

## Formal Aesthetics of Dragon Patterns in Ming Dynasty Clothing

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### Abstract

The Ming Dynasty is renowned for its rich cultural and artistic achievements, which have a profound impact on various aspects of Chinese society, including fashion and clothing. A distinctive feature of Ming court clothing is the intricate dragon patterns, showcasing elaborate design craftsmanship. The dragon patterns in Ming Dynasty clothing encompass traditional Chinese aesthetic design, cultural beliefs, and traditional ceremonial practices, representing a cultural heritage that epitomizes China's rich history and traditions. The dragon patterns in Ming Dynasty clothing can be categorized into numerous types based on color, posture, pattern combinations, and motif patterns. This study conducts a detailed analysis on the formal aesthetics of dragon patterns in Ming Dynasty clothing through the functions of formal aesthetics in semantic theory. Dragon patterns not only possess visual appeal but also reflect traditional Chinese aesthetic views and cultural values. This research has the potential to inspire contemporary designers and contribute to the existing body of research on dragon patterns in society, enabling innovative approaches to the depiction of dragon patterns in Ming Dynasty clothing.

**Keywords:** Formal Aesthetics, Dragon Patterns, Ming Dynasty

### Introduction

In the field of Ming Dynasty (1368 - 1644) clothing research, dragon patterns serve as a typical decorative element with a profound historical background and cultural significance. As a symbol of the ancient Chinese social hierarchy, dragon patterns play a significant role in Ming Dynasty clothing, reflecting the social, political, and aesthetic values of the time.

Dragons have always held a special place in Chinese mythology and culture. In Chinese folklore, dragons are revered as powerful and benevolent creatures associated with luck, prosperity, and protection. They are symbols of imperial authority and often appear in artworks and garments worn by the ruling class, such as Ming emperors and high-ranking officials (Chen, 2019; Ding & Li, 2014).

Aesthetic exploration, whether in architecture or fashion design, plays a crucial role in various design disciplines, aiming to embody the essence of beauty (Zuo & Jones, 2005). Rooted in philosophy, aesthetics historically delves into the concept of beauty, and its consideration in the design process seeks to articulate a perceived beauty within the designed work (Zuo & Jones, 2005). Designers invest significant efforts in this pursuit, striving to express and evoke feelings of pleasure and imagination in observers through the visual experience of their work (MacLagan, 2001). While aesthetics is a multifaceted domain covering extensive discussions related to design objects, designers, and spectators, this study specifically focuses on formal aesthetics as a fundamental aspect (Wiesing, 2016; Ali & Liem, 2014). Formal aesthetics, interpreted through the arrangement of visual elements such as color, texture, and shape, views design objects as entities expressing aesthetic values beyond the order of existing visual elements (Nasar, 2017).

The inclusion of dragon patterns in Ming Dynasty clothing conveys a sense of authority and legitimacy. It visually represents the wearer's connection to the court and their elevated social status. The intricate details and craftsmanship of the dragon patterns showcase the wearer's wealth and elegance, as well as the skills of the artisans who created these garments. The combination of dragon patterns on Ming Dynasty clothing is carefully orchestrated to convey specific meanings and evoke awe and reverence. The placement and arrangement of dragons on the garments are not arbitrary but follow specific design principles (Ding & Li, 2014).

A detailed analysis of the formal aesthetics of dragon patterns in Ming Dynasty clothing is crucial for enhancing our understanding of traditional Chinese design culture and nurturing cultural values. This research sheds light on the cultural significance of dragon patterns in clothing and contributes to the appreciation of Chinese artistic traditions.

### **Semantic Functional Theory and the Aesthetics of Dragon Patterns**

Semantic functional theory, proposed by John Gros and Richard Fisher, provides a conceptual framework for understanding the formal and communicative aspects of product design. It suggests that a product encompasses utilitarian functions, such as ergonomics, economy, and ecology, as well as form and communicative aspects referred to as "product language functions" by (Jochen, 1984). Applying semantic functional theory allows us to analyse the form aesthetics, indicative function, and symbolic function of dragon patterns in Ming Dynasty clothing. Jochen (1984) elaborated on the theory of product language, which classifies semantic functions into form aesthetics, indicative functions, and symbolic functions, along with numerous subcategories. This detailed classification and analytical approach contribute to an in-depth study of pattern design in Ming Dynasty clothing. Gros further breaks down the specific objects of product language into form aesthetics, such as shape, color, and texture. By analysing the various formal and semantic aspects of a product, semantic functional theory helps us understand how product language conveys meaning and value.

The Semantic Functional Theory, developed by John Gros and Richard Fisher, explores how products, including clothing, fulfill both utilitarian functions (like warmth) and

communicative functions through their form and aesthetics (Norman, 2013). This includes the shape, color, and symbolic meanings embedded in designs. The theory outlines 11 principles that analyze the formal aesthetics of various products, including graphic design and architecture. These principles cover concepts such as simplicity-complexity and balance-out of balance. Applying this framework to dragon patterns in Ming Dynasty clothing helps analyze and enhance their visual appeal by incorporating diverse types of dragon designs, enriching our understanding of their aesthetic and cultural significance (Figure 1).

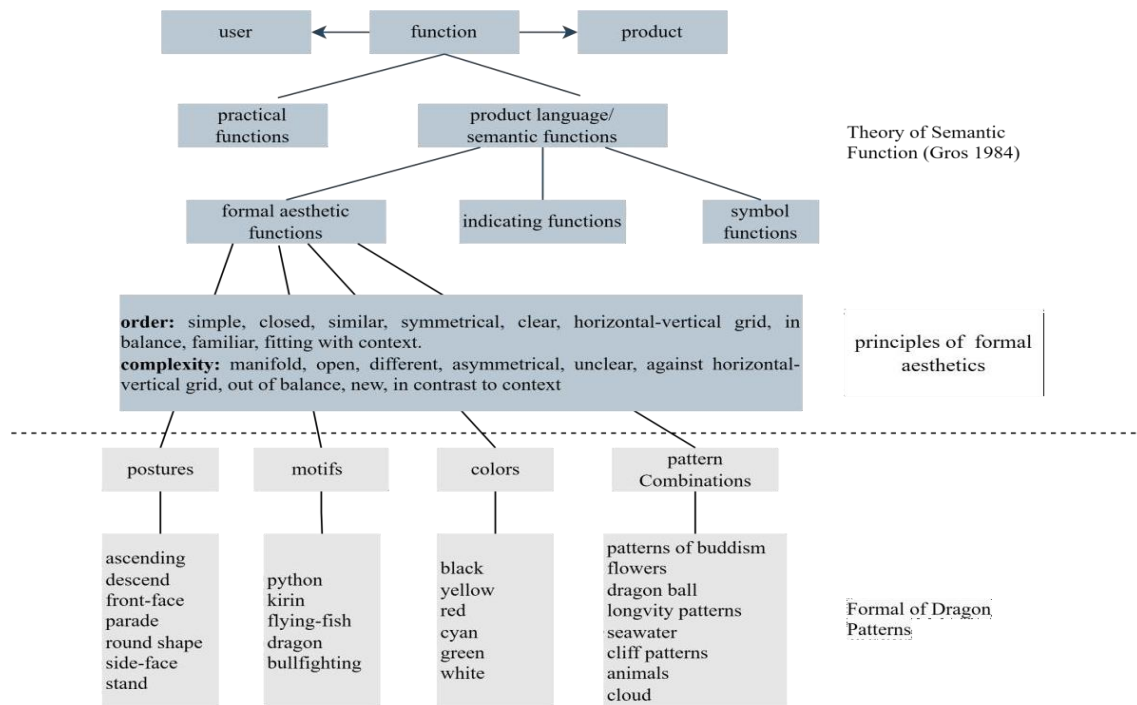


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of Formal Aesthetics of Dragon Patterns

During the Ming Dynasty, dragon patterns in clothing were not only varied and complex but also carried significant cultural and symbolic meanings. These patterns were meticulously classified based on several criteria, such as posture, color, and the combination with other motifs. The different postures of dragons depicted in the patterns include crawling, round-shaped, front-facing, standing, ascending, and descending dragons, each perhaps signifying different attributes or aspirations. Colors such as black, red, yellow, cyan, and green were used. Pattern combinations included floral patterns, dragon pearls, longevity patterns, animal patterns, cloud patterns, mountain patterns, and seawater patterns. Motif patterns encompassed dragon motifs, python motifs, qilin motifs, flying fish motifs, and bullfighting motifs. These patterns derived from variations in dragon patterns can collectively be referred to as dragon motif family patterns (Ming Dynasty (1368–1644), 2023).

In conclusion, the theory of semantic function allows us to understand that dragon patterns on Ming Dynasty clothing served both a formal aesthetic function and a semantic function. They not only conveyed the wearer's high status, power, and prestige but also potentially implied religious beliefs. This study primarily focuses on a detailed and in-depth investigation from the perspective of the formal aesthetic function within the framework of the theory of semantic function.

### The Form of Dragon Patterns in Ming Dynasty Clothing

Dragon patterns held a significant status as exclusive patterns for imperial and noble clothing during the Ming Dynasty. This study gathered data primarily from the Confucius Museum & Shandong Museum, the Palace Museum, along with excavated clothing artifacts, documentary materials, and figure paintings. A comprehensive collection of 118 dragon motif patterns was assembled, representing clothing from different periods of the Ming Dynasty (Liu et al., 2022).






The analysis methods employed in this study encompassed the identification, classification, and interpretation of visual representations of dragon motif patterns. Special attention was given to analysing the constituent elements within these patterns. An analytical framework was developed to facilitate the examination of these dragon motif patterns. Visual composition analysis, focusing on formal aesthetic function, was utilized for classification based on the following criteria: 1. Postures, 2. Colors, 3. Motif patterns, 4. Composition patterns. Throughout the process of collecting and analysing research information, it was imperative to document the findings. To fulfil this requirement, visual analysis templates were constructed. The visual research analysis of these data served as the initial and crucial step in the research process.

#### Postures

The dragon patterns on Ming Dynasty clothing exhibited a variety of postures (Table 1). The front-facing dragon, also known as the 'sitting dragon,' features a head facing forward, a coiled body, and a symmetrical distribution of four limbs. This design was commonly embroidered or woven on the chest, back, and cuffs of garments. In the Ming Dynasty, the standing dragon pattern displayed a frontal posture with the dragon's manes standing upright, divided into two strands flowing upwards. Each strand consisted of hairs arranged in three levels of depth, transitioning from light to dark, which created a layered and harmonious effect (Ding & Li, 2014). This meticulous technique was widely employed in dragon patterns on Ming Dynasty clothing, leaving a profound impression.

Table 1

*Five Postures of the Dragon Pattern*

Ascending	Descending	Standing	Crawling	Round-shape
				

The Ascending dragon was characterized by a vertical body with a raised head, giving the impression of standing upright. It differed from the sitting dragon and round-shaped dragon in terms of posture. As a result, the Ascending dragon motif was often used for decorative borders on clothing, hats, and canopies. The ascending dragon had its head positioned upwards and its tail downwards, opposite to the descending dragon. Conversely,

the descending dragon motif depicted the dragon with its tail upwards and its head downwards, evoking a flipping and leaping motion. These dragon patterns found widespread use in Ming Dynasty weaving and embroidery and are recorded in 'Ming Shi: Li Yue Zhi' (Records of the History of Ming: Rites and Music) (Huang et al., 2023).

The crawling dragon motif featured a sideways body, an elevated head, an upright tail, and downwards-facing dragon feet, representing a running or walking posture. The Descendants dragon motif was exclusively used by the imperial family and typically consisted of intermingled large and small dragon forms. The large dragon occupied the center, surrounded by several coiled small dragons. Ming Dynasty round-shaped dragons are circular dragon patterns usually composed of cloud dragon patterns. The dragon itself coiled and twisted within the circle formed by auspicious clouds, creating a unified composition. The spaces between the cloud dragons were often adorned with elements such as fire pearls, flames, seawater, and cliffs. Additionally, independent coiled patterns formed solely by dragon patterns were commonly found in smaller coiled patterns. Compared to the Ascending dragon, the Round-shaped dragon resembled the body of a python, displaying more dynamic flexibility, with the dragon face appearing either at the front or side. These characteristics have been deduced through research on historical literature (Huang et al., 2023).

### **Colors**

The dragon motif patterns on Ming Dynasty clothing predominantly featured five colors: cyan, red, yellow, white, and black. These colors not only reflected the preferences of the era but also held significant cultural and symbolic meanings. Excavated Ming Dynasty clothing and textiles confirm that these five colors formed the main color palette for dragon patterns. Red, encompassing shades from red to vermilion and bright red, was prominent in clothing fashion and drew inspiration from the Zhou, Han, Tang, and Song Dynasties, particularly influenced by the concept of Fire Virtue. Dragon patterns were exclusively reserved for imperial clothing, serving both ceremonial and hierarchical functions and showcasing a splendid and dignified color palette. The regulations outlined in 'Ming Shi: Yu Fu Zhi' (Records of the History of Ming: Administrative and Clothing Rites) strictly reserved black, yellow, and purple for the imperial family, prohibiting their use by officials and the general populace. This underscores the significant importance of the color red during the Ming Dynasty. Yellow symbolizes an unshakable status in feudal society, representing power and wealth. Bright yellow was exclusively reserved for the royal family, and even officials needed bestowed permission to wear it. Gold, a symbol of wealth, was a customary color for the imperial family, nobles, and wealthy individuals. With advancements in textile technology, the use of gold in clothing became increasingly widespread, expanding from eighteen types during the Northern Song Dynasty to thirty-three types during the Ming Dynasty, showcasing the admiration and favor bestowed upon the color gold in ancient times (Zujie, 2007).

In Ming Dynasty dragon motif clothing, the patterns on the dragon's body and the background of the clouds were typically red. Yellow color was predominantly used for the dragon's claws, horns, eyes, and other intricate details, emphasizing its majestic and royal status. Black color is commonly employed for the scales and eyes of the dragon's body. Blue color is often utilized for specific details on the dragon's body, such as its whiskers and mane, highlighting the intricate and delicate features. White color generally represents the dragon's body and the color of its scales. The production of dragon patterns often involved the use of gold thread, with the main color being golden yellow, while red, black, blue, and other colors served as accents. According to Lee (2002), studies of artifacts from the Dingling Mausoleum



reveal that black dragon patterns were frequently separated by gold thread, creating a more luxurious, dignified, and solemn appearance.






In the festive patterns of Ming Dynasty clothing, red and yellow were the predominant base colors, occupying larger areas of the patterns, while black and blue occupied smaller areas. Black color refers to dark blue–black shades, while blue color includes indigo and dark blue hues. Although black and blue were part of the traditional Chinese concept of the Five Colors, with black representing the virtue of water and blue symbolizing nobility and auspiciousness, they held a secondary position compared to the prominence of red for imperial power and yellow for symbolism, as well as the unique nature of festive clothing (Yuan, 2002).

Throughout the Ming Dynasty, dragon patterns underwent changes in response to the nation's increasing strength and advancements in craftsmanship. In the early period, dragon patterns featured simpler colors and relatively shorter and slender dragon bodies that, from a distance, resembled lizards to some extent. During the middle period, the most significant change was the elongation and robustness of the dragon's body, which became coiled and twisted. Colors became more diverse, with particular emphasis placed on the dragon's facial features. The use of white color, especially for the dragon's claws, horns, and eyes, became particularly prominent. In the later period, dragon patterns became even more elaborate and exaggerated. To accentuate the serpentine nature of the dragon's body, white color was used along the edges. The facial expressions of the dragons became more varied, with some dragons depicted with open mouths, conveying a fierce and menacing appearance. These transformations reflect the Ming Dynasty's technological and artistic advancements as well as shifting cultural values, which can be observed in the detailed craftsmanship of royal garments and artifacts from this period (Tomasic, 2023).

Table 2 shows the five patterns of dragon pattern clothing. The colors of dragon patterns are deeply symbolic, with the concept of "five colors" corresponding to five virtues. These virtues are derived from the attributes advocated in former dynasties, as uncovered through literature research. Li et al (2020) analyzed Five traditional Chinese colors. The "five colors" align with the five elements as follows: Water corresponds to black, fire to red, earth to yellow, wood to green, and gold to white. This intricate connection between colors and elements enhances the symbolic richness of dragon patterns, reflecting a profound cultural understanding and conveying a visual representation of virtues across different historical periods.

Table 2

*Five colors of dragon patterns*

Black	Yellow	Red	Cyan	White
				

### Motifs Patterns

Compared to previous dynasties, the dragon patterns in Ming Dynasty clothing showcased more refined and perfected imagery. Table 3 indicates that these motifs incorporated various features from different animals, combining elements such as the head of a bull, the body of a snake, the antlers of a deer, the eyes of a shrimp, the nose of a lion, the mouth of a donkey, the ears of a cat, the claws of an eagle, and the tail of a fish. These motif patterns found in bestowed garments, such as python, flying fish, bullfighting, and qilin, were all derived from the imagination of dragons (Na, 2008). The clothing system of the Ming Dynasty encompassed official clothing as well as bestowed garments granted as special favors by the emperor. These bestowed garments, which served as a form of recognition and reward, were often given to meritorious officials and military officers. Notable examples include python robes, flying fish robes, bullfighting robes, and qilin robes. These garments shared similar patterns with dragon ceremonial robes and were among the highest-ranking clothing worn by the emperor. In the early Ming Dynasty, the clothing system underwent more than 30 years of evolution and standardization, primarily adopting clothing customs from the Han and Tang-Song dynasties to eliminate the influence of Mongolian clothing from the Yuan Dynasty on Han culture (Zujie, 2007).

Table 3

*Nine Animal Characteristics of the Dragon Motif*

Nine Animal Characteristics of Dragons			
Horns like deers'	Head like camels'	Eyes like ghosts'	
Necks like snakes'	stomachs like clam	scales like carps	
Palms like tigers'	claws like eagles'	ears like cows'	

The system of bestowed garments in the Ming Dynasty initially appeared in the clothing specially bestowed upon eunuchs and high-ranking officials by the emperor. As society gradually stabilized during the mid-Ming Dynasty, the system of bestowed garments further developed into a special honor bestowed by the emperor upon meritorious courtiers. Being granted a bestowed garment by the emperor was considered a great privilege and an important symbol in Ming Dynasty society. One of the most prominent types of bestowed garments was the python robe, which can be traced back to the early years of the Ming Dynasty. By the middle to late Ming Dynasty, the python robe had become a symbol of recognition bestowed upon ministers and generals. According to Na (2008), an increasing number of military and civil officials received bestowed python robes from the emperor,

showcasing their personal achievements and status, as well as the emperor's respect and reward for his subjects.

However, exceptions existed within the hierarchy of bestowed garments. According to the 'Ming Shi: Yu Fu Zhi' (Records of the History of Ming: Administrative and Clothing Rites), a regulation from the 13th year of the Zhengde reign stipulated that all courtiers were bestowed with a red silk robe made of gauze. The regulation also specified that courtiers of different ranks wore robes of different colors: first-rank officials wore bullfighting robes, second-rank officials wore flying fish robes, third-rank officials wore python robes, and fourth- and fifth-rank officials wore qilin robes. Hanlin scholars, however, were not restricted by rank and could wear any of the colors. Officials below the fifth rank were not entitled to this privilege.

The flying fish robe, typically reserved for the royal family, featured a design primarily depicting a dragon head and a fish-like body. However, the fish body was not the typical round and compact shape of a fish but rather a long and cylindrical dragon body. The head had two horns, and the body featured fins, scales, wings, and claws. Unlike the dragon and python robes, the tail of the flying fish robe incorporated water motifs as the background. In comparison to the python robe, the flying fish robe design had a slight distinction, as the flying fish depicted on the garment had a pair of small wings. During the reign of Emperor Wuzong of the Ming Dynasty in the Zhengde period, the flying fish motif was first introduced into clothing decorations and held a prestigious position just below the python robe in terms of prestige (Chen, 2019; Zujie, 2007).

The bullfighting motif, intriguingly linked to celestial constellations, is a symbolically rich design element in traditional cultural representations. According to the "Piya," an ancient text, the Xu Wei star was once depicted as resembling a snake with a body akin to a dragon, indicating a mythical, not realistic, representation. Zhou (1984) elaborates on this interpretation, clarifying that the bullfighting motif, contrary to its name, does not actually represent a bull in a literal sense but is an imaginative depiction. This motif typically features a dragon's head equipped with two downwards-curving bull horns, setting it apart from other similar motifs like those of the python and flying fish. The body of the bullfighting motif is described as long and cylindrical, adorned with scales and ending in a qilin-like tail, denoting its high status, just below that of the flying fish robe in cultural significance.

As an auspicious mythical beast in ancient legends, the worship of Qilin began as early as the Spring and Autumn period. According to legends, the Qilin has the body of a deer, the tail of a bull, the hooves of a wolf, and its entire body is covered in scales. It features a single fleshy horn on its head. The Qilin is known for its benevolence, as it does not trample on grass or consume living creatures. The appearance of a Qilin is considered extremely auspicious.

Compared to the python robe, the quantity of flying-fish robes, bullfighting robes, and qilin robes is much smaller. The flying fish robe, with its dragon-themed motifs, typically features a dragon head in the center and flying fish motifs on the sides, symbolizing the dragon riding on flying fish, soaring through the nine heavens. The bullfighting robe, with its bullfighting theme, prominently displays a bull motif in the center, surrounded by patterns of clouds, lightning, and other elements, representing unparalleled bravery and the challenge of fate. The qilin robe, with its qilin theme, showcases a central qilin motif surrounded by patterns of clouds and flowers, symbolizing good luck, prosperity, and favorable weather.


























The main distinctions among the patterns of these bestowed garments lie in the presence of fish tail in the flying-fish motif, bull horns in the bullfighting motif, and bull hooves in the qilin motif. Table 4 shows differences between Dragon Family Motifs. The system of



bestowed garments in the Ming Dynasty served as a special ceremonial system that not only reflected the authority and dignity of imperial power but, more importantly, represented the emperor's appreciation and honour towards meritorious subjects. It played an irreplaceable role in maintaining the stability and unity of the court (Chen, 2019; Zujie, 2007).

Table 4

*Differences between Dragon Family Motifs*

Motif forms	Patterns	Scales	Claws	Tail	Horn
Dragon		Fish scale 	Five claws 	Dragon tail 	Deer horn 
Bullfighting		Fish scale 	Four claws 	Dragon tail 	Bull horn 
Flying fish		No scale 	Four claws 	Fish-tail shape 	Deer horn 
Kirin		Fish scale 	Hoof 	Lion-tail shape 	Deer horn 
Python		fish scale 	Vfour claws 	dragon tail 	Deer horn 

**Pattern Combinations**

Decorations such as round patches, square patches, and a persimmon-calyx shaped collar. These decorations primarily consist of dragon patterns, complemented by additional embellishments (Figure 1). Typically, the upper and surrounding areas of the dragon robe are adorned with cloud motifs, while the lower part is decorated with sea waves and river cliffs. Some dragon robes are further enhanced with floral patterns, the Chinese character for

"longevity" (寿, shou), and other decorative elements. The persimmon-calyx shape, resembling the calyx of a persimmon fruit with four lobes, is positioned on the front chest, back, and shoulders of the garment (Chen, 2019; Ding & Li, 2014). Within the persimmon-calyx shape, over-the-shoulder dragon motifs can be found, while dragon motifs on straight sleeves adorn the shoulders. The persimmon-calyx shape pattern is embellished with dragons playing with pearls, with sea waves and river cliffs at the bottom and cloud motifs at the top. Floral patterns, birds, and the Eight Treasures also adorn the area surrounding the dragon.

The position of the dragon patterns on the dragon robe results in different forms and designs of the dragons. As Figure 2 illustrates, the lower part of the dragon's body is often adorned with sea waves and river cliffs, depicting rolling waves or flowing ripples. The river cliffs are depicted as towering mountain shapes. Delicate cloud motifs are intricately arranged around the dragon's body, with the shape and quantity of the cloud motifs determined by the spaces in between, creating an elegant and ethereal effect. Silk weavers draw inspiration from the changing patterns of clouds in nature, distilling and generalizing them to create various exquisite patterns such as interconnected clouds, hooks of different sizes, flowing clouds, resting clouds, cloud clusters, and mushroom clouds. These cloud motifs exude majestic and grand styles or fresh and delicate charms. They curl and flow around the dragon motifs, adding a mysterious touch and igniting boundless imagination (Kuhn, 1995).

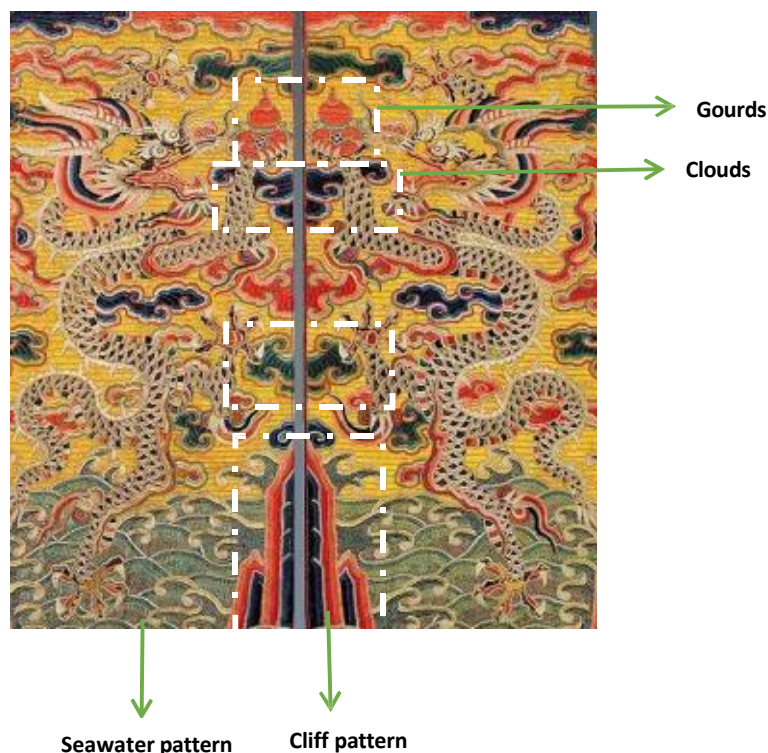


Figure 2: Dragon Combination Pattern includes the Dragons and Many Auxiliary Patterns
















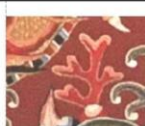


Excavated textiles from the tombs of Ming emperors reveal various other decorative patterns, including the Chinese character for "longevity" (寿), the Eight Treasures, floral and bird motifs, and plant and animal motifs. These motifs are harmoniously coordinated with the dragons playing with pearls, symbolizing auspiciousness. For example, on the front chest and back of the persimmon-shaped garment, dragons playing with pearls are embroidered, with each shoulder featuring a side-facing dragon playing with pearls. At the top of the dragon's head, an embroidered peony flower with the character of "longevity" (寿) in the center can

be found (Chen, 2019; Zujie, 2007). In addition to cloud motifs and the Eight Treasures, there are embroidered motifs of narcissus flowers with square halberds and twin fish, symbolizing abundance of blessings and joy (Williams, 2012). Furthermore, at the top of the dragon's head, an embroidered peony flower with the character of "longevity" (寿), two characters "yi" (己), and two bats can be seen. Bat motifs are widely used in traditional Chinese patterns (Asif, & Ali, 2019).

Table 5 presents the auxiliary motifs collected for the dragon patterns. Dragon motifs are often combined with plant patterns, with common plant motifs including Ganoderma, lotus flowers, gourds, and pomegranates. Ganoderma, growing in deep mountains and forests, possess strong medicinal value and are regarded as mystical objects. Lotus flowers have a long history of cultivation in China and are used to adorn lakes and mountains, exuding exquisite beauty. The noble and elegant nature of the lotus flower is greatly admired. After Buddhism was introduced to China, the lotus flower became a symbol of Buddhism and represented the "Pure Land," carrying a sacred meaning (Tay, 2005). Gourds, as a traditional motif, are associated not only with ornamental and practical value but also with their unique growth habits. With their vines spreading and abundant fruits and seeds, they symbolize the desire and prayer for many descendants and future generations. Pomegranates also carry a similar symbolism, representing prosperity and fertility (Williams, 2012). The meanings behind these patterns reflect traditional Chinese culture.

Table 5

*Auxiliary Patterns of Dragon Patterns*

Auxiliary Patterns	Dragon ball	Cloud	Cliff pattern	Longevity pattern	Moon	Seawater pattern
						
Auxiliary Patterns	Bat	Bird	Crane	Deer	Phoenix	Rabbit
						
Auxiliary Patterns	Peach	Ganoderma	Flowers	Coral	Buddism patterns	Taoist patterns
						

There is another special type of auxiliary pattern that complements the dragon motif, known as the festive pattern for seasonal clothing. The festive patterns for seasonal clothing in the Ming Dynasty, also referred to as festive motifs, were created to add color to court life. These garments and patterns changed with the seasons and festivals, forming an integral part of traditional Chinese festival customs. Festive patterns encompass a variety of themes, often derived from traditional festivals, corresponding to the seasonal sequence, and were one of the distinguishing characteristics of Ming Dynasty seasonal festival activities (Yuan, 2002).

Both the imperial nobility and the common people in the Ming Dynasty attached great importance to the transition of seasonal customs. There was a custom in the court to change



clothing and patterns according to the seasons. Similarly, the common people enthusiastically dressed in festive clothing and new clothes during festivals. Liu Ruoyu, a eunuch of the Ming Dynasty, described in detail the festive life in the palace, including a comprehensive introduction to the festive patterns for seasonal clothing in his book "Zhaozhong Zhi." According to "Zhaozhong Zhi," starting from the day after the Kitchen God Festival in the twelfth lunar month, courtiers and palace ladies wear gourd patterns and dragon pattern clothing. During the Lantern Festival, both courtiers and palace ladies wore lantern-shaped patterns and dragon pattern clothing. From the first to the thirteenth day of the fifth month, courtiers and palace ladies wore Five poisonous insects and tiger patterns and dragon pattern clothing. On the Qixi Festival, palace ladies wore magpie bridge-shaped patterns, and during the Double Ninth Festival in the ninth month, they wore chrysanthemum-shaped patterns and dragon robes. During the Winter Solstice, both courtiers and palace ladies wore dragon robes. Each seasonal festival corresponded to one or two festive patterns, which were randomly paired with other auspicious patterns, contributing to the grandeur and opulence of the court (Zujie, 2007; Yuan, 2002).

### **Formal Aesthetic Analysis**

The dragon patterns found in Ming Dynasty garments demonstrate a fusion of formalization and creativity in their designs. The design of dragon patterns can be characterized as structured, planned, or spontaneous pattern compositions. It is considered an art form that encompasses cognitive, spiritual, and emotional dimensions, drawing from the 11 aesthetic principles put forth by (Hekkert, 2006).

In contrast to contemporary animal pattern designs in fabrics, the composition of dragon patterns in Ming Dynasty clothing resembles that of individual paintings. The pattern designs often incorporate diagonal structures or dynamic S-shaped structures, evoking a sense of vitality from the natural world. The utilization of realistic and abstract techniques in depicting animal elements achieves a sense of naturalism while also incorporating the designer's creativity. Dragon patterns portrayed in ascending or descending postures often exude dynamic energy, with the claws exerting force and the dragon's head raised high, as if soaring through the clouds. Standing dragons have their lower limbs supporting the body, exhibiting a proud and majestic posture as they stride forward. These dragon patterns are often intricate, imbued with a sense of imbalance and open design from aesthetic principles (Williams, 2012).

Dragon patterns are frequently paired with cloud patterns, suggesting their status as divine creatures rather than mere beings. Below the dragon motifs, depictions of water waves and mountain cliffs are common. Additionally, various plants and flowers, such as peonies and lotuses, are frequently incorporated to symbolize auspicious meanings. Animals are also often paired with dragon motifs, including tigers, toads, and bears. Through the design and combination of these patterns, the harmony between humans and nature is portrayed, striving to achieve the philosophical concept of the "unity of heaven and humanity." This principle aligns with the 'fitting with context' aesthetic rule, emphasizing the integration of art within its broader philosophical and cultural milieu (William, 2012).

The dragon motifs found in Ming Dynasty garments encompass a diverse range of forms, allowing for the classification of dragon postures into several distinct types: crawling dragons, round-shaped dragons, front-facing dragons, standing dragons, ascending dragons, and descending dragons. These dragon patterns serve as symbols in court etiquette. Crawling dragons, ascending dragons, and descending dragons are designed to convey a sense of movement, featuring open and imbalanced aesthetic characteristics. Conversely, round-shaped dragons and front-facing dragons often possess closed designs, emphasizing thematic patterns and highlighting balance (Figure 3) (Chen, 2019).

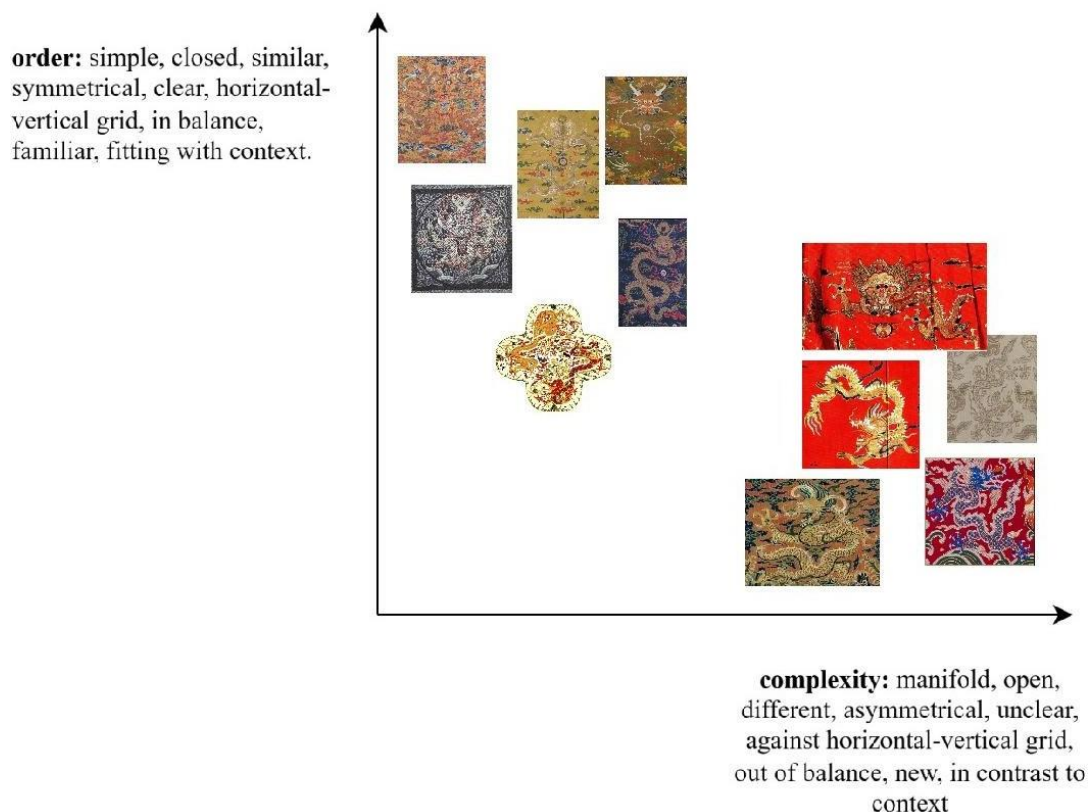


Figure 3: Use Aesthetic Principles to Analyse the Aesthetics of Dragon Patterns

The usage rules of these dragon patterns reflect court etiquette, rooted in traditional Confucian ideology and a hierarchical system. The monarch holds the highest rank, and the clothing of officials should not surpass that of the monarch. There are also specific regulations governing the patterns. Turner (1967) said that rituals form a complete system for expressing meanings through symbolic representations. Etiquette is an essential symbol through which people convey emotions, worldviews, and values, serving as a representation or symbolic model of society. Therefore, etiquette best represents the spiritual consciousness of a nation (Zheng, 2023). In the political sphere, Confucian ideology emphasizing moral conduct and rituals became a crucial ideological foundation in Ming Dynasty politics. The Ming Dynasty's social hierarchy was also influenced by Confucian ideology, which emphasized moral principles and obligations in relationships such as ruler-subject, father-son, and elder-younger. These concepts were widely applied in the Ming Dynasty's bureaucratic system, family system, and local social system (Salat, 2013; Huang, 1981).

The formal design of dragon patterns in Ming Dynasty clothing embodies the refined aesthetic sensibilities of the court, adheres to orthodox official aesthetics, and demonstrates



a strong sense of formalization. It emphasizes the solemnity and grandeur associated with dragon patterns. The patterns are characterized by their intricate layers, distinctive themes, and exquisite craftsmanship (Withrow, 1990). However, alongside these formal elements, there is also an incorporation of folk patterns in the pattern combinations, adding diversity to the composition of dragon patterns and showcasing their vibrant and approachable aspects. In this way, dragon patterns encapsulate and reflect traditional aesthetics (Wu et al., 2023).

## **Conclusion**

This study has revealed the creative description and expression of dragon patterns found on Ming Dynasty garments while also conducting an analysis of their formal aesthetics. It is noteworthy that although dragon patterns have a rich historical background, it was during the Ming Dynasty that they attained a distinguished status and became exclusive motifs associated with royalty. These patterns serve as a testament to the remarkable craftsmanship of artisans and reflect the social standing of those who wore them. With their intricate designs and meticulous craftsmanship, dragon patterns emerge as representative symbols of Ming Dynasty court aesthetics, encapsulating the traditional aesthetic values of ancient China. From the Ming Dynasty to the present day, dragon patterns continue to garner attention and evolve, illustrating the enduring legacy of the Ming Dynasty and the profound influence of Chinese culture as a whole.

## **Significance of The Study**

In terms of theoretically, this study could contribute to the academic enrichment of traditional Chinese art and clothing, focusing on the Ming Dynasty, a period noted for its cultural flourishing. By analyzing the aesthetics of dragon patterns, this research may provide a nuanced understanding of symbolic meanings and artistic practices of that time, enhancing the body of knowledge on Chinese cultural heritage. It can also augment existing theories on symbolism in art and its societal roles, providing a comprehensive reference for future studies in these fields. In addition, through detailed examination of dragon motifs, this study can advance methodologies in iconographic analysis within the context of historical textiles. It will offer new perspectives on interpreting visual symbolism across different cultures and epochs.

While in terms of practical significances, firstly, by elucidating the intricate details and cultural significance of dragon patterns, this research aids in the preservation of Ming Dynasty art forms and serves as an educational resource for institutes and organizations dedicated to the conservation of cultural heritage, helping to inform restoration projects and curatorial practices. At the same time, this research can be integrated into educational curricula at various levels, from high school to university, enriching students' understanding of art history and cultural studies. It provides teachers with substantive content on the significance of motifs and aesthetics in historical contexts, enhancing the pedagogical approaches to teaching cultural history.

On the other hand, designers and artists can draw inspiration from the historical aesthetic principles uncovered in this study, potentially leading to innovative designs in modern fashion and textile production. This fusion of traditional motifs with contemporary styles can enrich the diversity and appeal of modern apparel. Following that, the findings from this study can be utilized by the government and tourism agencies to promote cultural tourism, highlighting the rich textile heritage of the Ming Dynasty. Exhibitions and cultural festivals featuring Ming Dynasty clothing can attract tourism, fostering a deeper appreciation for Chinese history and art. Lastly, policymakers can use the insights gained from this study

to develop strategies that support the arts and cultural sectors. By recognizing the historical and aesthetic value of Ming Dynasty textiles, policies aimed at funding cultural preservation initiatives or enhancing arts education can be more effectively formulated.

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## **GLOSSARY**

### **Books:**

Records of the Ming Dynasty: Rites and Music (明史·礼乐志)  
Yufu Records (舆服志)  
Zhuo Zhong Zhi (酌中志)  
Piya (埤雅)

### **Dragon-related Terms:**

Dragon (龙袍)  
Flying Fish (飞鱼袍)  
Python (蟒袍)  
Bullfighting (斗牛)  
Qilin (麒麟)  
Ascending Dragons (升龙)  
Crawling Dragons (行龙)  
Descending Dragons (降龙)  
Front-facing Dragons (正龙)  
Round-shape Dragons (团龙)  
Standing Dragons (立龙)

**Festivals and Events:**

Lantern Festival (元宵节)

Qixi Festival (七夕)

Queqiao (鹊桥)

Double Ninth Festival (重阳节)

Winter Solstice (冬至)

**Concepts and Ideologies:**

"Unity of heaven and humanity." (天人合一)

Confucian ideology (儒家思想)

Ritual (礼)

**Historical Dynasties and Emperors:**

Zhou, Han, Tang, and Song Dynasties (周朝, 汉朝, 唐朝, 宋朝)

Emperor Zhengde (正德帝)

Emperor Wuzong (武宗帝)

Hanlin scholars (翰林学士)

**Patterns and designs:**

Five poisonous insects and tiger patterns (五毒艾虎纹)

Xuwei (虚圩-星座)

Persimmon-calyx shaped (柿蒂形)

Magpie bridge-shaped patterns (鹊桥纹)

Longevity pattern (寿纹)

"yi" pattern (己纹)