



Changing Clothes in China: Fashion, History, Nation

Antonia Finnane

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Based largely on nineteenth and twentieth-century representations of Chinese dress as traditional and unchanging, historians have long regarded fashion as something peculiarly Western. But in this surprising, sumptuously illustrated book, Antonia Finnane proves that vibrant fashions were a vital part of Chinese life in the late imperial era, when well-to-do men and women showed a keen awareness of what was up-to-date.

Though foreigners who traveled to China in the early decades of the twentieth century came away with the impression that Chinese dress was simple and monotone, the key features of modern fashion were beginning to emerge, especially in Shanghai. Men in blue gowns donned felt caps and leather shoes, girls began to wear fitted jackets and narrow pants, and homespun garments gave way to machine-woven cloth, often made in foreign lands. These innovations marked the start of a far-reaching vestimentary revolution that would transform the clothing culture in urban and much of rural China over the next half century.

Through Finnane's meticulous research, we are able to see how the close-fitting jacket and high collar of the 1911 Revolutionary period, the skirt and jacket-blouse of the May Fourth era, and the military style popular in the Cultural Revolution led to the variegated, globalized wardrobe of today. She brilliantly connects China's modernization and global visibility with changes in dress, offering a vivid portrait of the complex, subtle, and sometimes contradictory ways the people of China have worn their nation on their backs.

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