

Between the Material Object and Its Representation: Chinese Garments on Non-Chinese Bodies at the Sino-African Exhibition of 1911–1912 in Finland

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Summary: This article explores the effects of cultural cross-dressing on the balance between the material object and its representation in the context of exhibitions. It builds on Timothy Mitchell's ideas of the exhibitionary order to demonstrate how early twentieth century Western exhibition practices were not uniform and stable but liable to experimentation in order to produce increasingly effective displays. The article focuses on the Sino-African missionary exhibition arranged in Finland in 1911–1912 in which static mannequins and dress racks were replaced by living displays. Thus, exhibition visitors encountered the main organizer and his assistants dressed in traditional brightly-colored Chinese costumes. In addition to revealing a variety of motives and purposes behind this unorthodox handling and presentation of clothes, the article draws attention to the intertwinement of bodies and dresses originating from different cultures and to the meanings they bring to each other and to the exhibition as a whole. Cultural cross-dressing served to create a lively, multisensory and spectacular show, and it was an effective tool, in the context of the Sino-African missionary exhibition, for making Chinese material culture intelligible and meaningful to its audience. This particular mode of representation both blurred and heightened the spectator's experience of cultural difference between East and West.

Keywords: China, clothing, Finland, exhibition history, cultural interaction, embodied experience

Between March 1911 and April 1912 a touring 'Sino-African' exhibition travelled over three thousand kilometers around Finland and visited fifteen towns. This first organized attempt to display non-Western objects to a wide audience of Finnish townspeople proved successful:

the exhibition reached a total audience of over thirty thousand people in a sparsely populated country and was frequently discussed in local newspapers.¹ Its success was largely due to the fact that the exhibition provided the general public with attractions previously unseen in Finland, which at the time was an autonomous grand duchy within the Russian Empire. The Finnish museum sector was still in its infancy and the public had very limited opportunities to see the sporadic non-Western collections that were to be found in the country. Most of these artefacts belonged to the National Museum of Finland, which, remained closed to the public until 1916, due to a prolonged construction project. The Museum of Applied Arts, established in 1873, also acquired examples of non-Western artefacts, but as this institution often changed locations in Helsinki, the public remained largely unaware of its existence.²

The Sino-African exhibition was initiated by workers of the Missionary Society of Finland (currently known as The Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Mission³), who had brought back artefacts from two locations where the society was active: Hunan Province in south-central China and Ovamboland in south-west Africa. No mission museum existed at the time to preserve and display the collected items. However, a temporary exhibition was set up in Helsinki on the initiative of mission workers and it proved lucrative. This success led to the idea of touring the artefacts around Finland. An overall objective of the exhibition was to present the cultures, living conditions and the results of the work in the society's target areas in order to raise funds and to find new supporters for the mission's cause. This was in keeping with the goals of missionary exhibitions arranged in Britain and North America, which were the main regions of influence for the Finnish missionary movement.⁴

The exhibition was held in local schools and prayer houses. In these venues China and Ovamboland were displayed side-by-side, as if they were neighbors. Yet, the selection and display of objects alluded to very different aspects of each culture. China was represented as a glorious and ancient, yet also stagnant, civilization, which, however, incorporated irrational elements, especially in regard to faith. Ovamboland, in turn, represented the early moments

of culture and humanity's close connection to nature. Although the exhibition was small by international standards, the Chinese section, which comprised the majority of the exhibition, consisted of hundreds of everyday objects and religious artefacts, textiles, watercolor paintings and calligraphy panels. In the midst of these assorted artefacts was another attraction: missionary Erland Sihvonen, the main organizer and presenter of the exhibition, could be seen dressed in a traditional brightly-colored Chinese costume. The exhibition assistants, who were typically young female members of local missionary associations, also wore Chinese garments (see figure 1).

This was viewed as an extraordinary scene by the Finnish audience.⁵ Moreover, it was also unusual from the perspective of Western museum traditions. Cultural cross-dressing, a practice of clothing oneself in garments originating from or associated with other cultures, is usually not associated with museums and exhibitions. It has, for instance, been examined as part of the history of masquerades, the culture of fancy-dress and theatre costumes.⁶ It is connected to the need of certain historical and present-day travelers to conceal their true identity in order to be able to undertake a journey, or to act in a manner that is respectful of local customs. Visual images of these travelers have been examined as a specific subspecies within the genre of portraiture.⁷ Studies on cultural appropriation have discussed cross-dressing as a necessary or chosen practice among individuals living in a foreign country.⁸ It has been examined in the context of globalization and the adaptation of Western clothing.⁹ Furthermore, it is connected to the history of fashion and the long tradition among designers of drawing inspiration from other cultures.¹⁰

As a whole, the phenomenon is fundamentally intertwined with self-identification as regards culture and ethnicity. Yet, as Tara Mayer observes, cultural cross-dressing manifests itself in diverse ways and can be interpreted, for instance, as a form of exotic self-promotion, a means of controlling colonial subjects, or as proof that someone has 'gone-native'.¹¹ The physical distance between the cultures involved varies. Hence, the garments worn can

originate from the other side of the world, or from a nearby ethnic group. Similarly, the degree of familiarity between the cultures varies considerably. Thus, cross-dressers can be informed in a multitude of ways about the garments. As hinted above, the motivations and purpose of cultural cross-dressing are manifold, and, consequently, the act of dressing evokes a variety of sensations in both wearers of costumes and those who witness it.

As the preservation of objects is fundamental to Western museum institutions, cultural cross-dressing is rarely encountered in museums and exhibitions. In historical terms, items of clothing associated with other cultures have formed an essential part of Western exhibitions. Yet, they were typically displayed by using exhibition technology designed for the purpose, such as glass vitrines, dress mannequins and racks. Non-Western clothing could also be seen in ethnographic exhibitions where people transported from colonies wore garments and adornments associated with their culture.¹² These two practices were predominant, whereas very little evidence exists vis-à-vis the exhibition organizers using their own bodies to display non-Western exhibits.¹³ Contemporaneously, there was increasing interest in the making and wearing of folk costumes, that is, more or less faithful replicas or imagined constructions of costumes associated with particular ethnic groups. With the establishment of folk and open-air museums in the Nordic countries in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, national costumes were often to be seen worn by museum employees. Together with other new ethnographic display techniques, such as human-size wax mannequins, this was part of a more general attempt to produce increasingly lifelike exhibition scenes and experiences.¹⁴

Yet, the actual wearing of museum artefacts remained an anomaly. The scene witnessed at the Sino-African exhibition directs our attention to the complex intertwinement of the 'real' and the represented in modern exhibitions. In his influential writings, the historian Timothy Mitchell has argued that a widespread machinery of representation, or an exhibitionary order as he calls it, evolved in nineteenth-century Europe in order to organize and present the world in a compact, yet, intriguing manner. This system was closely connected to exhibitions

and their methods of display, but, according to Mitchell, it more broadly affected the organization of perception in Western society.

He considers two elements as having been fundamental for this new order. First, representations aimed at verisimilitude, so that the display would stand in perfect correspondence to the external world. Second, and simultaneously, displays remained separate and distinguishable from the reality they claimed to represent.¹⁵ This combination of the real and the represented enabled a controlled environment to prevail without losing the strong sensation of personal encounter with outside reality. In a similar vein, in his study on Carl Hagenbeck, the leading German ethnographic and zoological showman of the nineteenth century, Eric Ames discusses the amalgam of an absent, imaginary world and objects, animals or individuals that were physically present in exhibitions. He describes how objects and bodies were choreographed in the physical co-presence of spectators in order to produce multi-sensory, immersive spaces.¹⁶ Building on this previous scholarship, the present article explores the effects of cultural cross-dressing on the balance between the real and the represented in the context of exhibitions.

Mitchell connects the modern exhibition system to the age of empire.¹⁷ At the time of the Sino-African exhibition, Finland was under Russian rule and Finns were only indirectly involved in overseas colonial activities. Even if Finland cannot be described as one of the major actors in colonialism, Finnish people did not remain detached from the general imperial atmosphere of the time. They were balanced between domestic, that is Russian, and Western influences. The Sino-African exhibition was not closely connected to the mainstream of European exhibitions, museum institutions or international world fairs. Yet, as Marta Filipová writes, exhibitions and exhibitionary practices were not limited to the wealthiest and largest cities and nations, but also spread to their margins. Although often less well-known and more modest in scale by international standards, regional exhibitions were significant in bringing about local conceptualizations of world. Many of these exhibitions

sought to follow and copy international examples in order to establish a recognizable exhibition culture.¹⁸ It is important to add, however, that many regional exhibitions were also innovative in producing exhibitionary practices and solutions fit for existing circumstances.

This flexibility in order to adjust norms, or deviate from them, is at the core of what is being examined in this article. It analyzes the motives and purposes behind the exceptional method of displaying Chinese clothes in Finland. More generally, it draws attention to what Joanne Entwistle has referred to as situated bodily practice, that is, the complex and dynamic relationship between the body, dress and culture.¹⁹ In doing so, it enhances our understanding of the meanings that bodies and dresses that originated from different cultures brought to each other and to the exhibition medium. The present article contributes to both costume and exhibition studies and calls attention to the significance of their intersections. It demonstrates how early twentieth century Western exhibition practices were not uniform and stable, but were still in a state of flux and liable to experimentation. It shows how non-Western garments could be harnessed to serve exhibition medium, when opportunities arose, as part of more general attempts to produce increasingly lifelike, captivating and effective displays. The article proceeds by first examining the content of the Chinese dress collection and the creative ways in which items were used. Second, it seeks reasons for the unusual practice, and, third, it offers an analysis of its effects in the exhibition setting.

A number of items displayed during the 1911–1912 touring exhibition still exist in Finnish museum collections.²⁰ As concrete as they are, pieces of clothing rarely reveal much about their previous history and use as a part of exhibitions. More informative in this regard are individual portraits of Sihvonen and group portraits he commissioned, which were taken by local photographers and included a changing exhibition team in Chinese dress. Group portraits exist from eight out of the fifteen exhibition venues.²¹ Similarly important are the frequent letters Sihvonen wrote to the head of the Missionary Society, as well as to his

fiancée. Moreover, contemporary newspaper articles and exhibition reports are valuable in shedding light on the exhibition as it was experienced by those who attended.

Dressing Up in Chinese Clothing

Sihvonen, who was born in 1873 and was trained to be a missionary by the society, arrived back in Finland in the summer of 1910 after spending eight years in China. The collection he brought with him outnumbered all previous Asian collections in Finland, most of which had never been publicly displayed.²² The Sino-African exhibition was primarily organized in order to display this particular collection, whereas the African section was based on much more sporadic and scanty material. Sihvonen owned everything that was on display in the Chinese section. He is not known to have catalogued his collection but newspaper articles and visual material help us to ascertain that costumes and other textiles formed a significant part of it.

The costumes represented formal, upper-class Han Chinese clothing worn in the time of the late Qing dynasty (1644–1912).²³ The sartorial regulations at the time were rigid and left very little room for personal choice. Male bearers of rank in the Chinese bureaucracy wore garments that were especially strictly defined in terms of hierarchy. Yet, similar dress codes also affected the lives of upper-class women. Valerie Steele and John S. Major have characterized appropriate clothing as an instrument of order that structured Chinese society on numerous levels: it served to distinguish the civilized from the barbarous, the male from the female, the high from the base and the proper from the improper.²⁴

Although certain costumes were closely linked with particular state positions and social rank, they also functioned as commodities that could occasionally be obtained by non-Chinese individuals. As Verity Wilson has shown, Westerners in China had opportunities to purchase official dragon robes. Most garments obtained were unused, and were adequately crafted items that were not of the highest quality.²⁵ Once Westerners had acquired local clothes, it was easy for them to transport the items to their respective home countries. Existing material

does not tell us exactly why Sihvonen wanted to bring such a large amount of clothes to Finland. It remains unknown whether he had planned, for example, to present amount of clothing to relatives or friends in Finland.²⁶ No other examples of Chinese clothing were to be found in the country and the idea of possessing, not to mention wearing them, must have been viewed as highly unusual. Yet, the touring exhibition made it possible for many to do so vicariously.

On the basis of photographs, at least fifty individuals around Finland, mostly young women who belonged to local missionary associations, volunteered to join Sihvonen in donning Chinese clothes as the exhibition arrived in their respective towns. Yet, as photographs survive from only eight of the fifteen towns that were visited, the total number may have been twice as many. Female assistants were relatively easy to find as mission associations often had active groups for women, such as Bible or sewing circles. Most of the group portraits also include persons dressed in their own Western clothes. This was not associated with a lack of Chinese attire, but had to do with the role of these individuals as organizers of the African section of the exhibition (see figures 2 and 6). Hence, examples of African clothing that were present in the exhibition, such as leather aprons, were kept strictly apart from the bodies of organizers. Instead, they were arranged on walls and tables in the African section. In group portraits, the organizers of the African section were shown as part of the team. However, they were always placed in the back row, thereby not detracting from the presentation of Chinese garments.

It is clear from the visual and written material that there were especially many female clothes in the collection. The collection included, for example, at least ten different richly embroidered wide-sleeved jackets, eight pleated full skirts, three cloud-patterned scarfs or collars and five pieces of headgear. As for male garments, the single most important costume was the complete attire worn by a mandarin, a civil servant of the imperial China. A

number of less formal pieces of male clothing, such as simple robes, cloaks and sleeveless vests, can also be discerned in the photographs.

As Joanne Entwistle reminds us, the act of dressing always requires knowledge. One needs an understanding about colors, textures, the function of separate pieces of clothing, and, most importantly, how to weave them together.²⁷ Having spent years in China, Sihvonen was well aware of the prevailing strict dress etiquette, at least as far as male dress was concerned. Yet, the visual material seems to indicate that while in Finland he did not require his assistants to use the costumes in any systematic manner. Identifiable items, such as skirts, jackets and collars, can be seen in different combinations. This suggests that Sihvonen gave his assistants a great deal of freedom in terms of picking and choosing various pieces from the collection. Consequently, individuals around Finland could be seen in varying dress combinations.

Yet, photographs also indicate that Sihvonen distinguished female garments from those intended for men and gave instructions not to mix these categories. Male and female clothing cannot be seen in combination or being worn by a person of the opposite sex. Similarly, long necklaces can only be seen being worn by men as a customary element of mandarin attire, regardless of being strongly associated with femininity in the West. Since jackets, cloaks and many other pieces of clothing did not necessarily seem to be especially gender-specific for unaccustomed assistants, it is likely that Sihvonen instructed them in this particular matter.

There were some practical restrictions related to the choice of garments. A Chinese wedding dress, for instance, was occasionally mentioned in newspapers,²⁸ but does not appear in any of the surviving photographs. This was probably because it was regarded as being too precious or intimate. It was also the only example of its kind, whereas other skirts and dresses were more numerous. Another group of clothing that was referred to in writing,²⁹ but was not depicted being worn, was children's attire. Tiny lotus shoes that had been made for

the bound feet of Chinese women were also far too small for the Finnish assistants. Visual material shows that these items were arranged on tables alongside various other artefacts. Pieces of clothing that had previously been shown on living mannequins also had to be displayed in this manner in towns in which it proved hard to find assistants.³⁰ Thus, the availability of assistants at a given moment had a direct effect on the manner of displaying clothes.

The playful mixing of Chinese clothing and accessories was especially noticeable with regard to female clothing. However, liberties were also taken with the highly regulated costumes of mandarins. In a portrait of Sihvonen, we can see him solemnly standing whilst clothed in a dragon robe (figure 3). This attire was traditionally worn by the emperor and state officials. Unlike Sihvonen, Chinese wearers of these clothes would have worn a dark garment adorned with badges of rank over the colorful robe. It was an essential part of the whole attire and was meant to conceal all but the hem of the robe.³¹

Wilson has suggested that Westerners recognized dragon robes as garments, which also helped in terms of imagining how they should be worn.³² Even if pieces of Chinese clothing had not previously been seen, as was the case in Finland, their function could usually be ascertained by their shape and appearance. Yet, even when the garments were put on in the correct manner, there was no guarantee that the result was conventional. The loose-fitting cut of robes and other garments made them wearable for practically anyone. However, the result was noticeably different depending on the bodily proportions of each individual.

There were also some other self-evident obstacles, such as fair hair and unbound feet, which made it impossible for the female assistants to correctly represent Chinese women. According to Antonia Finnane, women's clothing worn with natural, unbound feet looked strange to contemporary Chinese eyes.³³ The Finnish assistants had no means to avoid this and, predictably, European-style leather shoes can be detected under many of the

sumptuous skirts. The female assistants also wore European hairstyles. Yet, when Sihvonen dressed in a mandarin costume, he attached a long and loose queue to his hair, which was an essential part of the attire (see figure 6).

The changing combinations of Chinese outfits and the ways in which they were blended with non-Chinese elements created a potpourri that was recreated time and again with a slightly different emphasis on each occasion. By resorting to human mannequins, Sihvonen could compensate for the lack of exhibition technology and was able to present his dress collection in a manner that emphasized its real and physical character. At the same time, however, the inevitable local elements underlined the representational nature of the exhibition.

Curiosity and Splendor: Motives for Cross-Dressing

Sihvonen left China in 1910, just before the outbreak of the military uprising inspired by the revolutionary ideas of Sun Yat-sen. During the months that he travelled around Finland presenting his exhibition, the revolution in China put an end to four thousand years of dynastic rule and a republic was declared in March 1912. The revolution led to many drastic changes in Chinese society and also had a lasting effect on everyday sartorial practices. Men all over the country cut off their queues, which they had traditionally been required to wear as a symbol of their allegiance to the emperor. As the system of civil service ceased to exist, mandarin attire and other officially regulated pieces of clothing were no longer worn, but were packed away. Huge amounts of textiles were sold and shipped to Europe.³⁴

The increase of Chinese costumes could soon be experienced in European metropolises, such as London and Paris, where abandoned garments became widely available for purchase. However, the flow of textiles did not reach more remote regions in Europe, including Finland. Ordinary Finns did not have the opportunity to see or buy Chinese textiles and they also remained unaware of the sentiments attached to them elsewhere. Sarah Cheang has described how in Britain, for instance, the selling of mandarin robes became

framed within a general nostalgia for the mysterious eastern empire.³⁵ Yet, the fact that the costumes had once been worn by someone in China raised doubts and emotions in Britain. Exported old textiles were referred to as soiled, nasty and greasy because of their age and their previous close contact with Chinese people and their bodies.³⁶ In fact, Cheang estimates that most of the Chinese embroidered garments sold in Britain in the early nineteenth century were actually cut up and utilized for household decorations, such as cushions, curtains, wall hangings and antimacassars.³⁷

The Missionary Society of Finland was strongly connected to the contemporary British missionary movement which viewed exhibitions as an important medium to reach new audiences. However, the Sino-African exhibition was not directly influenced by any particular missionary exhibition either in Britain or elsewhere in Europe. It was also unconnected to the few museums that existed in Finland. Consequently, it did not benefit from the contacts enjoyed by these institutions with museums in Scandinavia, Russia and Central Europe. Indeed, the Sino-African exhibition can be characterized as a product of the personal activity and independent experiment of its principal organizer. This, together with the cultural context in which all things Chinese were previously unfamiliar and did not arouse particularly negative associations, helps in understanding the resulting outcome.

There were several reasons for Sihvonen and his assistants wearing Chinese clothing, the most important being linked to Sihvonen himself: during the years he spent in China, he frequently wore Chinese clothes. In fact, the male clothes in his possession were acquired primarily for his own use. The practice of wearing local attire instead of European clothing conflicted with the general norm of Western protestant mission workers. Outside China, they were expected to dress in an exemplary Western manner so that local people would learn what was considered to be appropriate clothing. This was deemed important because converts to Christianity were usually required to adopt Western clothing.³⁸ Appropriate clothing was also regarded as being significant for mission workers themselves, as it served

as a reminder of their own identity. Opposite behavior would have been considered as proof that they had 'crossed-over'.³⁹

Thus, China proved to be an exceptional mission field as far as clothing was concerned. Although missionaries, diplomats, traders and other foreigners were allowed to enter China, they often encountered strong suspicion or hostility on the part of local people. Mission workers soon realized that the easiest and safest way to approach authorities and ordinary people was to dress in a manner that was regarded as appropriate in China. The practice of wearing local dress was first adopted in the 1870s by workers of the China Inland Mission, one of the leading protestant missionary organizations in China.⁴⁰ Other organizations, including the Finnish Missionary Society, soon followed suit. Together with his colleagues, Sihvonen decided to switch to Chinese clothes soon after his arrival in China in 1902.⁴¹ He also adopted the contemporary custom of shaving his forehead and growing a moustache. However, on the basis of surviving photographs,⁴² he never had a queue of his own, but, when needed, used a loose one commonly sold to foreigners (see figure 6).

It was typical of Sihvonen and his colleagues to react to varying situations by switching between Chinese and European clothing. Prominent Chinese guests were received in local attire and important meetings were often documented in Western-style portraits (see figure 4).⁴³ However, Sihvonen did not only consider local clothes as merely serving a practical work function, as he actually enjoyed and preferred wearing this attire during his leisure hours. This practice also continued when he returned to Finland: he is known to have occasionally worn Chinese clothes at home or when visiting relatives.⁴⁴ He also wanted to be remembered like this and ordered a set of *carte de visite* photographs of himself in Chinese dress to be presented to acquaintances. The door curtain in the background of figure 5 reveals that this photograph was taken in the same place and probably at the same time as the one in which he appears in mandarin attire (see figure 3). The picture he chose to be used in cards presents him in a more modest outfit – similar to those he wore in his everyday

work in China. Thus, Sihvonen's donning of Chinese clothes was not merely connected with, or restricted to, the exhibition setting. It seems that he was familiar and comfortable with the clothes and, from his point of view, there was no clear distinction between wearing them in either an everyday setting or at an exhibition.

From the perspective of the temporary assistants of the exhibition, the situation was quite different. Even if scattered information on China and its people could be found in mission literature and newspapers, Chinese clothes had not been on sale or publicly displayed in Finland and it is likely that none of the assistants had any previous experience of them. No evidence suggests any reluctance on their part to wear the items provided. On the contrary, dressing in Chinese garments seems to have been an amusing experience, as seen in the manner in which separate pieces of clothes were combined. The opportunity presented to the assistants may have also been a way of rewarding them for their voluntary work. A fancy studio portrait of Sihvonen and his local volunteers in Chinese costumes documented a rare moment in their lives and represented a token of his gratitude. Copies of the photographs were presented to the persons involved as a memento of the exhibition.⁴⁵

In addition to Sihvonen's personal familiarity with Chinese clothing and the positive attitude of his assistants, certain qualities inherent in the costumes facilitated their use. First, they complied with local customs *vis-à-vis* appropriateness, thereby allowing Finnish women to wear them without appearing inappropriate – something that could not be said of the clothing and decorations brought from Africa. Second, the preciousness of silk and the finesse of embroidered Chinese clothes were strongly associated with conceptions of luxury, which made them admirable and desirable to wear. The assumed connection of the clothes with upper-class society further increased interest. None of the exhibition assistants had probably owned anything of a similar quality. Sihvonen wrote to his fiancée that even upper-class women who visited the exhibition had greatly admired the Chinese textiles.⁴⁶ It was also constantly pointed out in newspapers that the skills of Finnish women in needlework were

inferior to the Chinese: 'Chinese women have always mastered needlework. Look at the embroidered works they have made! Even those among us who are most skilled will be surprised.'⁴⁷ Thus, in the eyes of the Finnish people, Chinese clothes abounded with signs of wealth, intricate skills and civilization, thereby making it conceivable for them to wear them. With its long history and highly structured society, China was fascinatingly different from the point of view of Finland, which was dominated by the peasantry and was in the process of defining its roots at the time.

The exhibition medium itself provided yet another explanation for the willingness of Finnish women and men to dress themselves in Chinese clothes. As Mitchell has described, exhibitions produced spaces in which it was expected and encouraged to intensively look at the exhibits on display.⁴⁸ Although the temporary exhibition was set up in prayer houses, schools and other spaces familiar to local people, it created a world of its own in which atypical theatrical dressing was accepted. From the mid-nineteenth century it had become increasingly popular to put living people from foreign countries on display in various exhibitions. Living people from Africa and Asia had also been seen on display in mission exhibitions.⁴⁹ Using Chinese people was not an option in Finland, as very few resided in the country at the time. A far more practical, yet still attractive, solution was to dress Finnish assistants in Chinese costumes. The exhibition setting granted permission for them to act in a foreign manner as part of a wider spectacle. The role of the assistants as supporters of the missionary movement should also be remembered. Any unusual actions taken by the costumed women assistants were likely understood as being supportive of the Mission Society's activities. Thus, the mission work aspect was significant in terms of justifying the conduct of the women and in making them respectable to wider society.

In her research, Constance Classen has outlined the historical developments that first led to restrictions and eventually to the total prohibition of touching artefacts in museums. At the time of the Sino-African exhibition, touching – not to mention wearing – the exhibits was

already widely prohibited.⁵⁰ The tradition of mission organizations and individual mission workers displaying artefacts in their possession deviated, however, from this standard rule. Mission workers often collected objects in order to enhance their spoken descriptions of foreign cultures. Objects served a practical function: they were considered to represent tangible proofs of the alleged level of development of a given population. They were often displayed in the hands of the missionaries and given to members of the audience to be examined.⁵¹ Since the objects were in many cases owned by the mission workers themselves, as was the case with Sihvonen, no external regulations or institutions could restrict them from using the items as they wished.

The Effects of Foreign Dress

As culture, the body and clothing are deeply intertwined, the intended meaning and effect of garments can be easily broken if the specific cultural context or the people involved change. The consequences of wearing Chinese clothes in an exhibition arranged in Finland – let alone outside the exhibition venues – were quite different to those Sihvonen had encountered while he was still in China. Rather than making him invisible and less foreign, the very same clothes now emphasized his presence and unusual appearance. Sihvonen was well aware of the potential effect of Chinese clothes. In fact, the use of robes and skirts can be seen as a part of an organized attempt to present China in a way that would be interesting for as many Finns as possible.

The displays in the Sino-African exhibition, as reflected in surviving black-and-white photographs, may appear as modest and amateurish to the museum visitor of today. Yet, in 1911 and 1912 the exhibition was experienced quite differently. Based on contemporary descriptions, many people were truly impressed by the scene they encountered when entering their local prayer house or other familiar venue. Some even mentioned that they felt as if they were transported to China:

I visited China this morning and send my greetings therefrom. [...] Everyone who wishes can now get an idea of the circumstances in China and Africa by dropping in the mission exhibition. I won't describe it further since I am convinced that you will see it by yourselves and listen to the 'Chinese' who will explain it all.⁵²

The Chinese costumes played an important role in creating an inspiring and convincing atmosphere. Sihvonen clearly realized the decorative and aesthetic effect of saturated colors, sumptuous textures and fancy embroideries and harnessed them for service in the exhibition. The splendor and extravagant display of color delighted the eyes of visitors, whose own everyday environments and clothing were very different.

As the revolution in China developed, the exhibition became increasingly topical. In a sense, it also grew increasingly inexact as a representation of everyday life in China. An unintended consequence of the exhibition was that the display of garments turned into a historical re-enactment. It enabled visitors to catch a glimpse of imperial Chinese culture on the eve of its demise. Thus, the exhibition maintained an image of China that was no longer real.

Yet, the practice of exhibiting garments on living mannequins, rather than arranging them on walls and tables, emphasized the character of the clothes as real, tangible and usable items, instead of strange and ceremonial relics that could only be looked at from a distance. Costumes became more concrete and understandable to visitors when shown on the bodies of real living people. Indeed, they adapted to the movements of the person wearing them. The bodily movements made it possible for visitors to examine the costumes from different angles and in varying light conditions. They could observe the glimmering of textiles in bright light and could hear the rustling of a cloth or the delicate tinkle of a necklace as a person moved. Bodily movements also brought the textiles into close proximity with the audience – near enough to touch. On the basis of contemporary descriptions visitors were neither encouraged nor specifically prohibited from touching the exhibits, including garments. Direct

references to touching are rare, but the weight, texture or thickness of objects is occasionally mentioned. Descriptions can also be found of people closely examining Chinese needlework.⁵³

Even if the costumes did not always fit perfectly, individuals gave human shape to the garments and revealed the three-dimensional essence of the otherwise flat and hollow textiles. The filling of Chinese costumes with Finnish bodies generated associations with Chinese individuals who were otherwise absent from the exhibition. In his study on the attempts of Scandinavian wax and folk museums to produce increasingly realistic scenes, Mark B. Sandberg has called attention to what he calls the missing person effect. According to Sandberg, exhibitions are characterized by the absence of people who lived in the past – or those who live far away geographically. He argues that the absence of bodily representations plays an important role in relation to exhibition visitors: members of the audience are given hints in order to imagine the missing person.⁵⁴ Those attending the Sino-African exhibition were well served in this respect. In addition to being able to see the clothes associated with Chinese women and men, they were provided with a vivid enactment of what it might look like when the Chinese interacted with each other.

Dressing entailed sensing the texture and the weight of the fabric on one's shoulders and skin. The exhibition assistants, who were accustomed to much more close-fitting Western female clothing, also became conscious of the dimensions of Chinese garments and the ways in which it was most appropriate to display them. Hence, wearing costumes involved intimate bodily sensations, which directed attention to how Chinese carried their clothing. This did not mean that a dress was able to automatically convey how it should be worn. The presentation of Chinese female clothing provides an illustrative example of the mismatch between Chinese traditions and practices that were prevalent in Finland. Early nineteenth-century Chinese society was male dominated and women remained mostly excluded from activities in the public sphere.⁵⁵ From a Chinese perspective, the scene witnessed at the

touring exhibition, where one could see a number of women, would have appeared highly unusual.

Furthermore, most of the costumes and textiles collected by Sihvonen represented upper-class material culture, which was largely unfamiliar to the majority of the Chinese population. This became obvious to Sihvonen as he met a couple of Chinese people by chance and invited them to visit his exhibition. In a letter to his fiancée, Sihvonen wrote that the Chinese were absolutely amazed to see the exhibition and had never in their lives witnessed such splendor.⁵⁶ The identity of these rare visitors remains unknown. However, it is likely they were members of a circus troupe that was en route between St. Petersburg and Stockholm.⁵⁷ Travelling performers of non-European origin often adopted Western-style clothing during their free time.⁵⁸ It is also quite likely that when the Chinese visitors entered the exhibition and encountered Finns dressed as Chinese, they were themselves wearing Western attire.

No evidence can be found of negative reactions from those who attended the exhibition to the sight of Sihvonen and his assistants dressed as Chinese. A more typical response was one of amazement. It was reported by Sihvonen, for instance, that exhibition visitors in the town of Vaasa in western Finland stared at him and his four female assistants as if they were ghosts. He wrote to his fiancée that 'people are truly amazed at what they see'.⁵⁹ Another reaction to this uncommon scene was to emphasize its Chineseness. A number of newspaper articles reported that 'a Chinese mandarin' was present in the exhibition,⁶⁰ without specifying that what was on display was actually a Finn dressed in Chinese costume. Similarly, no attention was paid to details, such as the character of the exhibition premises or the furniture to be found there, for example tiled stoves and school benches, that were starkly at odds with Chinese interiors. This flexibility regarding Chineseness is also evident in the group photographs, many of which were taken in front of European style draperies or neo-classical studio backdrops, with painted images of street lamps or palm trees (see figure 6).⁶¹

In spite of their fair hair, facial features and big shoes, the individuals dressed in Chinese attire were of a great significance for the overall atmosphere and cohesion of the exhibition. They guided the audience through the exhibition by weaving separate artefacts and stories together as a comprehensible whole – a unity to which they themselves also belonged. Sihvonen, who designed the exhibition, occupied a special position in being able to inform the audience. The Chinese costume he wore played an important role in making his figure discernible and in emphasizing him as the leading authority in the exhibition. He was frequently described in newspapers as a knowledgeable and spirited speaker.⁶² A journalist in Helsinki mentioned how Sihvonen, dressed in plum mandarin attire, spoke Chinese 'like a native'⁶³ – something that further increased the multi-sensory atmosphere of the exhibition.

In her research on European subjects depicted in Oriental dress, Tara Mayer has characterized portraits as visual biographies which aimed at highlighting the experiences of the depicted individuals in foreign countries.⁶⁴ Similarly, the sizeable collection of Chinese garments owned by Sihvonen and the knowledgeable manner in which he presented them testified to his long experience of living in the country. Owning Chinese garments proved that he had a profound acquaintance with Chinese culture and was competent to talk about it. The decision to actually wear the clothes also reflects what Pravina Shukla has referred to as elected identity.⁶⁵ The deliberate choice made by Sihvonen to associate himself with the Chinese indicated a deep appreciation of Chinese society and culture.

Yet, Sihvonen's Finnish origin remained important as it made his message comprehensible and communicable to the visitors. By wearing Chinese clothes, Sihvonen blurred ethnic boundaries and came to be regarded as an intermediary between two distinct cultures. The combination of foreign and familiar aspects in his appearance made him more approachable. This encouraged the exhibition visitors to ask practical and uninformed questions that they would not have dared to pose to a foreigner. In a letter to the head of the Missionary Society,

Sihvonen described how, after spending a day in the exhibition, he was exhausted by the countless questions asked by visitors.⁶⁶ It can be seen also from the newspaper articles that he gave long and detailed descriptions on the history, meaning and use of various items on display. Sihvonen could formulate his descriptions and answers in a manner and language intelligible to his fellow countrymen. His intermediary position made him a cosmopolitan figure, who was able to master two cultures and could mingle between them with ease.

Conclusion

A pivotal aspect of this article concerns being aware of the interplay between the representational and the real, the two realms which Mitchell has characterized as fundamental for the exhibitionary order. The Sino-African exhibition in Finland shows how the two aspects were intertwined in numerous ways. The exhibition was based on an amalgam of two material things that were, as such, equally real: Chinese costumes and the bodies of Finnish individuals. Erland Sihvonen, was an individual in a particularly special position, as he had a real, extended experience of living in China and wearing Chinese dress in its original context – albeit as a foreigner. Exhibition assistants were also provided with real and tangible experience with regard to Chinese materialities. Even if they did not know much about the garments they were entrusted to wear and present, let alone the rapidly changing sartorial practices in China, they gained practical know-how about Chinese clothing.

Yet, the bodies and costumes that were combined at the exhibition were of different origins and represented distinct cultures. They were brought together in order to create an attractive scene and an increasingly lively, multisensory and realistic experience of China. Sihvonen attempted to offer a glimpse of the China he had witnessed himself to an audience that did not have many points of reference to assess the realism of the scene set before them in Finland. In a similar manner to many other regions that were situated outside European metropolises, Finland only possessed a limited number of museums, exhibition halls,

department stores and other public venues that could be used to display items in an organized representation of the world. Consequently, the exhibitionary order did not manifest itself in such an omnipotent manner in Finnish society as, for example, in nineteenth-century Paris. Visitors to the Sino-African exhibition entered a world of its own that did not have many connections to what they already knew or what was to be found outside the exhibition. As the Finnish example shows, exhibition practices were not established in a similar manner all over Europe, but were still in a state of flux and open to experimentation.

A connection to missionary work was an important factor in enabling cultural cross-dressing in the exhibition context. It was also a compelling force: costumes were worn for instrumental purposes in order to arouse curiosity among a wide-ranging audience in order to secure funds. The method of display increased the effect of a direct and immediate experience. This enabled increasingly lifelike insights into living conditions in China. The pursuit of realism can also be seen a symptom of more general attempts in the Nordic countries to preserve and display folk culture in an increasingly concrete and engaging manner. The Seurasaari open-air museum was established in Helsinki in 1909 by following the example of the Skansen in Stockholm. Yet, its more organized presentation, including the display of folk costumes, only began much later.⁶⁷

The two real and tangible ingredients that were put together at the Sino-African exhibition – Chinese dress and Finnish bodies – formed a representation of China and its people. Even if the Chinese costumes retained a link to their country of origin, the exhibition was unavoidably representational in its essence. There was a constant mismatch between Chinese and non-Chinese elements, and, as the revolution advanced, the exhibition became increasingly inaccurate as a portrayal of China. Inevitably, the Finnish depiction of China also included stereotypical Orientalist notions of China, even if the organizers did not purposefully seek to emphasize and circulate them.

Yet, the representational nature of the touring exhibition was of great significance in facilitating an encounter with China and in securing communication with the public. Combining Chinese material with local elements promoted a sense of familiarity and comprehension among attendees, without sacrificing the thrill and excitement connected to the visit. Thus, cultural cross-dressing provided an effective tool in making Chinese material culture intelligible and meaningful for the Finnish audience.

Figure legends

1. Sihvonen and his group of assistants as seen in the middle of the exhibition arranged in a local prayer house in the town of Kotka. Image: National Board of Antiquities, Helsinki.
2. The exhibition team in the town of Kuopio. The organizers of the African section always wore their own Western clothes. Image: National Board of Antiquities, Helsinki.
3. Sihvonen did not always wear the dark overgown that he possessed, which was a mandatory item of clothing for mandarin officials. Image: National Board of Antiquities, Helsinki.
4. Similarly to many of his European colleagues, Sihvonen (third left in the back row) preferred to wear local clothes in China. Chrysanthemums were native to China and were symbolic of nobility. Image: National Archives of Finland.
5. When Sihvonen ordered a set of *carte de visite* photographs of himself, he chose an image in which he wore informal dress rather than his mandarin attire. Image: National Board of Antiquities, Helsinki.
6. Many of the group photographs were taken in front of neo-classical backdrops or European style draperies that were common in photographic ateliers. Image: National Board of Antiquities, Helsinki.

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- ¹ The towns visited were as follows: Helsinki (twice), Kuopio, Mikkeli, Vyborg, Turku, Tampere, Vaasa, Oulu, Pori, Forssa, Hämeenlinna, Kotka, Porvoo and Riihimäki. The exhibition was mainly transported by train and most of the towns were linked to the rail network. For an overview of the exhibition, see L. Koivunen, *Terweisiä Kiinasta ja Afrikasta. Suomen Lähetysseuran näyttelytoiminta 1870–1930-luvuilla*, Suomen Lähetysseura, Helsinki, 2011.
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- ⁴⁵ The surviving copy of the photograph taken in the town of Kuopio (see figure 2), for instance, was given to the young woman standing on the right.
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