Like political leaders the world over, those of China’s dramatic 20th century sought to dress in styles they anticipated would connote their authority and legitimacy to rule or signify particular ideological inflections of their rulership. As China moved from a Qing monarchy, to Asia’s first and very fragile Republic, through to a communist state its leaders adopted a wide range of different fashion styles that reflect fundamental principles underlying the political culture of 20th century China.

Dressing for power

Scholars’ robes, school uniforms and military attire in China

Three major trends in the transformations of political dress codes emerged in China in the 20th century: the shift from an elitist, rarified style signifying remoteness from the people to one that indicated growing proximity with and responsiveness to the people; the increasingly confident adoption and adaptation of European fashion to a new Chinese style; and the continued importance of sartorial invocations of scholarly virtue replete with their associations with wise leadership. This brief study focuses on the third aspect.
of virtuous leadership made it the most ‘correct’ political clothing.

Reformist politicians wearing ‘chongzao and bowler hat combination’ could draw on both the Confucian tradition and the reformist Western-modernisation trend. A wide range of styles were changed or changed, jettisoning a key sartorial symbol of legitimate power - learning. In this regard, the failure of the European political wardrobe to take hold does in part derive from resistance to European domination or resistance to modernisation as it might have in other countries in Asia and the Americas; rather, it relates to the rejection of ‘power dressing’ in China still required the imprimatur of the scholar’s robes, complete with their references to traditional learning and virtuous leadership from centuries of China’s past.

School uniforms: political work wear for women

The dress styles adopted by women entering the public political stage also show the link between education and power. Politically active women adopted a school uniform-style of clothing which simultaneously signified their legitimate access to public space and their educational attainment. Winning access to education was central to the women’s claims to access political power since accusations about women’s widespread illiteracy and ignorance had long hampered the suffrage cause. Moreover, the girl student style indicated that its wearer was progressive but still respectable. Student status was an important driver of change for women, and the clothing emerging from the education sector served as an important political marker.

The dominant model of girls’ school uniform was the cheongsam or qipao and it became a common form of clothing for China’s politically active women in the 1910s and 1920s, particularly in its looser form. Hazel Clark notes that the qipao was first worn among the university female set as the demand for a practical, but modest uniform for women grew. Wu Hao’s study shows a picture of graduating women students in 1915 where they wear a variety of school uniform qipao with varying hem and sleeve lengths - all are holding newly awarded certificates.7

There are a number of competing explanations for the increasing appearance of the qipao. Finnane attributes its growing popularity from the early 1920s to a trend towards ‘vestimentary androgyny’. She posits that its wearer was progressive but still respectable. Student status was an important driver of change for women, and the clothing emerging from the educational sector served as an important political marker.

Notes

2 ‘Canyu yuanتانش فصيح’ , Shenbao, 10 August 1912.
8 Finnane, Antonia. 1995. ‘What should Chinese Women Wear?’ in Modern China 21, no. 1.
9 Clark, Hazel. ‘The Cheung Sam’ (as above).