

The Scholar's Robe:

Material Culture and Political Power in Early Modern China



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Abstract This talk explores the history of the scholar's robe as a nexus of material culture and political power. It focuses on the controversial fabric—called *ren* 衽—found pervasively in the Confucian canon and confirmed in archaeological findings. But for hundreds of years there have been disagreements and changes concerning which specific *term* is identified with which *part* of the robe, especially involving the use of *ren* in the scholar's robe. The bulk of my analysis deals with two prominent scholars' monographs on the robe: Huang Zongxi's *Investigation of the Robe* (Shenyi kao) and Jiang Yong's pointed rebuttal entitled *Mistakes in "Investigation of the Robe"* (Shenyi kao wu). The intellectual and political configurations of both works are analyzed in depth in order to contrast two options of cultural identity: Chinese superiority versus cosmopolitan universalism.