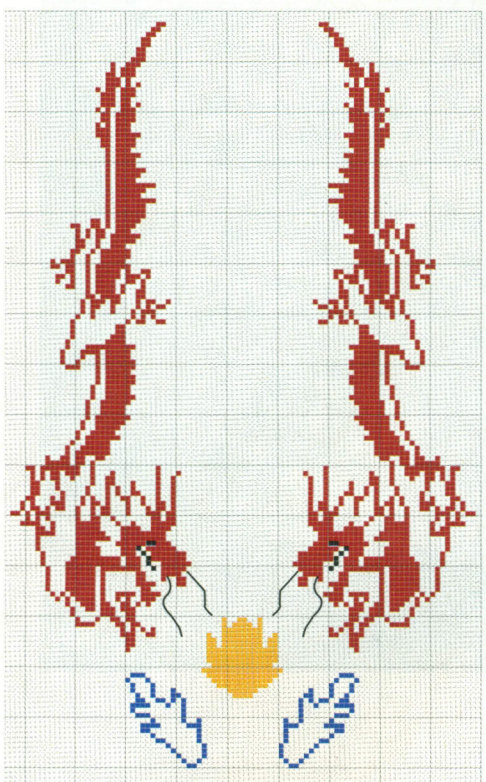
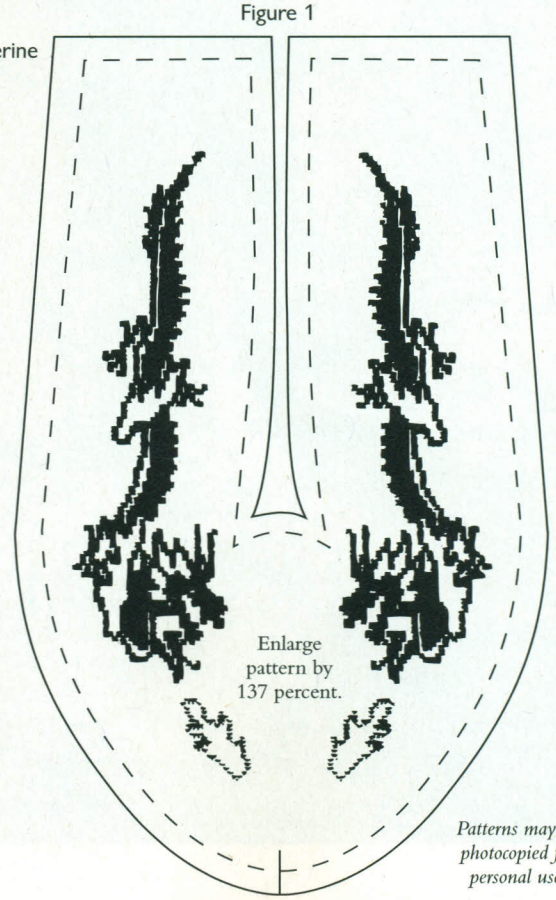
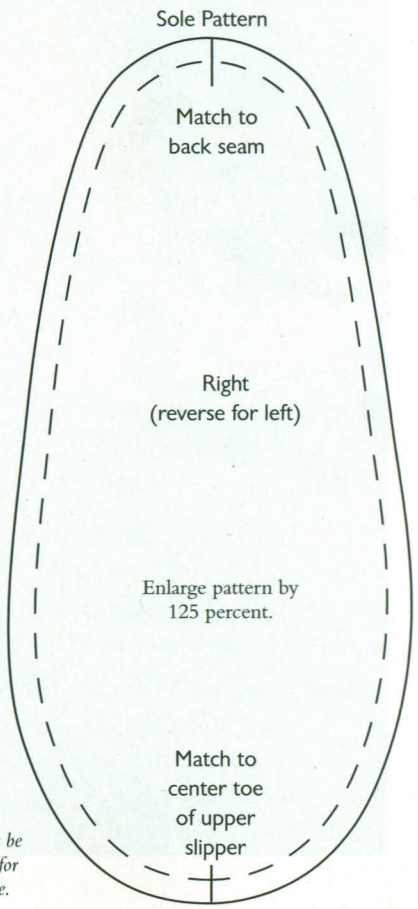


Figure 1





Patterns may be photocopied for personal use.