

# The General Image of the Armenian Merchant Projected Through the Sino-Armenian Socio-cultural Relations and the Case Study of the Revival of Merchant Traditional Costume

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: 31 Dec 2024 Revised: 20 Feb 2025 Accepted: 28 Feb 2025	<p>Armenian communities have had a notable historical presence in various regions of China since the 16th century, with particularly thriving settlements in Canton, Macao, Shanghai, and Hong Kong. During the 17th and 18th centuries, Armenians in China occupied influential positions, receiving endorsement from Chinese authorities. Their impact on Chinese society and East-West commerce is evidenced through their active promotion and patronage of Chinese-manufactured visual art objects. Notably, Jesuit preachers seeking unrestricted access to the country adopted Armenian attire as a strategic approach to integrate into the local culture. This academic pursuit represents an interdisciplinary effort to reframe the image of Armenian merchants, encompassing two major phases. The initial stage involves a scholarly examination of the collective image of Armenian merchants within the context of Sino-Armenian cultural and artistic exchanges, employing contextual and comparative analysis. The methodological framework integrates historiography, archival studies, ethnography, design, art history, and the history of costumes. The subsequent phase involves a collaborative effort with art historians, designers, and ethnographers to entirely reimagine the Armenian merchant's characteristic attire, headgear, accessories, and attributes. Drawing from primary sources such as merchant costume drawings from the mid-20th century, engravings and prints by European artists, and a rare and well-preserved 17th-century merchant costume ensemble currently housed in the US, this project aims to significantly contribute to Silk Road studies and deepen the understanding of the intricate history of Sino-Armenian commercial and cultural interconnections. Furthermore, it may serve as an inaugural endeavor of the Armenian merchant costume renaissance for important intercontinental and cross-cultural exhibitions and expositions.</p> <p><b>Keywords:</b> Silk Road, Armenian merchant, merchant costume, khoja, New Julfa, national costume.</p>

## INTRODUCTION

The Armenian mercantile networks originating from New Julfa, established by Shah Abbas I in 1605 following the forced relocation of Armenians from Julfa, emerged as significant actors in early modern global trade. Strategically located in Isfahan, New Julfa became a commercial hub, connecting Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. Historically, their extensive trade routes spanned from the borders of China to Cape Corso on the coast of Guinea [1]. The trade in Chinese silk, porcelain, and other decorative objects shaped the visual culture of European elites, further reinforcing Armenian merchants' influence as cultural brokers in global trade [2]. New Julfa's Armenian merchant community operated within a tight-knit socio-economic structure, largely organized around familial and communal bonds [3]. These structures not only facilitated long-distance trade but also enabled large-scale commissions of decorative arts, including Persian textiles, Indian miniatures, and Chinese porcelain. Such artistic patronage reflected their cosmopolitan identities and socio-political aspirations, with many merchants using art as a symbol of their cultural capital and prestige. Their engagement in the production and trade of armorial porcelain exemplified how art became a medium for expressing social hierarchies and alliances within the diaspora [4]. Additionally, by introducing Chinese art objects such as silk and porcelain into European markets, they contributed to the aesthetic

dialogue between East and West, fostering transcultural exchanges that shaped the artistic and material landscape of the early modern world [5]. It's worth mentioning that the mansions established by Armenian initiatives in New Julfa represent a fusion of Persian and Armenian architectural styles. This amalgamation is evident in both the interior and exterior decorations of the *khoja* mansions and Armenian churches. Constructed primarily of brick—a commonly used material in Iran—the churches of New Julfa feature domes that externally reflect traditional Persian architectural forms. However, the interior decorations distinctly exhibit influences from Armenian, European, and Persian artistic traditions, highlighting a rich confluence of cultural aesthetics [6].

By the 16th century, Armenians had begun establishing compact but well-structured diaspora communities in various regions of China, particularly in the southern cities such as Canton, Macao, Shanghai, and Hong Kong. These enclaves, primarily composed of merchants, became crucial conduits for facilitating exchanges between China and the global marketplace. Despite their status as a minority, Armenians in China made substantial contributions to the socio-economic fabric of the country; they even held prominent positions within Chinese society, owing to the patronage extended by both Chinese authorities and local elites. Notably, Armenian merchants were so deeply integrated into the social milieu that Jesuit missionaries, seeking unimpeded access, would adopt Armenian attire to traverse the country [7].

Some Armenian families even resided in Lhasa for over three decades, illustrating the expansive reach of their trading activities. However, significant geopolitical upheavals, such as the Afghan invasion of Iran in 1722 and the extortionist campaigns of Nadir Shah (r. 1736–1747), precipitated the dispersal of many Armenian traders to Russia, Europe, and, notably, India. By the late 18th century, Armenian merchant communities in India and the Far East found themselves increasingly at odds with the East India Company, as the British, envious of Armenian financial success, seized their ships and treated them as rivals.

While textual evidence and historical records regarding Sino-Armenian commercial interactions prior to the early modern period remain limited, it is evident that such exchanges occurred long before this era. A significant artifact that underscores these complex processes, particularly in relation to the Silk Road trade, is a 7th-8th-century sancai figurine representing a Western merchant. This figurine has been described as “Armenoid” by early explorers [8] and is currently housed in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston (Figure 1). Records from leading auction houses and catalogs from various exhibitions indicate that this type of small-scale sculpture is not an isolated example. Additional depictions of Armenian mercantile class representatives, crafted by Tang artisans, exhibit similar postures and gestures, often depicting figures holding a wineskin and adorned in attire and boots distinct from traditional Chinese garments.



**Figure 1.** A Man of West Asian Type (Probably an Armenian Wine Merchant)

The Armenian merchant costume of the 17th and 18th centuries also served as a symbol of social hierarchy and cultural exchange within trade networks. According to Arakel Patrik, a pioneering scholar of traditional Armenian attire, Christian Armenian merchants operating under Muslim governance typically donned a "Venetian hat" or cap,

often embellished with fur, in conjunction with a robe of black, blue, or purple velvet. During the summer months, they wore a *paregot* (quote) [9] constructed from damask silk or velvet, while in winter, they layered a coat over this garment. The outfit was further complemented by blue woolen socks and Oriental-style footwear, illustrating the diverse influences inherent in their mercantile interactions [10]. The author also provides drawings of the Armenian mercantile class collective image based on the literary and imagery primary sources.

During his stay in Italy in 1921, Armenian philologist Armenak Sagrjian discovered two medals bearing Armenian inscriptions at the Museo Nazionale del Bargello in Florence. Subsequently, he published an article in the Paris-based Armenian journal *Anahit*, titled “About Two Armenian Medals Named After a Merchant from New Julfa.” One side of the aforementioned medal features human figures wearing an Oriental turban and striped garb, one of whom is likely Girak Agha (lord), a prominent Armenian merchant from New Julfa and the son of Hakob [11].

Another notable Armenian scholar, artist, and ethnographer, Gevorg Broutian, has emphasized the attire of Armenian merchants in his illustrated album *Armenian Costume*. His colored drawings draw upon the shapes, forms, and iconographic details characteristic of the tombstone carvings in the Old Julfa cemetery, depicting a chief merchant from the 17th century. The second illustration is inspired by the “great merchant of the 17th century, Khoja Nahapet, son of Khoja Abulet Gulnazar,” as represented in a gravure on the title page of the Armenian book *Explication of the Divinely Inspired Psalms of the Prophet David*, printed in Venice in 1687. One of his sketches derives from the image on the medal, which was noticed by Sagrjian [12].

The Armenian director and scholar Ruben Giney, who largely contributed to the exploration of Sino-Armenian historico-cultural interrelations, suggests an intriguing cross-cultural and political function of the Armenian attire of merchants. Portuguese Jesuit missionary Bento de Göis, in collaboration with his Armenian associate Isaac, embarked on a mission to China from 1602 to 1607. In 1907, to commemorate the tercentenary of this expedition, a statue of Bento de Göis was erected at Villa Franca de Campo on the Azores Islands. Giney observes that the statue visually represents Bento adorned in the garb of an Armenian merchant, aligning with iconographic descriptions found in Nicolas Trigault’s Latin chronicles. Isaac’s unwavering support was pivotal in facilitating Bento’s survival during critical episodes, functioning as a crucial intermediary. Trigault’s narratives elucidate that Bento successfully navigated his passage to China only by adopting an Armenian disguise; had he been identified as Portuguese, he would have likely faced immediate detainment [13].

The multicultural dimensions of Armenian costume were later articulated through the experience of the eminent 18th-century social philosopher, moralist, writer, and composer Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778). Rousseau commissioned portraits depicting him in a fur hat and fur-trimmed jacket, emblematic of his preferred Armenian attire. This ensemble elicited considerable curiosity within London society following Rousseau’s arrival in Britain in 1766, highlighting the broader aesthetic and cultural dialogues surrounding Armenian textile practices and their adoption by European intellectuals [14].

Analyzing the Armenian merchant costume within the contextual framework of the Julfa attires of local Armenians reveals notable similarities between the men’s general costumes and those of the mercantile class, aligning with the broader description and core components of the national garments of the Julfa Armenians. The typical male ensemble comprised an *arkhalukh*, a tailored overgarment constructed from materials such as silk brocade, velvet, or wool, secured with a textile sash or embroidered belt. Beneath the *arkhalukh*, *shalvar* or loose-fitting trousers, often made of mohair or cashmere, were worn, accompanied by a tunic or chemise. Accessories, including a fur-trimmed *papakh*, a turban, or leather boots, indicated both social status and practicality. The traditional Armenian men’s attire in Jugha displayed a notable resemblance to Persian clothing, later integrating European stylistic elements.

The shirt, typically made from white cotton, featured a round neckline and extended to the hips. The *arkhalukh* was crafted from silk, with a defined waistband and a collar fastened at the neck with a button. The sleeves were broad, and the cuffs gathered into a narrow band, secured with a button or clasp. Over time, the *arkhalukh* was gradually supplanted by a European-style shirt characterized by a prominent collar. The trousers, constructed from dark velvet, were moderately wide. A long overcoat, known as the *chukha*, was worn over the trousers, available in two distinct styles. The first variant was crafted from black or dark blue woolen fabric (*shal*), featuring pleats extending from the waist for added width. This version reached the feet, with long sleeves gathered at the wrists, fastening in the front with a single clasp or button, accompanied by a wide silk belt at the waist.



The second variant of the *chukha* was constructed from locally produced woolen fabric or velvet, with edges embellished with silk ribbons or gold-colored braids and secured with clasps. In various regions, traditional headgear such as a *papakh* was commonly worn. Footwear typically included embroidered socks and slippers, along with a specific type of shoe known as *chusht*, which did not differentiate between left and right foot designs. Persian *giva* shoes, crafted from well-processed leather with woolen soles, were also prevalent, often associated with specific social classes and continuing in use until the 1940s. Key accessories in men's attire included wide silver belts, large gemstone rings, and wristwatches, further accentuating their social standing within the mercantile and broader community [15].

Despite the extensive visual documentation—through drawings, paintings, carvings, and sketches—of Armenian merchants from New Julfa, no fully preserved example of their complete attire has been identified within scholarly discourse. The sole extant specimen is a 17th-century khoja merchant's costume, currently housed in the private collection of Arpi Hovhannessian in the United States. (Figure 2) This ensemble is distinguished by its vivid chromatic palette, repetitive geometric and floral motifs, and the use of opulent textiles such as brocade and velvet. The attire comprises essential elements, including wide-legged trousers, a cylindrical hat, an embroidered sash, a silk belt, and a richly adorned robe, alongside accessories like an intricately crafted purse and personalized merchant seals. Despite its historical and ethnographic value, this artifact has not undergone a rigorous art-historical, curatorial, or textile analysis, leaving critical aspects of its material culture, craftsmanship, and iconographic significance unexplored.



**Figure 2.** A17th-century Khoja Merchant's Costume

Nonetheless, the Armenian mercantile class expands beyond the borders of New Julfa. The Armenian Cathedral of Saint James in Jerusalem possesses a noteworthy 18th-century dossal curtain, as documented by Narek Van Ashughatoyan. This artifact features a prominent depiction of an embroidered Chinese dragon, above which situated the Christian motif of the Resurrection of Christ [16]. The accompanying inscription indicates that the commission was executed by Yaghoub Agha, an Armenian merchant from Constantinople, originally from Akn, who subsequently attained the position of financial advisor to the Ottoman sultan. Notably, Arakel Patrik incorporated an illustration of this merchant in his scholarly work, which illustrates him adorned with a headdress that expands at the crown, contrasting with the turbans and headwear traditionally worn by merchants from New Julfa.

## METHODS AND METHODOLOGY

The scholarly investigation into the Armenian merchant costume, a subject not previously explored in depth, introduces novel frameworks for understanding the sartorial practices of the Armenian mercantile class. Given the lack of prior systematic studies, the hypotheses and taxonomies proposed here remain preliminary and will undergo further scrutiny as the field develops. This study's interdisciplinary methodology integrates two core phases: art-historical analysis and ethnographic reconstruction.

The first phase focused on a theoretical and art-historical approach, incorporating an extensive literature review and iconographic analysis of visual materials, such as portraits, engravings, and reliefs depicting Armenian merchants. This phase utilized a comparative methodology to classify the costumes based on their regional and chronological contexts, emphasizing the semiotic and cultural implications of textile choices, tailoring techniques, and symbolic ornamentation. The garments were analyzed through the lens of material culture, identifying distinct patterns of textile production, fabric sourcing, and stylistic motifs influenced by both Persian and European aesthetics. This classification drew upon visual and contextual analysis to distinguish recurring elements, such as the *arkhalukh*, *shalvar*, and *chukha*, and to contextualize them within broader socio-economic and geopolitical frameworks.

The second phase involved the ethnographic reconstruction of the Armenian merchant costume, focusing on re-envisioning the attire within its historical milieu. This reconstruction, informed by the Sino-Armenian mercantile exchanges of the 17th and 18th centuries, aimed to revive the distinctive features of the New Julfa merchant class. The revival process was guided by the collaboration of the author with Taguhi Simavoryan, a specialist in Armenian costume design with over two decades of experience, and a team of ethnographers, curators, and textile historians. The design process relied on an array of primary visual sources, including European engravings housed in the British Museum, Gevorg Broutian's and Arakel Patrik's ethnographic drawings, and frescoes from the 17th-century mansion of Khoja Sultan. The recreation was further informed by material artifacts, such as the rare complete merchant costume preserved in a private U.S. collection and the embossed figure of an Armenian merchant from a medal in the Museo Nazionale del Bargello in Florence.

This interdisciplinary methodology, combining material culture analysis with the reconstruction of historical garments, underscores the complex cross-cultural exchanges embodied in Armenian mercantile attire and situates it within the broader discourse of global trade, identity construction, and visual representation in early modernity.

## RESULTS

The employed methodology, in conjunction with the existing sources, facilitated a chronological and logical analysis during the initial phase of our research, situated within the frameworks of historiography, ethnography, and cross-cultural studies. This multifaceted approach enabled the systematic classification of both visual and contextual sources pertinent to the Armenian merchant costume, as well as the categorization of existing visual representations of Armenian merchants' garments into distinct groups. Such classifications are instrumental in advancing the precision of visual interpretation and contribute significantly to the scholarly revival and subsequent stylization of the costume. By establishing these taxonomies, we aim to enhance the understanding of the intricate interplay between cultural identity, historical narrative, and artisanal craftsmanship projected through the Armenian mercantile attire.

The primary visual sources for the Armenian merchant costume encompass the following:

1. **Carvings:** Representations of Armenian merchants found on cross-stones, gravestones, tombs, medallions, and other decorative art objects, created by both Armenian and foreign artisans.

2. **Murals:** Artistic works located within the residences of Armenian merchants in New Julfa, Isfahan, predominantly produced by anonymous artists.
3. **Engravings:** English, Dutch, and French prints depicting Armenian merchants, often accompanied by inscriptions that identify the subjects' Armenian ethnicity.
4. **Paintings:** Oil paintings and watercolors by foreign artists, showcasing Armenian merchants adorned in their distinctive attire.
5. **Sculptures and Paintings:** Visual art monuments that feature foreign subjects wearing elements of Armenian merchant costume.
6. **Drawings and Sketches:** Revived colored images based on historical sources, created by Armenian artists, ethnographers, and designers during the early to mid-20th century.
7. **Surviving Artifacts:** Existing pieces and examples of the Armenian merchant costume, along with specific details that inform the reconstruction efforts.

The classification of Armenian mercantile costumes is delineated into three principal categories, each reflecting varying cultural and regional adaptations:

1. **Costume of New Julfa:** The attire associated with Armenian merchants from New Julfa is characterized by fundamental components, including a turban or *papakh* (fur hat), a textile sash or metallic belt, and frequently a fur-trimmed overcoat. This ensemble epitomizes a confluence of Eastern and Western stylistic elements, indicative of the diverse influences that have shaped Armenian dress in this particular locale.
2. **Costume of Armenian Merchants in European Diasporic Communities:** The attire linked to Armenian communities in India, as well as merchants operating in Britain, the Netherlands, and Poland, is notable for its elevated headgear, which reflects 17th- and 18th-century European fashion norms. This category exemplifies the adaptation of Armenian dress to prevailing European sartorial conventions while simultaneously preserving elements of cultural identity.
3. **Costume of Armenian Merchants in Prominent Ottoman Trading Cities:** Costumes associated with the Armenian mercantile class in developed Ottoman urban areas, particularly Constantinople, are distinguished by dark-colored headgear that broadens at the crown.

The second and final phase of our research, focusing on the revival of the traditional attire of the Armenian mercantile class, initiated with the formulation of comprehensive sketches and detailed drawings that represent the garment's overall aesthetic. This phase was marked by a methodical selection process concerning the intricate details, elemental features, and silhouettes, followed by a thorough examination of colors, hues, and ornamental motifs. Additionally, we undertook an exhaustive analysis of available textiles derived from sustainable natural sources within contemporary marketplaces.

This endeavor constitutes a pioneering contribution to modern Armenian art history, arising from the collaborative efforts of a multidisciplinary team and informed by the extensive theoretical research previously conducted to facilitate the revival of the merchant's costume. The reconstructed attire comprises a white cotton undershirt, voluminous trousers, a striped gray long outer garment, and a purple silk sleeveless overcoat embellished with fur trim. (Figure 3)





**Figure 3:** The Revived Costume of the Armenian Merchant



Complementing this ensemble is an Oriental turban meticulously crafted from natural wool, featuring a striped purple-gray textile imported from India, which integrates seamlessly into the overall chromatic palette of the costume. This revival aspires to establish the garment as a distinct category within the broader framework of Armenian national costume, thereby achieving international recognition and scholarly citation.

The ensemble exemplifies a sophisticated amalgamation of Eastern and Western stylistic elements, encapsulating the cosmopolitan identity and expansive worldview of the Armenian mercantile class. This class largely contributed to the intellectual, cultural, and political revitalization of Armenia during a historical period marked by the absence of a centralized state, thereby underscoring their role as custodians of cultural heritage and agents of social transformation.

## CONCLUSION

The revival of national costumes in the 21st century plays a critical role in the preservation and articulation of cultural identity, serving as a key medium for safeguarding intangible heritage. These garments, which encompass centuries of craftsmanship, regional aesthetic traditions, and embedded historical narratives, provide a direct link to the past while reasserting cultural identity in contemporary settings. By reintegrating traditional dress into modern contexts, societies engage in an act of cultural reclamation that revitalizes indigenous knowledge systems, artisanal techniques, and local aesthetics. From an ethnographic perspective, this resurgence allows for the examination of the shifting nature of cultural identities and the adaptation of traditions, making it a relevant subject for scholarly discourse.

In socio-political contexts, the reintroduction of traditional attire functions as a counter-narrative to cultural homogenization, affirming the continuity of heritage in both public and private spheres. The revival of such costumes is not merely an aesthetic trend but an academic exercise that engages with issues of identity, memory, continuity, and transformation, positioning reconstructed garments within the evolving landscape of modernity. These revivals are imbued with new roles and meanings, revealing the ongoing dialogue between historical forms and contemporary cultural practices.

The study of the Armenian merchant costume, through the classification and analysis of visual and textual sources, contributes to Armenology and cross-disciplinary research. The examination of Armenian merchants' attire, as depicted by both Armenian and foreign artisans, provides a window into the socio-political and cultural dynamics of their time, reflecting both local traditions and transnational influences. The costume itself, characterized by its hybridization of Eastern and Western elements, underscores the Armenian merchants' position as cultural intermediaries. Through their attire, merchants navigated complex social, religious, and economic landscapes, blending local and global influences to shape a visual identity that resonated across Christian, Muslim, European, and Asian contexts.

The process of reconstructing the Armenian merchant costume, alongside its related accessories such as seals and purses, represents a scholarly endeavor that holds broader implications for the study of global fashion history, Armenology, Sinology, and interdisciplinary research. This ongoing project promises to expand the understanding of Armenian cultural heritage, offering insights into the role of dress as a marker of identity and as a tool for cultural negotiation.

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## Figures

**Figure 1.** A Man of West Asian type (probably an Armenian wine merchant) holding a leopard skin bottle, Chinese, Tang dynasty, 8th century CE, glazed earthenware with red slip, 33.5 x 16.3 x 16.3 cm (13 3/16 x 6 7/16 x 6 7/16 in.), Museum of Fine Arts Boston, Edward Sylvester Morse Memorial Fund 44.70, <https://collections.mfa.org/objects/19304/a-man-of-west-asian-type-holding-a-leopard-skincovered-bott?ctx=d52c635b-d374-4bfe-b73a-b41a205c0267&idx=11>

**Figure 2.** A 17th-century khoja merchant's costume, currently housed in the private collection of Arpi Hovhannessian in the United States, Source: Collection of Arpi Hovhannessian, [https://hy.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Պատկեր:The\\_Armenian\\_merchant-khoja's\\_costume,\\_17th\\_century,\\_Collection\\_of\\_Arpi\\_Hovhannessian,\\_USA.jpg](https://hy.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Պատկեր:The_Armenian_merchant-khoja's_costume,_17th_century,_Collection_of_Arpi_Hovhannessian,_USA.jpg)

**Figure 3.** The revived costume of the Armenian merchant, a project founded and implemented by © Ani Margaryan, the costume is designed and created by Taguhi Simavoryan. The costume is displayed among the primary sources used for its revival: one of the frescoes of the Armenian khoja Sultan's mansion, 17th century, New Julfa, Arakel Patrik's drawing of the Armenian merchant costume, Gevorg Broutian's colored drawings of the Armenian merchants' costumes, a medallion with the depiction of the Armenian merchant Girak Agha from the Museo Nazionale del Bargello in Florence, and Portuguese Jesuit missionary Bento de Göis's statue at Villa Franca de Campo on the Azores Islands.