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Fashion

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Fashion

Chun Chang on Jan 14 2002

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Through consideration of Chinese clothing styles, the dramatic cultural, social, and especially political changes that have occurred in Chinese society are explored.

To most Chinese people, there are four key factors in life: clothing, food, shelter and transportation. Clothing is the most important amongst the four since it is about "face" or social status. The Chinese clothing styles had a closely-knit relation within politics for hundreds of years. Before the 1990's, Chinese imperialists and governors had always determined what to wear and how to wear it, both for the common people as well as for themselves. They were even involved in the designing of clothing styles in order to consolidate their political powers. The clothing styles were often used as a political tool to sever the imperialism or the governors. The change of clothing styles mirrored changes in society and politics.

Each dynasty in Chinese history had its strict regulations on clothing. The Qing Dynasty is a typical example. Clothing was regulated for each level of society, as to the color, material, and design. In the second year of the Qing Dynasty (1645), emperor Shunzhi executed an order to cut queues in the style of Man-zu. As adopting queues and Man-zu-style dress was a sign of submission, cutting queues and changing clothing styles explicitly signified a rejection of the Qing imperialism. Later on, to ease up the national conflict between the Han-zu and Man-zu, the Qing dynasty had to adjust its policy regarding clothing. That was, " All men, not women follow the Qing's dressing code as a standard dress while alive, not dead." So it is possible that a few Han dresses from Ming Dynasty survived.

The revolution of 1911 brought an entirely new look to Chinese fashion. It ended the ruling of the Qing Dynasty and introduced the new thought of the Republic of China in 1912. Sun Zhong Sha, the leader of the new government also made new standards for formal attire. For men, high and flat hats were demanded for grand courtesy, and dome hats and western suits or traditional long gowns were for common courtesy. The formal dress for ladies was a traditional jacket with front buttons down to the knees, slit on both sides and back and embroidery all over, worn with a black skirt. In the 1920's, new regulation was issued: Chinese tunic suit for men and qipao (more details) for ladies. In the year of 1949, the People's Republic of China was built up. "Labor is honor." became a popular political slogan. The elegant and glorious style was no longer a fashion, replaced by the gray Chinese tunic suit worn by cadres of military committees as army and labor uniforms. People re-tailored their western suit and long gown into Chinese tunic suits or uniforms. Some even put on a suit underneath the uniform. Qipao no longer matched the lifestyle of labor and was gradually outdated and replaced by the Lenin suit, a Soviet style dress. This style of the suit featured a big turndown collar, side button, and side pocket. The woman wore the suit with short hair, giving an impression of neatness and simplicity. The suit was first popular in the school of cadres, and then spread to universities, societies, and finally took the overall shape of a new fashion.

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During the Cultural Revolution, military uniform, a symbol of revolution, became the most popular dress. In the early years of the P. R. of China, western suits and qipao still appeared in formal national holidays, such as Chinese National Day and Labor Day. However, with the political reform of the Cultural Revolution, western suit completely disappeared in China. Tunic suits and cadre suits were the standard dress for everyone, independent of age, profession, social status, or sex. Even the general suit was put away since it was a blockage for communication between general and soldier. The Cultural Revolution started in 1966. Chairman Mao met thousands of Red Guards (young students) at Tian-An-Men Square in his military uniform, The Mao suit, and armband. Girl students were inspired and cut their long queues into two brushes. They put on military uniform, leather belts and Liberation Shoes, almost the same as boy students. At that time, military uniform were the most popular and revolutionary dress and admired by everyone. In the early 1970's, Mao's wife Jiang Qing designed a style of dress, called the Jiang-qing skirt. She recommended it as standard clothing for women, but it wasn't acceptable to the majority.

China finally opened its door to the outside of the world in 1978, and Chinese people regained the freedom of dressing. In the 1980's, western suits began to be put on by national leaders. Shortly after, the suit was worn by every walk of society, from leaders to laborers. The western suit, at that time, was considered a standard dress for China. The people's concept regarding clothes underwent great change. High-heeled shoes and qipao once again became fashion. People were also surprised to see that there were also elegant dresses in China. There was no limitation of regulations on clothing anymore.

The open-door political policy finally leads to an open view of fashion. Through consideration of Chinese clothing styles, the dramatic cultural, social, and especially political changes that have occurred in Chinese society are explored. The clothing styles are like markers of the shifting political configurations 20th-century China. Politics and fashion have always linked together and illustrated the Chinese history.

original context



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