

How to Make a Mao Suit

When the People's Republic of China was founded in 1949, new clothing protocols for state employees resulted in far-reaching changes in what people wore. In a pioneering history of dress in the Mao years (1949–1976), Antonia Finnane traces the transformation, using industry archives and personal stories to reveal a clothing regime pivoted on the so-called Mao suit. The time of the Mao suit was the time of sewing schools and sewing machines, pattern books and home-made clothes. It was also a time of close economic planning, when rationing meant a limited range of clothes made, usually by women, from limited amounts of cloth. In an area of scholarship dominated by attention to consumption, Finnane presents a revisionist account focused instead on production. *How to Make a Mao Suit* provides a richly illustrated account of clothing that links the material culture of the Mao years to broader cultural and technological changes of the twentieth century.

Antonia Finnane is Honorary Professorial Fellow in History at the University of Melbourne. She is internationally known for her work on the history of dress and fashion in modern China.

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How to Make a Mao Suit

*Clothing the People of Communist China,
1949–1976*

Antonia Finnane

University of Melbourne



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To my students: Shan, Xavier, Laura, Nathan,
Katherine and Luke

Having comfortable clothing is a necessity in daily life: why is it that in the past no one has studied it? This is a question about people wearing clothes.

When there are people who can make clothes, why is it they don't introduce the method to others? ... This is a question about making the clothes.

Jin Shoushen, 1954

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In the course of the research, I have spoken informally to many friends and colleagues who, born and raised in China, all had memories and knowledge of the subject of my research: Chen Chen, who as a schoolgirl wore a Jiang Qing dress; Wang Yiyang, who in 1977 was sent down to a village near Jianyang, in Chengdu, where she served as the village tailor; Du Liping, the son of teachers, whose family bought all their clothes ready-made from shops in Beijing; Liu Luxin, whose mother spun and wove cloth from local cotton in the Anhui countryside; Wang Zhengting, whose family lost their servants after the ‘Liberation’ of Shanghai and had to buy a sewing machine; Li Jinyu, who was wearing short plaits and cloth shoes when I first met her at Nanjing University in 1977; Mao Yufeng whose clothes during the Reform Era were made by a tailor-in-residence in the family home; and Jia Liming, whose photograph appears in Chapter 6. Most of these people were born in China in the 1950s and 1960s. To different degrees, they and their families all experienced hardship during the Mao years. I am grateful to them for sharing their stories with me. My fellow students in China in 1976–1977, Sally Anderson, Andrej Mrevlje and McComas Taylor, helped in identifying sites, dates and other details of my untagged photographs and imprecise memories of those years. My daughter, Siobhan Fitzgerald, helped with advice on and the editing of the images. John Gaunt was the most patient of copy-editors.

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Technical Notes and Key Dates

Pinyin romanization is used throughout the book with the usual exceptions made for common older renderings (Chiang Kai-shek, Sun Yatsen) and names of people who are conventionally known by alternative spellings. Standard Chinese name order (surname first) is observed both in the text and in references, except in those cases where a writer has used English name order for publication purposes or customarily uses English name order.

The majority of people mentioned in this book are from walks of life that have rarely been documented in English. Unlike Sun Yatsen or Mao Zedong they cannot easily be looked up on Wikipedia. Here they are identified in a glossary by the characters for their names and in the text by dates of birth and death where these can be ascertained. Dates place them generationally in relation to each other and locate them in the periods of history during which they were active. For many, however, the only visible trace at the time of writing was authorship of a published work or passing mention in an archive.

The most commonly used units of measurement in tailoring are *chi* (foot) and *cun* (inch), both slightly larger than the Anglo-American equivalent. As explained in Chapter 2, regional differences in the actual length of these measures pertained before standardization in 1928, when the length of a *chi* was set at one-third of metre. In the period under study, it was common for metric measurements to be used for woollen cloth, usually imported, and Chinese measurements for cotton. In this book, reference to ‘foot’ and ‘inch’ is to the Chinese measure.

Units of currency were extremely large in the early Mao years, following severe inflation in the postwar years. With currency reform in 1955, a new yuan (Chinese dollar) replaced 10,000 old yuan. For convenience, in this book all references to prices and wages for the period beginning in 1949 are given in 1955 currency, with the adjustment indicated for mentions pertaining to the period before that year.

Terms for clothing pose problems in both English and Chinese. Languages struggled to keep up with new forms of garment. For many

Chinese terms there is no precise English equivalent and vice versa. Words such as ‘shirt’ and ‘jacket’ in English may bring to the reader’s mind images quite distinct from what is meant by the Chinese terms they are conventionally used to translate. The English terms used in this book are provisional and approximate and are best read in conjunction with the illustrations provided.

The system of dating changed in China over the period under study. In this book, all dates have been standardized to present-day international norms. Dates for significant historical periods continue to be disputed by historians but the reader can take the following as indicative.

Ming dynasty	1368–1644
Qing dynasty	1644–1912
Republic of China	1912–1949
Nationalist period	1928–1949
Sino-Japanese War	1937–1945
People’s Republic of China	1949 –
Mao years	1949–1976
Great Leap Forward	1958–1962
The famine	1959–1961
Cultural Revolution	1966–1976
Reform Era	1978–2008

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